History As Theme Park

Reconfiguring the Human Journey in the Art of Theodora Skipitares

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For over 25 years, Theodora Skipitares has conceived, designed, and directed a series of productions that express her passionate interest in human history and her desire to investigate and reexamine that history through theatrical means. A smattering of her works reveals the scope of her vision: The Age of Invention (1986), a historical account of American inventiveness and its leading figures; Defenders of the Code (1987), a recounting of the history of heredity; Underground (1992), a historical montage of human stories about trapped circumstances; Under the Knife (1993, 1994, 1996), a historical journey tracing the scientific and cultural evolution of medicine; Body of Crime (1996, 1999), an examination of women in prisons throughout history; and Optic Fever (2001), a history of “thinking about the way we see” (Skipitares 2001a).

Skipitares tackles each of her projects with the discipline of a research scientist, spending, on average, six months reading material on virtually every aspect of her subject, from general overviews to highly unusual primary documents. A historian with a penchant for the quirky, Skipitares inevitably unearths information that has been hidden from history—and just as inevitably, this is the material that her productions highlight. She trains her eye on the stuff of historical fact, but she is not interested in hitting the high points; her focus exposes the minutiae. Skipitares claims she wants to “go deeper into that black hole of history” (1994a). She is, indeed, a meticulous documentarian, using primary texts and illustrations as the main sources for her productions. She often uses verbatim excerpts from these documents as her text; for example, the monologue for a scene in Under the Knife came from an unpublished letter written by the English novelist Fanny Burney, who described having a mastectomy in 1811 with no anesthetic. The images of Skipitares’s source illustrations are also often detected in the environments she builds. This reverence for her sources—both verbal and visual—lends an intriguing authenticity to the work, despite Skipitares’s fantastic treatment of those sources.

Skipitares began her professional career as a costume designer, which included a period in the mid-1970s with Richard Schechner’s Performance Group. During
Theodora Skipitares poses with three of her “Theodora dolls.” For many of her productions, Skipitares has used her own image on the puppets’ faces. (Photo by Eli Langer; courtesy of Theodora Skipitares)

this time, she also ventured into the performance arena, creating autobiographical works in which she herself was both subject and (literally) object. In *The Venus Café* (1977), Skipitares related stories about her Greek-American family’s heritage and danced wearing a costume of clattering plates, recalling the cacophony of her father’s restaurant in San Francisco.

By the early 1980s, Skipitares had turned her attention away from the personal, seeking to dramatize instead the biographies of others. Simultaneously, she began designing and building puppet figures that initially shared the stage with her. By 1984, *Micropolis: Seven Portraits and a Landscape* featured a cast exclusively of puppets that reenacted the stories of ordinary citizens, most of whom Skipitares had learned of from newspaper and magazine articles. Since then, Skipitares has relinquished all onstage performing to her puppets and their manipulators. Although she has referred to her performing objects as “kinetic sculptures,” she much prefers the traditional term “puppet” (1994a). For Skipitares, this concept incorporates a gamut of forms from small human figures, as in *Micropolis*, to large-scale constructions in which only an isolated part may move.

Although in recent years Skipitares has also incorporated actors into her productions, the puppet remains her central performer. The puppet as communicator possesses an undeniable fascination for Skipitares:

> It’s a basic thing that I’ve felt for a long time. It’s as simple as saying that the puppet is an empty shell, and the puppeteer’s job is to breathe life into the empty vessel. And if the intention of the puppeteer is pure, then the soul of the puppet is pure. And so you can ask the puppet to be a person, and it will be that person with a lightness and innocence and authenticity. Whereas if you ask an actor to be that person, the actor’s ego is going to make a kind of clever manipulation of energy to allow the creation of this figure within himself, but it’s really in a sense, I believe, not as pure as a puppet. I’m not saying this for every actor; I guess I feel this for many actors, that there’s a complexity that needn’t be there for a puppet. (2000a)

This purity contributes to the puppet’s power as well as its beauty for an audience, according to Skipitares. Skipitares’s career parallels that of a number of New York theatre artists who
use performing objects to create theatre geared to adult audiences, namely Lee Breuer, Janie Geiser, Julie Taymor, Paul Zaloom, and Pat Olazko, among others. In the early 1980s, puppets as performers were almost exclusively relegated to children’s theatre in this country, while rich traditions were enjoyed by people of all ages in Europe and Asia. The emergence of performance art and its emphasis on multimedia has nurtured the development of these object makers and expanded their audience. It has also liberated them from narrow, fairy-tale notions of how puppets function. Skipitares recalls:

I remember in those early years, audiences coming to see my work or Lee Breuer’s work and saying things to us like, “That’s disgusting. You can’t have a puppet do that to his body. You can’t have a puppet throw up. You can’t have a puppet say things that are not nice.” There was a real lonely feeling about making experimental work with figures in the theatre at that time. And then, by the time we were moving into the late ’80s, the landscape started to change. Then in the ’90s, there was a really exciting movement in the United States of very original, highly imaginative, important work coming from a younger generation of artists who have chosen to work in some form of puppetry. I consider myself one of those people who broke the boundaries at that early point. And I was able to do it because a lot of factors seemed to come together: I had a strong knowledge of and passion for visual art; I was in New York at that moment performance art broke out in SoHo—a five-minute walk from SoHo; I was trained in experimental theatre; and I was an object maker. It all sort of cooked together in my case. It was at a very interesting point when there was only a handful of us. And the generation after mine is doing incredible work; I attribute a lot of that to the Jim Henson Foundation for bringing its world-class puppet festivals to us. (2000a)

Interestingly, although performing objects have still not penetrated mainstream 21st-century American theatre, they have had substantial impact on popular culture. Puppets in television commercials are rampant; the renaissance in animation—and the proliferation of computer animation in particular—has brought puppets to both the big and small screens. Only in the last decade has the use of puppets carved an inroad into adult entertainment, yet Skipitares sees this as a dramatically “indigenous change,” not simply the influence of other countries with long puppetry traditions (2000a). Still, to observe the development of Skipitares’s career is to witness the steady but painstaking evolution of that indigenous change.

In 1985, Skipitares created The Age of Invention, which initiated her expansive treatment of monumental subjects covering (at least) several centuries. The Age of Invention pivoted around two famous figures, Ben Franklin and Thomas Edison, and a third everyman, a medical-parts salesman named Mike Connors. According to Skipitares:

I think Age is really talking about the rise and fall of Yankee ingenuity, not a straight historical progression of great inventors. There are a few elements of the hustler in Franklin and Edison, but by the time you get to our century, that’s become the main feature of the salesman. [...] Ultimately, those three figures became really interesting expressions of façade. The puppet mechanisms served them well. (in Harris 1985:16–17)

Included in the production were a scene of the Revolutionary War’s Battle of Lexington, a model of Wall and Broad Streets in New York (representing the first section of the city lit by Edison’s newly invented electric light), and buffalo figures
sporting female faces, signifying the exploitation of both animals and women in the 18th century.

It is in *The Age of Invention* that Skipitares’s obsession with documenting history’s eccentricities crystallized. Scholar Joan Driscoll Lynch observed:

> When researching Edison [Skipitares] had as additional sources the newspapers of the day which recorded his exploits in minute detail. Fidelity to the writings was an important consideration as she assembled the material on these men. She quoted them exactly, in proper contexts. (1989:149)

Skipitares confirms:

> Maybe it’s because I’m not working with real people. Puppets are such a sensational lie of their own—but a very innocent lie—that I don’t think you can ask them to support anything but the truth. [...] I get so carried away with eccentricities that I let them glare out at me and I flock to them, finding obscure pieces and fashioning them into a picture rather than constructing what might be a more temperate portrait of someone. (in Lynch 1989:149)

This three-act extravaganza, an eclectic mix of imagery that both glorified and condemned American inventiveness and American greed, launched Skipitares’s career in a new direction—one that most of her productions since have followed. In addition to the puppet as primary performer, her hallmarks are numerous: Multimedia elements include video, film, slides, sculpture, music, song, and dance. But Skipitares insists that her shows are “low tech” (1994a)—and they are. Manipulators in Skipitares productions usually wear black and are unmasked; they connect empathetically to the puppets but do not comment on the action. Universal themes address expansive subjects, such as American invention, genetics, the development of the modern city, the history of medicine, the culture of food. Structure episodic: a montage of vignettes is collectively associated through a common theme. Skipitares approaches her themes from a historical perspective, tracing human phenomena in a chronologically linear fashion. Narrators supply voices for the puppets and often comment on the action. Her tone is a combination of social criticism (that can sometimes be scathing) and a delightful sense of humor and fantasy.

*Defenders of the Code: A Musical History of the Uses and Abuses of Heredity* (1987) exemplified all these characteristics. In this production, six-foot-tall figures of Marie Curie and Charles Darwin dominated the action, which investigated the nature of science and art. Skipitares: “I wanted to show that it is a myth, a masculine notion, that science is neutral and deals only with cold, objective truth rationally, logically, and without emotional investment” (in Lynch 1989:154–55). *Defenders* tackled many other themes as well, such as classism and racism, and used much more complex puppets than her earlier productions, including a group of tap-dancing cows.

*Empires and Appetites* (1989), Skipitares turned to the subject of food through the ages and told her story with a variety of puppet designs that included life-size, realistic figures, small shadow puppets, and rod puppets—all of which were handled by only four manipulators. A huge bust of the 18th-century economist Thomas Robert Malthus, who theorized that the world would inevitably starve itself to death because of population increases, was constructed (with typical Skipitares irony) of dozens of vinyl baby-doll bodies. The production also featured a 12-foot-high ape-man designed as a marionette and a bird’s-eye view of the first Thanksgiving. Though fully produced in New York at Theatre for the New City...
In 1989, parts of Empires and Appetites were previously presented in Amsterdam in 1988.

In retrospect, Skipitares views Empires and Appetites as “the end of an era, the end of a phase” that included The Age of Invention and Defenders of the Code. She explains her ultimate dissatisfaction with the monumentality of the work:

I started to make a lot of these big things that were really more like constructions and a little like puppets. I think Age of Invention and Defenders of the Code pretty much stayed with 40-inch puppets and some human-scale things. There was maybe a clunkiness about Empires and Appetites. I began to make these really big heads and these really big 12-foot aluminum marionettes, and they were stunning constructions, but I think there was a heaviness about how they moved in time. When I think of Empires and Appetites, I think of a mouth full of impacted teeth. I just think they hadn’t grown out yet, and there is something about them that is just too crammed in, too much information on top of too many big things made out of wood and metal that barely moved. It was just big. (1994a)

Skipitares ushered in the 1990s with a production at the American Place Theatre in New York that she considered a departure from her previous work. The Radiant City (1991) focused on city planner Robert Moses, credited—and sometimes condemned—as the single person most responsible for the New York City skyline in the 20th century. In effect, the work also became a history of New York and vicinity, beginning with the Ice Age and concluding with the 1964/65 World’s Fair. Archival footage of Moses and the development of the city of New York was incorporated throughout a large part of the show. Contrasting this documentary backdrop, in typical Skipitares style, the production included a variety of approximately 150 puppets (controlled by five manipulators) to convey her theme: a critique of Moses’s disregard for the human element in his plan to tie New York together in a “concrete knot” (in Gussow 1991:C15). Moses appeared in all shapes and sizes, from a dozen disembodied heads attached to a Ferris wheel to an imposing faux-stone bust. Life-size papier-mâché figures represented Moses’s political allies in Albany, replete with big cigars and shifty eyes. Skipitares also attached a series of small whitewashed figures to movable platforms, representing...
the ordinary people—Skipitares calls them “neighbors”—who left their homes in droves, thanks to Moses’s redevelopment schemes. Contrasting the bleakness of these images, another scene highlighted a group of skyscrapers performing a comic dance to the music of a five-piece live band. Also integral to the Skipitares formula were two narrators who spoke for the characters and sang a “quasi-Brechtian commentary” (Richards 1991:H28).

In his New York Times review of the production, David Richards described The Radiant City as:

one of those eccentric side show exhibits that come magically alive when you insert a nickel in the slot. [...] Ms. Skipitares’s assertive social consciousness in no manner precludes an extravagant sense of play. While “The Radiant City” gives you lots to ponder—the arrogance of developers, the efficiency of glaciers and the inevitability of traffic jams—she illustrates her ideas so originally that you don’t really think of them as abstractions so much as pop-up surprises in some fun house of the mind. (1991:H28)

It is the conglomeration of fun-house distortions and such dark, poignant images as the bent, despairing figures in Depression-era bread lines that gives Skipitares’s work its theme-park atmosphere. So many worlds are compressed into the funnel of her cohesive vision: Mel Gussow described her methodology as “a cross between Bunraku and Brecht” (1991:C15), while Robert Massa referred to her work as “eerie dioramas that attempt to reveal the insidious ways technology and materialism corrupt human life” (1991:122). A few years later, Skipitares called The Radiant City “the most beautiful show I’ve done in terms of the objects and the landscapes” (1994a). It was also her most expensive production to date, costing about $120,000.


4. In Empires and Appetites, small pyramid-shaped shadow theatres dramatize parts of the biblical story of the pharaoh who dreamed of lean cows devouring fat cows (Theatre for the New City, New York, 1989). (Photo by Michael Cummins; courtesy of Theodora Skipitares)
Underground, produced at New York’s La MaMa E.T.C. in 1992, marked a detour from Skipitares’s more extravagant works. Approximately 50 puppets, each 40 inches tall, were located in “subterranean” environments of corresponding proportions (Richards 1992:H7). The standardization of size did not deter Skipitares from her usual proliferation of objects: 10 vignettes from various sources examined underground subjects, including a nuclear family of four encamped in a fallout shelter; Count Dracula in his coffin; coal miners; and baby Jessica McClure, who had riveted the nation after tumbling down a well in Texas. Two narrators stood to the side of the action, assuming the characters’ voices, while four manipulators invested the puppets with life. One scene depicted a New Age prophetess named Ma Guru (based on the real-life person) in her burial chapel, as she “gets progressively caught up in a preaching frenzy [...] until she’s a mass of shrill, quivering ecstasy” (Richards 1992:H7). In another scene, the family members in the fallout shelter, ostensibly captured in the ultimate bonding experience, spout soliloquies in which they reveal disquieting thoughts about each other and their close quarters. These revelations are juxtaposed with an environment emblematic of civilized America—a multitude of cans and boxes sporting the universally recognized labels of Campbell’s soup, V8 Juice, and Cheerios. Once again, Skipitares maintained that ironic edge that prods her audience to contemplate her theatre of contrasts. David Richards:

Ms. Skipitares is a social critic, and she designs each world and its denizens with a scrupulous attention to detail. At the same time, she is something of a metaphysician, and a disquieting sense of dread and dislocation attends her endeavors. [...] Watching these crazed and pathetic souls—mired either
physically or spiritually in the dirt—can make you feel a lot like a giant Peeping Tom in a toy village. [...] She wants you to look hard and close into dark nooks and spooky crannies. You’ll discover all sorts of mini-revelations and Lilliputian enchantments, if you do. Not to mention astonishments by the thimbleful. (1992:H7)

*Underground* marked Skipitares’s first formal association with Ellen Stewart, Artistic Director of La MaMa—one that would continue to develop in several directions. Skipitares has lived in the East Village, just a stone’s throw from the La MaMa complex, since 1975, while Stewart has been the neighborhood’s matriarch since the early 1960s. They were casual neighbors for many years before developing a personal relationship in the early 1990s. As Skipitares describes it:

Ellen is a very intuitive person, and she always just follows her “beeps,” as she says. She just goes by her instincts. In the early ’90s, we began to develop a really famous friendship, a fabulous friendship. She’s utterly inspirational to me. She’s a magical person. She is like a family member. She’s very connected. Sometimes you see people who are giants in our world—which I consider her—and their consciousness is bigger and higher. She really has a very high consciousness. She’s a very spiritual person, a very religious person. It’s like we’re girlfriends, and we’re creative playmates. Ellen is one of the most creative people I’ve ever met. She’s very, very open. She’s the kind of person you can really make things with; you can make work with her. It took me to arrive at middle age to encounter one of my rare mentors; she is the great mentor of my life right now. (2000a)

They would, indeed, come to make work together, collaborating on projects in Vietnam (1996), India (1999), and Cambodia (2001–2002).

Skipitares’s next endeavor following *Underground* was unique from conception to realization. The production would also eventually be staged at La MaMa, but its development took an unusual route. In 1993, the University of Iowa offered Skipitares the opportunity to launch on its campus a “first draft” (Skipitares 1994a) of the work she initially called *The History of Medicine.* Having never developed a work outside of New York City, where her coterie of artistic associates live, Skipitares found herself in a distinctive set of circumstances. UI provided financial support for Skipitares to invite only two collaborators to work with her on-site. Holly Laws, with whom she had worked on different projects for nine years, assisted in designing and building the environments as well as the mechanisms for the puppets. Virgil Moorefield, a composer Skipitares had worked with since 1980, also made the trip to Iowa to create the score. Accustomed to spending months in the process of building and rehearsing a show, at UI Skipitares had only a nine-week rehearsal period. She and Laws spent eight hours every day creating virtually all the puppets and environments themselves, then Skipitares spent her evenings in rehearsal. Despite the fact that her usual group of creative associates was drastically reduced, the collaborative process ultimately became more expansive.
than Skipitares had ever before experienced. Throughout most of her career, her long-time dramaturg has been Andrea Balis, whereas in Iowa, for the first time, Skipitares relied on several playwriting students to create the text for specific scenes. She also incorporated students as live performers, in addition to using them as manipulators. Several different students designed lights and/or sets for some segments. Skipitares describes her role in this mammoth collaboration, involving approximately 30 people, as that of a “lightning rod” (1994a). She certainly was an inspirational lightning rod, but that image in terms of her directing style may be misleading. Skipitares has a remarkably easygoing manner; she is never demanding or overbearing. Students and colleagues alike found her to be a good listener who was always respectful of others’ ideas (Hansum 1999).

The most dramatic departure, however, from her previous endeavors was in Skipitares’s use of the environment. Because the entire theatre building at UI, including three theatre spaces, was made available to her, Skipitares used the lobby, stairways, hallways, and a café, in addition to the more conventional spaces. And she made her audience move from place to place for the first time. (Skipitares had originally conceived of an ambulatory audience for Underground, where she intended it “to go downstairs into a basement and encounter room after room after room” [1994a], but the plan never materialized.) For her previous works, her general technique had been to perform each vignette on a stage before a stationary audience, separating each scene with a blackout.

Posters in her neighborhood drugstore had caught Skipitares’s imagination as a young child and the idea for a work devoted to the subject of medicine had been gestating for years. She remembers, “Each month in the big window of the pharmacy there would be a very dramatic illustration from a great moment of medicine” (1994a). Skipitares had spent a stint as a premed student before she turned to art in college, and she addressed some of these subjects in Defenders of the Code, but the era of AIDS really sharpened her focus:

Around 1992, I became interested in doing medicine, and I think it has to do with how we were thinking about it all the time. We were thinking about the revolution in health care, and especially those in the artistic community, we were/are confronted with losses, losses to our lives of great people who have slipped away from us. (1994a)
Skipitares began reading and accelerated the process when she received the invitation from Iowa to create a production there. Scouring New York’s libraries, she researched from April through August of 1993 before leaving for Iowa. She describes her process:

I know some will say I’m not systematic in how I do this. I tend to try to read a lot of conventional ideas of history, so I’ll start by going to all those horrible history-of-medicine books that were written in the 1950s. That’s always wonderful and fascinating. Then I just start delving into periods that I find interesting. I’ll often find an odd piece of information, and I’ll really scour the territory for that. I didn’t really get to travel much when researching History of Medicine, but I did do a lot of work at the Academy of Medicine in New York. And I was lucky because Iowa had a history-of-medicine book collection, so I also researched while I was out there.

So it’s not very systematized; it’s more intuitive—what draws me to uncover something. I think I’m always looking to uncover or cobble together something that gives me a different way of looking at a period of history that has been only represented one way or even ignored. When I was sleuthing to find out more about views of women, for example, there were wonderful things the scientist Galen said. They were fanciful but wonderful: he said the uterus had seven cells inside of it, three for future boys, three for future girls, and one for a hermaphrodite. I find this material exotic, like an artist’s fanciful view of something like an exotic fruit.

A lot of the images just assert themselves and wait for a text. I always knew I wanted to start the medicine piece with a figure like a Minoan snake goddess. I’ve been to Crete several times, and that image just came to mind. Intuitively, I make a mental list; it starts to grow and some things drop out. The image list takes shape before I even know that a particular paragraph from a document is going to be used or whether I’ll call up a playwright and ask her if she’ll write a song. It’s a feeling, which is partly visual, about how these things will come to you, come to the audience. (1994a)

During this research period, Skipitares also created what she calls her “storyboard script,” a notebook full of her own drawings and photocopies of original visual sources, acquired from books and manuscripts, which serve as jumping-off places for her environments. The storyboard script also contains narrative descriptions of each scene’s action and excerpts from primary texts she has unearthed from her reading. These texts eventually evolve into actual dialogue: “I rarely write original text from scratch. I collage text together; I arrange text.” When Skipitares arrived in Iowa, she had already determined for 80 percent of the script which scenes would require text. As part of her pre-Iowa preparation, Skipitares also built or cast about 35 puppet bodies in her studio that she shipped out to Iowa, “not even knowing what the scenes were like yet or who they were going to be,” attempting to get a jump-start on the relatively brief rehearsal process (1994a).

The University of Iowa production of The History of Medicine was divided into four chronological periods: “The Ancient World,” “The Medieval World,” “From the Renaissance to the Nineteenth Century: Origins of Modern Medicine,” and “The Twentieth Century.” Twenty-four scenes spanned from the Ice Age in 10,000 B.C.E. to an epilogue set in the future, some time after the year 2000. It used 11 different playing spaces in the Iowa theatre building and ran for a total of 90 minutes, with two fairly lengthy sections of 20 and 25 minutes that took place each in its own venue with the audience seated. For all other scenes, the audience either stood before or walked past the performance space.
An imposing, 12-foot-tall figure of Medusa served as the production’s prologue to “The Ancient World.” Conceived by Skipitares as a “parade float” figure (1994a), Medusa moved her head, torso, and arms in a rhythmic dance. Her gigantic skirt opened, creating an archway for the audience to pass between her legs as it entered the next scene, a chamber representing an ancient healing temple. Skipitares chose Medusa as the opening image because an ancient Greek myth contends that her blood was given by Athena to Asclepius, the founder of medicine, both as an agent to heal and a weapon of death. Another scene called “The Healing Pathway,” which was located in a hallway, comprised a series of tableaux depicting alternative systems of medicine, such as acupuncture.

Skipitares found her inspiration for scene 6, “Gyna Gals Cabaret,” from a particular illustration she rediscovered in her image archives:

If not the seed, it was certainly one of a succession of powerful images that really held my attention. It is an image of a very realistic life-size woman wax sculpture reclining on a bed of velvet. She had flowing hair, Botticelli hair, and pearls on, and from below her breasts to just above her crotch, she was completely cut out like an anatomical model. And spilling out of her like glorious flora, like a garden, were her organs. The intestines were displayed, hundreds and hundreds of feet of them, in a very decorative fashion, and she was a cornucopia of guts. At the same time, her head was leaning back and she was very seductive looking. It was an incredibly compelling image. Then during my research for History of Medicine, I began to look for other figures like that and learned they were called medical Venuses. They were a genre of sculpture in the 18th century, and there were men too, but they were always standing up while the women were always lying down. That image stayed with me for a very long time and ended up as a song-and-dance number. (1994a)

Transforming an on-campus café into a lounge setting, three life-size Venuses, whose opened bellies contained miniature theatres with animated figures, danced while an actor dressed in medieval costume sang an accompanying song. Playwriting student Diana Son’s lyrics reflect Skipitares’s wry sense of humor:

Men had exposed/ Their family jewels/ But women withheld/ Their heirloom of tools.
We kept our big secret/ Close to our hips/ We locked them inside us/ And buttoned our lips.
But when Doctor Galen/ Cut into our skin/ He saw with his eyes/ What we had hidden.
One on the left/ One over our right/ Little hard testicles/ Just within sight.
These miniature testes/ Were so feminine/ Small and dainty/ But they led to some skin.
This skin grew round/ Like a tube it led/ To a fold of skin/ Like an unfinished head.
Doc Galen had found/ His suspicions were true/ Women were men inside/ What if they knew? (in Skipitares 1994b)

Son and Skipitares based the song on the ideas of Galen, one of the Roman Empire’s most renowned physicians and scientists. The lyrics parody Galen’s belief that women have all of the male’s sexual organs, and the only difference between the sexes is that men’s sexual organs are on the outside and women’s are on the inside. He concluded that women are really men: there is only one sex.

The production’s third section, “From the Renaissance to the Nineteenth Century: Origins of Modern Medicine,” included a series of scenes performed in one of UI's theatres, which allowed the audience to sit for a while. Several of these scenes involved live actors—a major innovation for Skipitares’s work. The text for scene 9, “Dissection,” derived from the journal of the 16th-century physician Vesalius, who described discovering a dead body in the woods and sneaking it home piece by piece, because the Catholic Church at the time banned dissection. As the text was read, actors portraying Vesalius and his students feverishly attacked a puppet cadaver, throwing body parts around the room. By the scene’s end, however, Skipitares describes them as “quiet and reflective” (1994a). In the following scene, entitled “Blood Dance,” three actors dressed in “three-dimensional anatomy suits with veins of chasing red lights” (1994a) performed to a text based on the journal of William Harvey, who discovered the motion of the heart: that the blood circulates the body in a circle. For one of the most riveting scenes, “An Operation,” an actor spoke a monologue based on a letter written by the novelist Fanny Burney to her sister, in which she described in gruesome detail the sensation of having a mastectomy without anesthetic. The actor simply sat in a chair while silhouettes of animated yet silent doctors loomed behind her (Skipitares 1994a).

The final section, “The Twentieth Century,” featured one scene entitled “Polio,” in which puppets represented a family of four. The puppets recited a series of very antiquated notions about how to protect children from polio, excerpted from the 1949 U.S. Government Bulletin on Polio. Jack Shamblin, a student at the University of Iowa, wrote and performed the scene “Last Summer in Washington.” Skipitares gave Shamblin an article that described the eyewitness account of a 1993 event in Washington, DC, in which a young man who had died of AIDS requested his friends to take his body to the White House and perform a funeral service for him. The casket was barely out of the back of their van when police arrived and refused to allow the ceremony. They then escorted friends and casket out of the city limits. This incident was transformed by Shamblin, who performed much of the scene naked inside a big clear plastic body bag, struggling to break free while video footage of the actual event served as a backdrop. According to Skipitares, Shamblin’s performance style was very intense; after escaping from the plastic bag, he spoke the following monologue “in a plaintive, tormented, exaggerated wail of a voice” (1994a):

I want my body thrown on the White House lawn. I want Clinton to see my skin dark with lesions. My head swelled up. I want my stink to make the head of my country puke a thousand times to know the nausea I felt from the pill after pill I took to fight this death. I want my body to be the start of a funeral procession of millions of AIDS corpses piling up on the White House lawn. I want to be realized as I never was allowed to before.
In a country where my ribs can be broken, my face left as a canvas of red blood and purple bruises, my skull turned into a rotten fruit, and then I am
taken to jail instead of a hospital. It’s you my country that creates the rift where my mom says I’d rather die than have a gay son. Well now, dear Mom and dear country, I am dead but I am not satisfied. My body will rot on the White House lawn until every official, every police officer, every mom, dad, brother, sister realize that murder happens. (Skipitares 1994b)

The production’s final scene, “Auscultation,” created a simple dramatization envisioning the future of medicine, with the text based on observations by Stanley Reiser in his book, *Medicine and the Reign of Technology* (1978). Two actors described in the stage directions as “dressed futuristically” exchanged this dialogue:

**FEMALE:** Sir, can you tell me the meaning of an obsolete word? I know medical history is a hobby of yours.

**MALE:** I’ll try. What word?

**FEMALE:** Auscultation. It meant listening.

**MALE:** Listening to what?

**FEMALE:** Sounds made by the human body. [...] I thought you’d be puzzled. Doctors used to listen to patients’ bodies, and palpate them directly, too.

**MALE:** Directly? You mean they used some simpler kind of palpating machine than ours?

**FEMALE:** No, really directly. [...] I see I’ll have to demonstrate. Come here. Put your hand on my wrist—right on it, skin to skin.

**MALE:** May I really?

**FEMALE:** Yes, yes. No one’s looking. (Skipitares 1994b)

The richness of Skipitares’s approach to her subject is demonstrated by the variety of her material and the vastness of her treatment. One reviewer declared, “Intimate as a homemade haunted house, this environmental production is a dizzying chase through 24 short scenes, in which historical esprit mingles with cheeky comedy” (Renner 1994:94). From the crude horror of medieval surgery
to the cynical laughter provoked by her Venus lounge act to the gentle poignancy of the finale, Skipitares encapsulated moments of humanity in each scene. Performed at the University of Iowa 33 times during November 1993, this version of *Under the Knife* was considered by Skipitares a first draft of a monumental work she looked forward to revising. A few months after her residency in Iowa, Skipitares reflected, “I think that my oddball mix of actors, puppets, and media came about because of where I was, but that’s always how it is when you are creating a piece. It’s the best of where you are” (1994a). Skipitares prefers—feels compelled—to rework virtually all of her productions, sometimes two and, ideally, even three times. Three subsequent incarnations would be produced between 1994 and 1996:

The La MaMa Annex space was a continuing factor in my revisions of the show. The experience at the University of Iowa was truly a collaboration. The New York production gave me the chance to focus it in and make it more particular to that specific performance space. I like to go back again—to focus and sharpen a piece. I am always looking for the opportunity to create a one-on-one experience that accompanies the performance in preshow time. (1998a)

The addition of an installation event that occurred prior to the production’s formal beginning was just one of many innovations Skipitares made between Iowa and New York. Many of the original actors were replaced with puppets—about 35 puppets used in Iowa, and the number increased to 50 in New York. A few of the Iowa scenes were dropped and new ones were added. In particular, Skipitares says she “wanted to add more weight to the 20th-century section” (1994a). Most dramatically, perhaps, she adapted the empty space of the La MaMa Annex theatre to create a new setting. Some scenes were realized completely differently. For example, the huge healing temple from the Egyptian period that was housed in the Iowa theatre lobby had become much more confined at La MaMa. Skipitares admits:

There was not as much variety at La MaMa as Iowa, but there was the sense of an environmental cavern almost and you worked your way around the whole space. We had more architectural elements or spaces that were ready-made in Iowa, and at La MaMa just one large, really cavernous room. For example, the 20th-century scenes in Iowa took place in a very large room that had a transparent, wire-maze structure that guided the audience to continue to walk and walk through the century. At La MaMa, the 20th century was in a much smaller area where the audience sat in seats. The environments became smaller and more compact while the audience stayed fixed. At Iowa, it was more comfortable; it was a carpeted sort of journey. At La MaMa, we were always going up and down wooden stairs. (1994a)

Despite her reservations, critics took note of the unique environment. John Bell praised the “11 different stages ingeniously situated” all around the theatre (1994: 11. The final version of *Under the Knife* included four completely new scenes. In “The Waiting Room,” eight different puppet figures were scattered about the theatre lobby, including a leper whose accompanying text was based on a church manifesto dictated when and where lepers could be seen in public (La MaMa E.T.C., New York, 1996). (Photo by Nancy Chu; courtesy of Theodora Skipitares)
13–14), and David Richards described the audience’s “zigzagging path, upstairs and down, around corners and behind curtains” (1994:C13).

The January 1996 production of Under the Knife at La MaMa Annex was its final public performance and represented over three years of reassessment and refinement.4 By this time, Skipitares had added four completely new scenes. Scene 1, “The Waiting Room,” what Skipitares terms “the preshow event” (1998a), used a second, inner lobby in the theatre at the top of a large flight of stairs. Eight different puppet figures were scattered about the lobby with two Walkmans beside each of them. While waiting to enter the theatre, audience members could pick up a Walkman and listen to text (which ran in a continuous loop) relating to the figure. The tapes were also running at the end of the performance, so the audience still had an opportunity to experience the installation before leaving the theatre. These figures included a medieval midwife, a leper whose accompanying text was based on a church manifesto dictating when and where lepers were allowed to be seen in public, and an HIV-positive woman prison inmate. The inmate’s text was taken from a contemporary magazine that is written by and about prisoners with HIV.

The three other scene additions included “Garden of Germs,” in which the audience was invited to look up at a series of gargantuan, three-dimensional descending microbes, such as tuberculosis. This scene was one of several that were introduced by a hawker as part of a medicine show, creating the atmosphere of an amusement park. The scene also showed how Skipitares made use of the new physical space: the puppets and set were directly overhead. Another new scene called “Sanitarium” took place in a confined, narrow corridor in which “the audience squeezed in tight” (1998a) while manipulators, dressed in lab coats and carrying tiny Chopin and Byron puppets, walked along the corridor. In effect, the scene moved past the audience. (Skipitares chose these two famous figures because Chopin had died of tuberculosis, while Byron had fantasized about doing so.) Barry Greenhut, who would become Skipitares’s collaborator on her next two major projects, composed the music for the third new scene called “Air Pipe,” based on Skipitares’s experiences teaching workshops in New York City schools. She observed that the percentage of students in the Bronx who suffered from asthma was 20 times higher than in other U.S. schools, and she conducted intense research on the subject. In “Air Pipe,” four puppeteers donned fluorescent lungs over their black garb and danced to Greenhut’s hip-hop song, with lyrics by Jamie Leo.

In “Dissection,” the actors who had portrayed Vesalius and his students were transformed into puppets. The final scene, “Auscultation,” also featured:

two puppets each made of nothing but head, welded structure, hands that lit up inside, and legs—kind of organic robots. The male had a chasing blue light through it and the woman a chasing red light; the pace of both could be controlled. The scene was read live by the narrators, Cathy Shaw and Tom Costello. The puppets touch and connect as the chaser lights pulse faster and faster. It was very, very simple, but it actually worked as an ending. (1998a)

This scene exemplifies Skipitares’s contention that puppets have the capacity to be more engaging than live actors in many circumstances. According to Skipitares, several scenes in which she exchanged live actors for puppets resulted in stronger audience reactions. In his review of the first New York production, David Richards agreed, declaring that Skipitares’s puppets “have an uncanny ability to project concentrated thought and dense anguish” (1994:C13). In “Auscultation,” the exotic juxtaposition of the puppets’ eerie humanity (breathed into them by skilled
manipulators and voiced by live actors) and their robot-like physical composition (welded metal and chaser lights) created a very compelling presence for the audience. Skipitares believes the puppets elicited a more empathetic response than their human predecessors (in the Iowa version), particularly at the moment when they touched. Their poignancy derived from the fragile balance between the characters’ naive notion of what it means to be human and their apparent loss of humanity.

Indeed, *Under the Knife* could be viewed as a study of human frailty expressed through medicine’s successes and failures. Four years after the premiere in Iowa, Skipitares reflected on her real inspiration for the work:

> In 1994 the idea of the body and healing the body was in our cultural foreground. *Under the Knife* was really a lot about AIDS. Now we pretend that AIDS has peaked. The cultural wars [over the NEA and the government dictating the use of public grant money] have had a chilling effect. Things have quieted down. (1998a)

The primary legacy of *Under the Knife* for Skipitares was her commitment to composing her work for a peripatetic audience:

> I think walk-through productions affect your point of view. I know that people who have seen my work a lot over the years have said that *Under the Knife* had a more multifaceted point of view. The audience experience alters each time it moves into a new space. You move into one space and you find tiny little figures playing a game, or a scene opens with a 11-foot-tall figure. Each space has its own atmosphere, its own feeling, and—if I am still working as didactically as I think I am—its own information. I am interested in creating a different way for an audience to be a community as well as a new way to structure the seeing of the work. (1994a)

Shortly after the third La MaMa production of *Under the Knife*, Skipitares began researching her next project, which would also be strongly influenced by her newfound focus on multiple environments requiring an ambulatory audience.

In 1992, one of Skipitares’s cousins, with whom she is very close, was incarcerated at a federal women’s prison in California:

> I began to visit her and was very curious about a women’s prison. It appeared to be very different in architecture and also in feeling from the common perceptions most people have of men’s prisons in the United States. So I became interested in doing research on women’s prisons, and I found that, once again, it was another forgotten subject. The history of prisons is mostly the history of imprisoning men. Initially, there were so few women criminals that they were pretty much ignored and actually put into cells with the men. There was no notion of how they should be separated or if there were differences between male and female criminals. I discovered that in the 19th century, in this country and in Europe, differences emerged, and those differences coincided with Victorian notions, for example, of what was a good woman and a bad woman. A lot of those Victorian notions gave support to and masqueraded as scientific ideas. This resulted in the birth of criminology, which at the time embraced a lot of (what we now see as) ridiculous ideas about what made a woman moral/immoral or criminal/law abiding. That became very interesting to me. Then in the 20th century, the numbers of incarcerated women grew incredibly. In the last 10 years, for example, there’s been a fourfold increase in the number of
women imprisoned in this country. It’s become an acute crisis; the U.S. has more women imprisoned than in any other country. I think I took a very difficult subject to dramatize. It was very, very disturbing for me to do some of this research because the material was so utterly dispiriting. (1999)

*Body of Crime: A History of Women in Prison* marked a return once again to Skipitares’s penchant for addressing universal themes and demonstrated her feminist perspective on prison, which the production addressed as a physical, political, moral, and psychological phenomenon. Following a period of research in the spring of 1996, Skipitares spent the month of July in Bellagio, Italy, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Here she wrote her first draft of *Body of Crime*.

Skysaver Productions, Skipitares’s own company, in association with La MaMa, produced *Body of Crime* as a work-in-progress at the Annex in November 1996. This early version, which Skipitares refers to as “part 1,” ran 48 minutes and concluded in 1941. She anticipated completing the work to include the rest of the 20th century and performing a three-week run at La MaMa in April 1998. Unfortunately, the theatre closed for renovations which were not finished on time, thus postponing the second production. Skipitares explains:

The reason *Body of Crime* took a two-and-a-half-year span to make was purely the practical matter of where to produce my play. It could not have been done in a conventional theatre. I had had great dreams of doing it outdoors in a site-specific place or even inside of a prison. As a self-producer, I knocked myself out trying to find such a situation. There’s an island about 10 miles off of Manhattan on the east side called Roosevelt Island, which was where, at the turn of the century, the prisons and the contagious hospitals were. People like Mae West were put there, charged with obscenity for her play called *Sex*, and the suffragists. I had originally wanted to do this piece where you would meet on the East River, and there would be boats waiting, and the show would start there. You would be imprisoned and then you would go over and march around this deserted island. But I didn’t have enough support behind me—not just money. I didn’t have the support that you need to get all those permissions. I haven’t given it up; I would like at some point to do a version like that. So I put it on the back burner, and I found myself back in a theatre [the La MaMa Annex]. Doing site-specific pieces is still one of my real fantasies, but you don’t do it yourself. (1999)

During the year-and-a-half hiatus between parts 1 and 2, Skipitares continued to visit her cousin in prison and ponder, in particular, the additions she wanted to incorporate into part 2 that would address contemporary prison life. Fortunately, while awaiting the reopening of La MaMa, Skipitares’s creative energies found another outlet she couldn’t have anticipated. While Skipitares researched the prison project about “women who fall outside the law,” Monroe Denton, an art historian and personal friend, suggested that Skipitares look at a series of engravings by William Hogarth, because “he practically invented the fiction of country girl who goes to the city and becomes a whore. In a sense, he wrote the story with those pictures” (Skipitares 1998a). First Skipitares studied Hogarth’s more famous *A Rake’s Progress*, and then the six plates comprising *A Harlot’s Progress*. In six scenes, Hogarth traces a young woman’s fate, beginning with the moment she steps out of her carriage onto the streets of London and ending with her funeral. In the summer of 1997, still waiting for a venue to complete *Body of Crime*, Skipitares participated in the International Puppet Conference at the O’Neill Center. She led a nine-day workshop with 15 students—
teachers and artists from around the country. Her charge: to make a performance. Skipitares decided to use *A Harlot's Progress* as the genesis for her O'Neill workshop, bringing the engravings to life in a performance that lasted 22 minutes.

In the fall of 1997, delays in the renovations kept La MaMa closed. It looked doubtful that it would open in time for an April 1998 revival of *Body of Crime*. After desperately trying to locate another performance space without success, Skipitares decided to switch her focus back to *A Harlot's Progress*, which would require a much smaller space than *Body of Crime*. The Wooster Group’s Performing Garage would be available for a few weeks in May 1998, and Skipitares devoted that spring to expanding the work. Small (in terms of scope) and focused (in terms of subject), *A Harlot’s Progress* departed decisively from Skipitares’s usual broadly sweeping, epic style. She reproduced the characters in each of Hogarth’s six plates faithfully, creating photocopied, blown-up, black-and-white cutouts of the originals. Each of the flat puppets was life-size, approximately five and one-half to six feet tall. Skipitares discarded her customary black garb for the manipulators, and instead dressed them in black and white, reproducing the appearance of the puppets’ engraved surfaces. The manipulators became characters in the drama, albeit silent ones. Projections of Hogarth’s actual engravings served as the backdrop for these scenes, unifying environment and performers. All of the action took place inside an ornate proscenium, 16 feet long and 12 feet high, which Skipitares covered with a collage of Hogarth’s engravings. The wealth of detail depicting 18th-century London and the rich characterizations typical of Hogarth’s satirical style were reflected in the quality of the entire production.

Animated puppets that were also incorporated into the proscenium facade introduced the prologue. In addition to reenacting the six scenes from Hogarth, Skipitares infused the piece with her characteristic twist by including five more scenes she called “entr’acts” (1998b). These scenes elaborated and commented on the saga of Moll Hackabout, the play’s heroine and victim. The source documents that inspired the scenes included works by Jonathan Swift, Daniel DeFoe, and Claude Quetel’s *History of Syphilis* (Skipitares 1998b). Skipitares’s entr’acts created a stark visual contrast to the black-and-white scenes faithful to the original Hogarth. While the Hogarth-inspired puppets were literally flat, with movement only at major joints, the puppets in the inserted scenes were often three-dimensional and colorful. One in particular featured a huge inflatable bust of Moll that loomed above the proscenium arch, staring down omnipotently at her audience. Complementing Skipitares’s visual storytelling, three vocalists sang all the puppets’ parts.

It was an interesting way to work, focusing on one story, and it was an interesting thing to limit myself to black and white. That was a situation where the writing of the music and the lyrics was such a crucial part of the piece. The composer, Barry Greenhut, and I really wrote the piece together, so it was a tighter form in that way. We would look at each picture together and determine what was happening. It was mostly sung; some of it was spoken. And there were the inter-scenes where we could break from the narrative and include other things, such as the inflated Moll. It was a very popular show—more popular than my other things. Why? Because it had a beginning, middle, and end. Why? Because it’s a salacious story of a whore. Why? Because the music is pretty. Why? Because you can just sit in your seat and see it unfold. (1999)

Greenhut’s music enhanced the action, creating a sense of period and heightening the emotional intensity of this bleak saga. In typical Skipitares fashion, vocalists and musicians stood/sat to the side of the proscenium in full view.

When *A Harlot’s Progress* premiered at the Performing Garage in May 1998, its
12. Skipitares based *A Harlot’s Progress* on a series of six engravings of the same name by William Hogarth. These life-size, black-and-white puppets are faithful to the original Hogarth, but Skipitares also added five more scenes that enabled her to elaborate and comment on the saga of Moll Hackabout, the play’s heroine and victim (*The Performing Garage, New York, 1998*). (Photo by Ryan Speth; courtesy of Theodora Skipitares)

The parallels to the ills, social and medical, that beset the United States even in these times of great prosperity are inescapable; and particularly in its emphasis on the plight of women, “*A Harlot’s Progress,*” designed and directed by Ms. Skipitares, would be a forceful political document even without the theatrical craft that lifts it well above the ordinary. (1998:E5)


*Body of Crime II* continued to wait patiently in the wings for the right venue. With renovations of the La MaMa Annex finally complete, it was slated for a three-week run in April and May 1999. As is her practice, Skipitares refined and expanded the work during the year-and-a-half between part 1 and part 2. Harkening back to her experience at the University of Iowa, Skipitares added more live actors and singers to the second version, employing her manipulators as both performers and puppeteers:
This is something I think I’m often criticized for, among puppet-theatre critics: the fact that perhaps there’s a slacker quality in my work—that it’s a peculiar hybrid of many puppetry styles and then stuff left over, which is singing and acting and other kinds of performing by puppeteers. Certainly, there are not a lot of artists who work that way. Julie Taymor works that way, as the maestro of maestros of maestros. She’s always combined a very powerful dance sensibility—so her actors are really important—with spectacular puppetry. But my puppetry has always been a hybrid. I think that hybrid shifted in that year and a half, and I am really now much more interested in hiring puppeteers who have many other skills. Or I’m actually asking the puppeteers who work with me to stretch and do more things now. I like mixing that up. (1999)

Nine actor/singer/manipulators shared the stage with approximately 65 puppets, taking their audience on a journey that spanned from the Middle Ages to the present. Skipitares captured this history of incarcerated women in 12 scenes whose texts were based, once again, on her meticulous research, including authentic documents from the Salem witch trials in 1692, several New York Times articles, and letters written by inmates. Once again she transformed the La MaMa Annex into a variety of locales, requiring her audience to group and regroup around several different performance spaces.

One of the production’s many striking scenes that utilized space above the audience, “The Crossing” encapsulated the journeys of hundreds of women prisoners sent to colonial America from England. A cross-section of a ship, revealing tiny puppet figures crammed into its bow, traveled from one side of the theatre to the other, suspended by a tightrope. While the ship made its slow crossing, narrators read excerpts from contemporary accounts describing the trials and tribulations of these women.

For “The Crossing,” I wanted to use another kind of space. I had been interested in the idea of transportation—what that term meant. I guess England comes most to mind: How do you deal with your criminals? You put them on a boat, and you transport them somewhere. We tend to forget that a lot of our early colonies were made up of people who had been transported here either as criminals or as workers for a period of seven years or so. I remember reading Moll Flanders in connection to the Hogarth piece, and indeed that is such an interesting story about her coming to Virginia and finding her mother. I knew I wanted to spend most of the piece talking about American prisons, so I figured that the crossing was the best way to go from Europe to America. (1999)

Only the production’s first scene, which preceded “The Crossing,” took place in Europe.

In “Black Dress,” four performers stood on a balcony overlooking the audience. Each of the performers recited excerpts from an 1890 New York Times article that described the downward spiral of a young maid who steals a piece of black fabric from her mistress and is then befallen by a number of tragedies, eventually ending up in jail. There was an otherworldly quality to the scene, in which the stiff, declamatory style of the performers made them seem more puppetlike than human. The costumes, which fell somewhere between the semblance of a black dress and a dresslike contraption, were parted by each performer to reveal disturbing images, such as a miniature shadow-puppet performance of the young maid being beaten by her husband. At the end, the performers, with their “dresses”
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peeled back, stood virtually naked and vulnerable in their undergarments as the lights faded. Skipitares explained the origins of this scene for the 1996 production:

“Black Dress” had a major dramaturgical makeover. In part 1, it was done by one woman, Cathy Shaw, a puppeteer who has worked with me for a very long time and who is a strong performer as well. She went in and out of each dress. In the end, she grabbed a rope and came swinging down to ground level. It was quite different from part 2, but I’m not sure it was totally successful. Nonetheless, out of necessity, I rethought it with the dramaturg, Andrea Balis, because the performer’s father was dying, and she had to go home to Virginia. And I thought, it’s time to really rethink this scene.

“Black Dress” originated, word for word, out of a *New York Times* article from 1890; it’s a true story. It’s so perverse, but sometimes I just take a piece like that and chop the lines up and collage them. Every single word of that text is from the *Times* article. I became interested in what was underneath the dress and used that idea of the dress as the overriding image. (1999)

The hard lines of the four black-dress costumes in the 1999 version bound, or entrapped, the characters, as if the dress were both ball and chain.

“Typhoid Mary” was perhaps the most simply staged scene of the entire production. An 18-inch puppet performed the motions of baking while a narrator spoke her story, describing her incarceration for unintentionally transmitting typhoid through her cooking. The sensitivity in her lifelike movements and the simplicity of the text made her a very sympathetic character. Yet Skipitares’s portrayal of the character seemed somewhat ambiguous. The repetition of the puppet’s movements combined with the text conveyed an image of the willful innocent—victimized by her own ignorance and a system that singled her out for punishment.

That was an interesting situation. Tom Ross, the manipulator of Mary, is a dancer and an actor; he had no experience in puppetry until our French tour of *Harlot’s Progress*. He became very devoted to Typhoid Mary; he was so thrilled that I gave him that puppet alone, and he really put a lot of care into that portrayal. Also she was a very lovable puppet. Some people are torn about the question, “Why did she have to keep cooking?” For me that’s not the issue. There were several silent carriers of typhoid at the time. She was the *only one* who was put on an island for her last 34 years. (1999)

This scene exemplified the sometimes subtle character of Skipitares’s social critique, which, whether reserved or zealous, is ever present.

“Albion Jail” represented another interesting scenic departure for Skipitares. It involved no puppets. Two women, whose silhouettes were projected onto a screen, performed a very sensual dance-movement piece. A simple flashlight beam served as the projection light, which distorted the figures accordingly as

13. *Typhoid Mary* mixes and bakes a batch of cookies for the audience in *Body of Crime* (1996–1999), while a narrator describes her incarceration for unintentionally transmitting typhoid through her cooking. *Typhoid Mary* was quarantined on an island for her last 34 years. (Photo by Valerie Ostenwalder; courtesy of Theodora Skipitares)
they moved closer to and farther away from the light source. Barry Greenhut composed the haunting melody for a song that was sung during the dance. Skipitares explains how she discovered the song’s libretto:

About four years ago, I went to Albany, to the New York State Archives. And they had folders which were filled with materials they had patched together from reformatories, prisons, whatever in New York State. There is still a prison called Albion, which started out as the Albion House of Refuge. I was looking over photocopies of original documents (it appeared as if none of this stuff had ever been touched), and I found a handwritten poem by a teenage girl in the Albion House of Refuge. And that is the text for the song which Barry Greenhut set to blues. It’s a wild little song, and I didn’t change a word of it. There are a lot of found texts that are so powerful. In the “Bedford Hills” scene about the riots there is one of my favorites, when the dunking girls come down [from overhead, suspended on ropes]. That text is totally word for word from the New York Times account of that riot. I hardly touched the texts for those two scenes, as well as “Black Dress.” (1999)

Skipitares’s storyboard for Body of Crime was not as complete as Under the Knife. In this case she drew sketches and/or created photocopies from original sources only when deemed necessary for specific scenes. The four notebooks she compiled include her research as well as working drawings that often reveal developmental changes in her ideas—for example, several different sketches of the four costumes in “Black Dress.” They also include texts and drawings of ideas that were never realized, as well as some ideas discarded after the performance of part 1. The maquettes she created for the 19th-century “Scientific Sideshow” scene are evidence of her passion for authenticity. Skipitares photocopied body-length photographs of four women criminals, which then became the models for the life-size figures used in the production, faithfully reproduced in black and white. Body of Crime II culminated in an extensive scene representing contemporary prison life. Interestingly, Skipitares reprised some of the visual techniques she had used so successfully in A Harlot’s Progress. The audience approached a fairly large proscenium arch decorated with a collage of black-and-white images—in fact the
very same proscenium used in *A Harlot's Progress*. Life-size puppets behind the proscenium represented three doctors in lab coats who lectured three female inmates about horrific events that occur inside American prisons. Both doctors and inmates were rendered in black and white, with a cross-hatched, pen-and-ink style, hand painted by the artist Michael Allen. As in *A Harlot’s Progress*, the manipulators’ costumes repeated this black-and-white aesthetic. In a surprising climax, three women superheroes descended from above. Puppeteers attached the three inmates to the superheroes, at which point all six puppets ascended magnanimously out of sight. Skipitares explains the impetus for this scene and its *deus ex machina* ending:

The very contemporary material in part 2, called “Rikers Island,” was based on three books that were documentation of interviews with inmates. It also came from my own experiences of going to Rikers Island and seeing things and talking to people. In 1996 and 1997, I visited once a week and did art workshops with inmates who had their babies with them in prison as part of the Incarcerated Mothers Program. As for the superheroes Xena, Lady Hawk, and Spider Woman, it was really the craziest reason why I got interested in them. I was at Bedford Hills a few years ago, and there were two women sitting on a couch. It was their free time, and they were talking about cartoons. They just knew everything about cartoons and comics; they must have talked together for two hours, just laughing and laughing. And I thought, what a wonderful idea to cross over the notion of superheroes. Here you have these black-and-white puppets who were dealing with this really disturbing, dead-end information. What can you do when you read for the 15th time that a guard backs up a woman and rapes her? So I thought, there’s no way out of this. It has to be an extra-terrestrial rescue. I don’t know if that works in *Body of Crime*, because it’s certainly unlike anything else in the piece. And it’s unlike anything that I’ve ever done—to completely go out of the documentary material and bring in Xena to save them. (1999)

This uncharacteristic conclusion seemed both fantastically uplifting and hopelessly pessimistic—communicating the idea that, indeed, the dead-end universe of women in prison is beyond redemption by ordinary means.

*New York Times* reviewer Anita Gates claimed that *Body of Crime II* had “some flashes of brilliance and some lovely music [...] but it feels a little like a work in progress. [...] When it works, however, the show can be powerful” (1999:E6). Addressing Gates’s “work in progress” remark, Skipitares realized that her treatment did not rival that of previous productions. However, she contended that the show’s topic rather than its presentation was more problematic:

I think *Body of Crime II* is a rather modest scale. So much went into it, but I think it is modest. *Under the Knife* was much, much more ambitious. Certainly, *The Radiant City* was still the most ambitious in terms of objects. Yes, it was beautiful, but maybe not the most dynamic. I think *Body of Crime* had some depth to it and it finally dealt with, as I said before, really difficult subject matter. I think that *Under the Knife* was a much more popular work in that everyone can relate to the body and medicine and well-being and sickness. I was pushing a pretty hard subject when I was trying to get people really interested in this notion of criminals. People aren’t interested in criminals—certainly not women criminals. I think that was a hard one, but I’m happy with how I did it, and I would love to have a chance in some other setting or another city to try and expand on the show. (1999)
That refrain is heard whenever Skipitares discusses her work; she is always ready to remount and revise any production. For more than 20 years, she has rented warehouse space in Manhattan where all of her precious performing objects are stored, awaiting such an opportunity.

Skipitares’s relentless desire to refine and revive her productions is indicative of her work ethic, as is her ever-expanding list of credits. During the period that fostered *A Harlot's Progress* and *Body of Crime*, she also designed and/or directed two other productions. In December 1996 and January 1997, she and Ellen Stewart collaborated on a unique project in Hanoi. Working with the National Theatre of Vietnam and the Vietnamese National Puppetry Theatre, in a few short weeks they created a production based on the life of Dionysus. Skipitares kept a journal of the experience, parts of which were published in *Performing Arts Journal*:

> What Ellen and I want precisely to do for our production is alter the way water puppets are used. We want to integrate the puppetry techniques and the stock characters into a multi-media production with singers and dancers, based on the myth of Dionysus. We are told that because we are foreigners, we are welcome to try this in a way in which Vietnamese artists are not. We are also told that the censors will be easier on us when looking at our script than they would be on Vietnamese artists. I will design the production, as well as direct the puppetry and assist Ellen in directing the show. In preparation for this project I, along with my associate Cathy Shaw, created a new kind of puppet: a lightweight 7-foot-high shadow puppet made of perforated aluminum and covered with colored tissue paper. Several puppets fit into a 1/2”-thick package, which I was able to stow behind my airplane seat. [...] [The National Puppetry Theatre has a] spectacular outdoor theatre, with a small shallow section of lake framed into a playing area, surrounded by a larger, deeper part. The seating was beautiful, just like a Greek stone amphitheatre, with three sections of seating. Ellen and I fell in love with this space immediately. [...] Ellen would use the center of the seating to stage events on land, as well as narrow bridges leading to the temple where the puppeteers are hidden behind bamboo screens. The water puppets would perform in their traditional space, interacting in different ways with singers and dancers, and there would be other kinds of puppets as well. A five-piece band made up of musicians playing Cheo, a popular music form, would perform live. (1997:65, 67)

Their on-the-spot creative process is a testament to the genius of these two women. The script consisted of a four-page outline, which they wrote after the second rehearsal. Stewart cast the actors by humming melodies and asking each actor to repeat them as she “put her head against his” (1997:68).

After only seven days of rehearsal, Stewart had completed composing the music. Skipitares described her method:

> She’ll look at her lyrics in English on the page, half close her eyes, and a nasal “Eastern” series of notes comes out of her as if we were at a séance. By her side is a tape recorder to capture the transmission. Then three musicians, their teacher, and a couple of singers look at the Vietnamese translation. [...] They notate it and try to make it fit to the regular rhythms of their language. Really very ambitious stuff. The cast loves her, and assures her the music sounds very Vietnamese! (1997:71)
Again and again, Skipitares’s journal testifies to the admiration the Vietnamese performers felt toward both her and Stewart. Skipitares also worked closely with the three staff puppet carvers and chief sculptor, who created several nontraditional puppets for the production, including a tiger. The outdoor performance of Dionysus premiered on 18 January 1997 amid “nonstop rain” (1997:77). Two weeks later, after returning to the U.S., Skipitares notes, “Ellen and I learned this evening that Dionysus is a huge hit in Hanoi and is still running. The national television station is showing the video recording of the show in its entirety and people are rushing to buy tickets to see it live” (1997:79).

The following summer, the Sundance theatre program invited Skipitares to Utah to direct Charles Ludlum’s children’s play, The Enchanted Pig (1997). Based loosely on the King Lear story, Skipitares’s version revolved around a vegetable family. The fantastic costumes she designed, all of which were constructed by Holly Laws, included characters transformed into a huge cabbage, a garlic bulb, a head of lettuce, a green pepper, and a bunch of carrots. Even more fantastic were the costumes made out of hundreds of plastic knives and another created with about 400 Visa credit cards. The production also included another Skipitares-designed animated proscenium, puppets designed by Skipitares’s long-time associate Cathy Shaw, and a score composed by Barry Greenhut.

The four-year period from 1996 to 1999 was an extraordinarily prolific one for Skipitares. Bookended by the two versions of Body of Crime in 1996 and 1999, the productions of Dionysus, The Enchanted Pig, and A Harlot’s Progress represented forays into new forms and styles. Her work was rewarded with a prestigious Fulbright Fellowship. Supported by the Fulbright, Skipitares spent six months in India from October 1999 through March 2000 studying its ancient theatrical and puppetry forms. The opportunity came at an ideal time, reinvigorating her thinking and inspiring her to move in new directions. Skipitares spent much of her time in Southern India, particularly in the states of Karnataka and Kerala. She visited the renowned Ganesh Yakshagana Gombeyata Troupe and witnessed a production of an episode from the Ramayana created entirely with a cast of two-foot-high marionettes: “Not only are they beautifully carved, but they stand and move in a very solid, precise way. These are rhythmic, dancing feet. Which makes sense because they are known as Yakshagana puppets, after the vibrant dance form from this region of the same name” (2000b:14). Skipitares claims that these were the most beautiful puppets she saw in India. She traveled constantly, visiting other professional companies as well as individuals in remote villages. One of the most unusual was a woman puppeteer who, sitting on the ground, performed scenes from the Mahabharata by placing small wooden puppets on the end of a stick that was balanced between her nose and upper lip. The people in her village referred to her as “the lady who does curious things” (2000a). Skipitares also attended all-night performances, from 11:00 p.m. till dawn, by both Yakshagana and Kathakali dancers: “These troupes were heavily costumed, with heavily painted big flame headdresses. The female roles performed by the men were especially wonderful, and a remarkable sense of spirituality enriched these performances” (2000a). Reflecting on how the entire Indian experience influenced her thinking, Skipitares returns to the idea of spirituality:
The forms were so old and so powerful. And the dedication of the Indian people to the elephant god Ganesh was inspiring. In the Hindu religion, Ganesh is the remover of all obstacles. In India, every dance performance, every theatre performance begins with a dedication to Ganesh. In this culture, every single creative act is sacred. (2000a)

Skipitares also created her own theatre in India. In fact, she had two formal commitments arranged before leaving the U.S., including another collaboration with Ellen Stewart. In November 1999, they worked with a Yakshagana dance troupe in Bangalore to re-create a story from the Hindu legend, Ramayana, involving Sita, the wife of Rama. Once again, Stewart directed the production while Skipitares acted as her collaborator and designer. A company of 46—including dancers, actors, puppeteers, and musicians—created two outdoor performances for standing-room-only crowds. Then in February, Skipitares worked with the Darpana Company in Ahmedabad on a production of The Pied Piper. It incorporated an eclectic mix of shadow puppets, masked dancers, and a Bunraku-style Pied Piper that Skipitares designed (2000a). Prior to this trip, Skipitares speculated about its prospects: “I think that India is going to change my head a lot in terms of how I tell a story—puppetry-wise, mask-wise, and dance-wise” (1999). Those influences were certain to emerge in her future work, but their impact would not be immediate.

In January and June 2001 at La MaMa, Skipitares produced Optic Fever, inspired by Giorgio Vasari’s 15th-century book, Lives of the Artists. Vasari’s biographical sketches of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and their contemporaries provided Skipitares with the catalyst to launch yet another of her ideological explorations:

What interests me about that world [the Renaissance] is that it became “the age of the eye.” The act of seeing acquired a very high status, and there were lots of optical devices and machines invented in order to see in a certain way, which led to discoveries such as perspective. One of the reasons that area interests me is that it is a great example of the collaboration between science and art; often my work has expressed that interest—how science collaborates with art. (2000a)

For six months following her travels in India, Skipitares returned to her familiar model, historical montage, and devoted her energies to theatricalizing this “collaboration.” In addition to Vasari, her texts for Optic Fever included writings by such authors as Pliny the Elder, Leonardo da Vinci, Paul Cezanne, and Sigmund Freud. In a prologue and 15 scenes, the play traversed from ancient Greece (“The Origin of Painting”) to the present, which focused on the scientific advances of iris scanning as a 21st-century replacement for fingerprinting (“No Two Alike”) (2001b).

Once again, Skipitares used an array of performing objects to illustrate her theme. Optic Fever’s dramatic prologue lured its audience to look upward at the figure of Vasari, who, after inflating from his perch on the ceiling of the La MaMa Annex, spoke sonorously about the glories of art, as if he had replaced the gods on
Olympus. Skipitares later used another inflatable, a 10-foot-tall baby that was “born,” i.e., blew up, while the narrator intoned Vasari’s words in praise of Leonardo da Vinci. A second tribute to da Vinci was infused with Skipitares’s signature tongue-in-cheek tone: one by one, five small, white-haired Freud puppets appeared around the portrait of the Mona Lisa as they psychoanalyzed Leonardo. Da Vinci also inspired a dance of four large eyeballs (reminiscent of Skipitares’s dancing noses in Defenders of the Code), spheres about three feet in diameter that were mounted on the black-clad bodies of the puppeteers (2001b); his notes about perspective and how light rays converge in the eye were the basis for the scene (2002a).

While audience members moved to three different major locations during the production, some objects actually came to them. A giant housefly about the size of a sheep, replete with red blinking lights for eyes, flitted near the audience as the narrator shared thoughts on The Compound Eyes of Insects (by James Horridge, Paramount News, 1947). Another nod to science culminated in a brilliantly colored eight-foot iris rolling across the house floor as excerpts from The Eye/Body Connection (by Jessica Maxwell, 1980) described iris scanning experiments conducted at the county prison in Lancaster, Pennsylvania (2001b).

Perhaps the most curious inclusion was actual footage from an obscure newreel film Skipitares discovered at the National Archives:

It was about vision, this film from the ’40s about outfitting chickens with spectacles. It showed them. They all had little rose-colored spectacles. They are in crowded living conditions, and if one of their community got cut, they would go wild. The sight of blood would excite them so much that they would attack each other. So these rose-colored glasses would trick them so they wouldn’t see the blood. Hundreds of these chickens were outfitted with little baby rose spectacles. It was priceless. (2002b)

Skipitares’s sheer delight as she describes this oddity, this tribute to the so-called scientific advances of the past, is a testament to her own insatiable interest in the novel and her ability to recognize the monumental in the minutiae. Her vision of history never discriminates; the absurdity of much human endeavor stands gallantly alongside the most noble of our accomplishments.
From the discovery of perspective in painting to spectacles for chickens: for Skipitares, “thinking about the way we see” (2001b) embraces the sublime as well as the ridiculous. In pure postmodernist form, Optic Fever demands that its audience determine the linkages and assess their value. Despite her enthusiastic ruminations about the expansive themes in this production, Skipitares confesses that she had once again focused on an esoteric subject that may not have broad popular appeal (2001c). She seems almost plagued by her insatiable intelligence and her indefatigable desire to communicate complex concepts through theatrical means. Attempting to reconcile the didactic with the dramatic, in June 2001 Skipitares remounted Optic Fever with a critical addition:

I made a life-size Sister Wendy puppet with her glasses and buck teeth; she looked exactly like Sister Wendy. She was such a quirky presence. The narrator even mimicked her voice; you know she has a heavy lisp. I placed her in the balcony, and she would say a few lines every other scene or so, acting as the guide. Adding Sister Wendy was wonderful because she became the storyteller and she was also a popular link—people know her. (2002b)

It may seem surprising that Skipitares’s first production following her Fulbright did not reflect her India experience, but she has claimed on many occasions that she only works “one idea ahead” (2002b), and Optic Fever had been gestating prior to her trip to India. It would be her next production, The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame, that expressed her immersion in Indian culture. Also, prior to India, Jeffrey Horowitz, artistic director of Theatre for a New Audience, had approached Skipitares about producing Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the Great. (The 14th-century Asian warrior-conqueror Timur became known as Timur Lang, aka “Timur the Lame,” after permanently wounding his right side. Marlowe’s use of the name Tamburlaine was based on the European corruption of the original Timur Lang.) Although much discussion about Tamburlaine ensued between Horowitz and Skipitares, nothing tangible materialized. Skipitares recalls:

When I first got to India, I was in New Delhi at the national art archives, and I saw some tapes on Yakshagana dance and thought, “This is Tamburlaine.” Pure Yakshagana is tribal, it has heavy drums, it has heavy footwork, it’s very aggressive, and it’s very warlike. The real folk-theatre Yakshagana is very raw, very rough, and incredibly vigorous. (2002b)

She was also fascinated by the shadow puppetry, particularly the rare, large, colored figures she saw only in museums. When her trip to India concluded, Skipitares knew she would create a production that incorporated shadow puppetry and Yakshagana; that production would become The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame.

For several months she immersed herself in researching, designing, and then building Timur the Lame puppets, when her work was interrupted by an opportunity that had been four years in the making. Under the auspices of the Asian Cultural Council, Skipitares, Ellen Stewart, and choreographer Perry Young were invited to create a work with the circus school at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from late December 2001 through late January 2002. The trio first visited Angkor Wat for three days, where they found their inspiration for the subject matter of the play: “We found a really great Cambodian myth that is on a major panel at Angkor Wat; it’s called ‘The Churning of the Sea of Milk.’ It’s a Hindu story involving Vishnu and the quest for the liquor of immortality—gods and demons, you know” (2002b). Once at the circus school, Stewart was dispirited after discovering that the talents of the students were limited mostly to juggling, whereas she had envisioned flying gods on trapezes:
We had originally planned to work with about a dozen dancers and circus performers, but given our immediate circumstances, Ellen, in an expansive moment, decided to use all 35 students in the program. We used shiny white material and transformed them into drops of milk. Ellen had them spinning like Sufi dancers as drops of milk. (2002b)

Several professional dancers were also hired for the production, and Skipitares worked with a local puppeteer to create an “absolutely beautiful shadow sequence inside of the show” (2002b). (She would also later commission him to create a Brahma shadow puppet for Timur the Lame.) They rehearsed for three weeks, and then realized that the school had made no efforts to advertise the production. They submitted a press release to a foreign-language newspaper, which resulted in full houses for both of the two performances, approximately 600 people total. The box-office take of about $400 each night was an enormous sum in Cambodian terms. “There was an excellent audience response,” Skipitares relates, “and we returned home very energized and excited about their desire to continue performing the show after we left” (2002b).

Immediately after returning from Cambodia, Skipitares plunged into rehearsals for Timur the Lame, with Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the Great as its centerpiece. Skipitares and her long-time dramaturgical collaborator, Andrea Balis, whittled the seven-hour text, for both parts 1 and 2, down to 45 minutes, which included the Asian warlord’s massacre of 100,000 people in New Delhi on one of his final campaigns. The entire saga was rendered as a shadow-puppet play with 35 different characters (manipulated by 8 puppeteers) appearing on a huge 5-sided, 60-foot-long screen that wrapped around the audience (La MaMa E.T.C., New York, 2002). (Photo by Richard Termine)
Theodora Skipitares

around the audience. Skipitares replaced the leather of traditional shadow puppets with a plastic material. About an eighth of an inch thick, it had the flexibility to allow the puppets to move and bend. Skipitares made each of the puppets as large as the material could support, approximately 43 inches high. The plastic also has properties that make it superior to leather: it is easily painted; its translucent quality allows light to shine through it, resulting in brighter colors seen by the audience; and it allows for holes to be easily drilled through it, replicating the leather-punching effect used in traditional shadow puppetry (2002b).

Skipitares’s unique style is evidenced in her design of these shadow puppets. Her reverence for her sources is clear, yet she makes bold choices that mark this Tamburlaine/Timur as her own invention. For several characters, she incorporated the so-called Picasso technique (which he, in turn, borrowed from Indian tradition), in which the face is in profile but both eyes are facing front. She replaced the muted tones of the past with brilliant, vibrant colors, particularly for Part 1, which traced Timur’s rise:

I saw Part 1 as an epic cartoon, and so that cartoon style is expressed in the characters. Part 2, Timur’s fall, is all monochrome with lots of cutouts. Those characters are more mythical, more translucent, more ethereal. Part 1 has a certain commitment to realism, whereas Part 2 is less bound by realism. In Part 1, Tamburlaine is very animated and flying into the air a lot, but mostly it is realistic and the puppet is pressed close to the screen. In Part 2, there are more hallucinatory shadow effects where the puppets step away from the screen, and simultaneous yellow and purple shadows are created around the puppet’s figure. (2002b)

The workmanship decorating the surfaces of the puppets exhibited marvelous painterly technique both in terms of the facial detail as well as the patterning on the clothing. Interestingly, Skipitares chose to simply outline the facial features for most of the characters in Part 2, again attempting to distinguish the earthly world of the first part from the ethereal atmosphere of the next. A bit confusing from the audience’s perspective, though puppets in Part 2 appeared unfinished rather than other-worldly.
Despite the textual and visual transformation that Skipitares imposed on her version of Tamburlaine, she concedes that her sense of the working process for a show based on a text is that it is more confining than when creating collages such as Body of Crime or Optic Fever:

There is an openness about working on a thematic show that is very freeing for my visual sense and my imagination, which was very different from the Marlowe. For the Marlowe, I began as a costume designer (which is one of my trainings) because I had a certain number of characters. It was almost like dressing them—totally realizing them as cartoons and making a thoroughly credible whole of the cast. I had to stay disciplined to that concept and to the Marlowe text. I gave it my best design sense, but it was a totally different kind of visual imagination. When I do the thematic pieces, I feel as if the world is an empty slate and I can create whatever I want with no restrictions. I like to think that when my visual imagination is working really well, the literary integrity of the piece also works, even if not in a traditional way. I like that freer thing that I have with those shows like Optic Fever, which is very different from the process I used for Timur. (2002b)

Skipitares’s reflections imply that Timur the Lame was limited to a shadow–puppet rendition of Tamburlaine, when, in fact, she is incapable of such a restrictive interpretation of this larger-than-life warrior and his story of conquest.

It wasn’t enough to do Marlowe: Skipitares insists on envisioning the universal context for any story or theme, and thus she added three more segments to her truncated Tamburlaine. Following the Optic Fever precedent, the prologue, entitled “The Origin of Theatre,” took place on the La MaMa Annex’s ceiling. Two inflatable puppets, representing the gods and the demons of Hindu mythology, dramatized an ancient argument. Theatre was born out of the need to fairly represent the stories of both the gods and the demons—to bring the world into balance. Timur the Lame, whose story unfolded in the shadow–puppet play, personified the veering out of balance between good and evil: a mortal out of control.

Skipitares then used the Yakshagana dance form to introduce the Bhagavad Gita, a meditation on war within the Hindu epic, Mahabharata. She invited Sangeeta Suvarna, a master dancer of Yakshagana, to come to the U.S. and perform in her production. The text is a dialogue between the god Krishna and Arjuna, one of the Mahabharata’s most revered warriors, sung by a narrator and with original music by composer David First. Skipitares constructed a puppet Arjuna who interacted with the dancer, but at various points during the course of the performance, Suvarna portrayed both Krishna and Arjuna. Suvarna’s brilliantly colored, multilayered, bejeweled costume and elaborate headdress complemented the intricacies of the dancer’s movements and his expressive face. As Skipitares notes, “Suvarna’s style is really much more refined than pure Yakshagana. It leaves the earth and really goes somewhere else” (2002b). This style actually served Skipitares’s purposes better than the raw, rough form of “pure Yakshagana,” because she intended the Bhagavad Gita segment to stand in sharp contrast to Timur the Lame:

I wanted to examine the tyrant’s bloody rise and just stop his decline in midstream and meditate in a totally different framework on war and violence and action. The Bhagavad Gita restores consciousness, if not the balance of good and evil. I realized it was a stretch to move from Tamburlaine to the Bhagavad Gita, but I thought it posed an interesting question. (2002b)

In performance, the spirituality imbedded in Suvarna’s dance, complemented by the haunting voice of the singer and the poetic language of the Bhagavad Gita,
achieved that intellectual bridge that Skipitares sought. The previous glorification of the cartoonish Timur seemed garish compared to the sacred ruminations of Krishna and Arjuna.

The Rise and Fall of Timur the Lame concluded with a video of an aerial view of Central Asia’s rolling hills while the narrator spoke Tamburlaine’s last speech from Marlowe’s play. Skipitares’s distinct, warning voice could be heard between the lines of the conquering warlord’s. Yet she is still condemned by her critics for her lack of thematic cohesion. Bruce Weber of the New York Times dourly speculated:

[I]t seems possible that the show is offering some comment on current events. Perhaps something about the wages of warrior-hubris, or about the history of ideological and tribal warfare in the region. (Afghanistan was, in fact, among the conquests of Timur. [...] But even if such a reference is intended, its resonance is lost in the vagueness of its expression. (2002:E6)

Based upon my own scrutiny of Theodora Skipitares’s productions, I believe such criticisms misrepresent her theatre. Skipitares’s productions do not simply require, but demand a rigorous intellectual engagement on the part of her audiences.

The Tamburlaine project stands as yet another departure from Skipitares’s signature thematic-historical collages. But such departures as A Harlot’s Progress or The Enchanted Pig, scripts that (comparatively) impose content and structural limitations, are beginning to dominate her contemporary work. One may view Timur the Lame as initiating this new tendency toward focusing on a particular story rather than a theme.

Skipitares brims with enthusiasm as she speculates on her potential next project, a production of Euripides’ Helen. Forever in search of the believe-it-or-not, Skipitares explains:

It is such a curious play, because in Euripides’ version Helen was framed by the gods to be the icon of the Trojan War. Helen herself never went to Troy, because other gods made a double of her that they sent to Troy. The real Helen was hidden in Egypt. It’s such a fanciful thing. And it totally removes any stigma from Helen of Troy. (2002b)

“Fanciful” is unquestionably the kind of notion that permeates Skipitares’s imagination, regardless of subject matter.

When asked to reflect on the arc of her more-than-25-year career, Skipitares returns to Under the Knife as a pivotal point:

Under the Knife was somewhat chaotic, but it was very rich. It spoke to a lot of people because we’re all concerned with health and sickness, but especially in the early ’90s we were because AIDS looked like it had no end. Well, it still has no end. We were changing into new forms of health insurance. I think it was a really interesting subject. Under the Knife was definitely one of my favorites; as I’m looking back, it still intrigues me. (1999)

The production became an experimental lab in which Skipitares tried new techniques that she has incorporated into her repertoire. She is clearly committed to the concept of the audience on the move: “I feel that creating an ambulatory audience has really lessened my relentless didactic agenda” (1994a). Using a variety of locales also supports her characteristic structure of static short scenes that accumulate, one on top of the other, for a bigger effect. Skipitares contends that a sequence of scenes will affect the audience rhythmically as it moves from place to place: time is experienced differently. Audience movement allows spectators to
view the environment through a “telescope lens [...] to get very, very close to things. If you are walking by something, and the something is a 40-inch-high medieval surgeon, I love that you can get three feet away from it if only for a minute” (1994a). For an ambulatory audience, Skipitares’s epic productions are like a living museum.

Productions since Under the Knife also attest to the artist’s commitment to incorporating “many different definitions of performer” (1999)—as manipulators, of course, but also as actors, narrators, singers, even actors physically merged with performing objects. Skipitares’s collaboration with several writers in Iowa opened a new door, as well. Rather than relying on found, historical material almost exclusively for her text, Skipitares has more often allowed original documents to become the inspiration for newly composed texts. Her experience at the University of Iowa also renewed a serious desire to discover new spaces for her peripatetic productions:

Site-specific work is so interesting to me because it’s a really different set of aesthetics and a really different set of dramatic principles, too, because suddenly you’re dealing with many competing elements. You don’t have the advantage of the audience’s built-in focus towards that proscenium. (1999)

Hopefully, the future holds possibilities for Skipitares to move her work beyond the confines of a theatre into complete performative environments, as in a theme park.

Despite these dramatic changes in the evolution of Skipitares’s style, one thing remains essential to the Skipitares aesthetic: the puppet. Using puppets as her central communicators creates a compressed universe, a phenomenon Skipitares claims is organic to puppetry:

A scene will be perhaps about two minutes long, and in a way it is a very dense, constructed notion of time, because sometimes a two-and-a-half-minute scene will involve really hundreds of hours of labor constructing such a convincing alternative reality that fills that time. And that is what makes it special: when you as an audience become aware—or are not even aware probably—that you experience this alternative reality which has been so well constructed. (1994a)

Compression is also achieved through Skipitares’s style of animating puppets, which has generally meant very sparse, selected movement that can sometimes incorporate a hauntingly humanlike quality. Skipitares explains:

I think initially I was less interested in the physical movement of a puppet, the physics of it. But there are certain kinds of puppetry that have the illusion of perfect movement or a fluidity of motion. That interests me and will probably surface in my [future] work. (2000b)

For Skipitares, directing puppetry is all about movement:

Puppetry becomes about rhythm; puppetry is more like doing choreography. You look at a piece again and again and again, and from it you extrapolate a kind of rhythm, and you choreograph a series of moves. So it is very technical. Puppetry notes are like, for example, “You dropped a scalpel in this scene because the rotation of the hand wasn’t correct.” There is something very satisfying about the puppetry parts because it is like choreography, and once you lock in the steps, you have, within limits, a consistency
that will play out every night. That consistency is not a reality about actors. There is a greater latitude about what comes out every night [with live actors] compared to puppetry. (1994a)

Surprisingly, such meticulous attention to the physical life of her puppets does not include the face, which remains inanimate. Skipitares claims the fact that the mouths of her puppets don’t move “doesn’t interest me in the slightest; the mouth isn’t important to me” (1994a). This, too, is relative to the Skipitares aesthetic: by paring things down to the essence of what is being communicated, the message, the thought, comes through so much clearer without the distraction of moving lips. And the inherent alternative reality of manipulator, narrator, and animate-yet-inanimate object creates a text that is often dense with layers of subtext.

Skipitares’s penchant for social critique clearly aligns her with Bertolt Brecht, but less obvious perhaps is her interest in the pure theatricality of the puppet as an “alias”: “I see the puppet not only as a stand-in for another person, but as a stand-in for a concept” (2000b). Thus, the disembodied heads of Robert Moses spinning around on a Ferris wheel in *The Radiant City* are emblematic of the thousands of New Yorkers his projects displaced and simultaneously representative of some of his great gifts to them: playgrounds and recreational facilities. The inherent duality of so-called progress is epitomized for Skipitares in the figure of Robert Moses.

Skipitares’s analytical nature engulfs her subject matter and this is evident in the aesthetic execution of her environments—which, overall, creates a distancing effect. To describe Skipitares’s puppet-making style as rough-hewn is to put the matter delicately. Sometimes her puppets verge on the ugly; they certainly do ugly and disturbing things, such as the female puppet in *Micropolis* who vomits or the girl puppets in *Body of Crime* who, dropped from the ceiling, come crashing to the floor in violent heaps of body parts. Skipitares’s sensibility simply excludes the commonly accepted notion of beauty as appealing and pleasing. Certainly, *A Harlot’s Progress* is an anomaly in this regard:

This show is as pretty as you can get. It’s too pretty for me. [...] If I think of the roughness of my work, I always think of it in terms of perhaps the performance style or the way in which the script is assembled. But I always find that the objects are things of great beauty and great power for me. That’s my aesthetic. (2000b)

Her aesthetic ultimately lies in the humanist tradition, and all of her stories are social stories about human beings trying to work through their history.

Still, after more than 25 years of telling those stories, Theodora Skipitares and her productions remain in the margins. Most of her work has been self-produced at relatively small venues, the result of both artistic choice and pragmatics. Now Skipitares admits she would relish the support of a producer and the opportunity to do large-scale work, and conversations about potential collaborations are part of her everyday reality. “There’s only so much more I can do on my own,” she confesses (2000b). Despite her 1999 Fulbright grant and increasing production opportunities overseas, La MaMa has become her home base, and residencies at academic institutions have become her bread and butter. Her audiences remain loyal but small. Skipitares confronts the inevitable comparison of her work to Julie Taymor’s:

I’ll tell you what I find different about the two of us and what I find very impressive about her. As an artist, I was born an avantgardist. I craved experimentation and what I knew of the historical avantgarde. I just loved the mind-set of the avantgarde. So I am always going to make work that is try-
Skiptares rightly observes that *The Lion King* has exposed a huge new audience to the theatrical power of puppetry—but one narrowly defined by the Taymor aesthetic. While Taymor and her engineer Michael Curry revel in creating unique solutions for the mechanics of their puppets’ movements, Skiptares, for most of her career, has been uninterested in the complexities of animation. While Taymor has built her reputation on the sheer beauty of her puppets, Skiptares has conceived the puppets themselves—and the execution of their design—as ideas.

In the manifestation of her creative vision, Skiptares fluctuates erratically between the miniature and the monumental. What makes the work so fascinating is that she continues to use unexpected media to convey very vital messages that use the past to illuminate the present. She communicates her high-powered, sophisticated ideas with media commonly associated with pure entertainment, yet her style is anything but Hollywood-esque. This disjunction between message and media is where Skiptares’s unique imagination emerges. Her dense productions burgeon with compelling images conveyed in a deceptively innocent manner, both raw and brilliant. Yet all of Skiptares’s works seek to expose the dark underbellies of revered human ideologies and to prompt her audiences to question the integrity of beliefs such as: human invention is always a positive force; medicine is sacred; and prisons are an affective punishment. Skiptares is the art world’s investigative reporter turned sociocultural critic. She once remarked that the most wonderful compliment she ever received was by David Richards in the *New York Times*. He concluded his review of *The Radiant City* with this statement: “If ever the Disney corporation decides to build a theme park for intellectuals, Ms. Skiptares is the obvious choice to preside over the planning committee” (1991:H28). That would be a theme park filled with thrills and chills like none the world has ever seen.

Notes

1. For an extensive review of Skiptares’s early career and descriptions of her major productions through *Defenders of the Code*, see Joan Driscoll Lynch’s article “Theodora Skiptares’s Performing Objects” in *TDR* (1989). Other than reviews of specific productions, Lynch’s article is the only substantive scholarly work on Skiptares as of this writing.
2. Skipitares titled the first workshop production in Iowa *The History of Medicine*. When subsequently produced at La MaMa in the spring of 1994, she retitled it *Under the Knife*.

3. Excerpts of the storyboard script quoted in this article are from the 1994 version produced at the La MaMa Annex. Skipitares published a version of the script based on the 1996 La MaMa production in *Performing Arts Journal* (1996), in which she titled the work *Under the Knife: A History of Medicine*.

4. La MaMa produced *Under the Knife* on three separate occasions, in March and November 1994, and January 1996. The March 1994 production focused on adapting the work to the physical environment of the La MaMa Annex theatre and substituting puppets in many of the scenes which had been played by actors in Iowa. Skipitares described the November 1994 version as “more a reprise of the spring 1994 performance” (1998a). The January 1996 version was distinguished by the addition of several new scenes, which are discussed in this article.

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