

BURATTINAIE

WOMEN GLOVE PUPPETEERS FIND SPACE IN A TRADITIONAL ITALIAN FORM

by Felice Amato



Federica Molteni in *Crape de Lègn* with puppets created by Maria Barbara de Marco. Photo by Alessandra Merisio.

In Italian, there is no singular generic word for puppet. Unlike in English, however, there is a word just for glove puppet: *burattino*. The word itself derives from the word for a coarse domestic cloth used for cheese making and grain sifting. The *burattino* exists in a particular context within Italy, going back centuries with a veritable golden age from the late 18th century until the early 20th century (Cipolla 31). And while in English, words like puppeteer are not inflected for gender, in Italian, they are. This is important because to state that one is a

burattinaia (a female glove puppeteer) implies that a woman has not only chosen to make a life within a marginalized form but that she is inserting herself into the flow of men who have largely shaped and sustained that form: fathers and sons, teachers and mentors—even rivals! This *mestiere* (a word that blends trade and craft) is not just work, but a set of specific skills and abilities, an identity, and a tradition. Of course, the history is complex: women played key roles within family enterprises. However, like other institutions, men were the public face of the form and a very male visual

vocabulary prevailed. The animators with name recognition and the central protagonists (heroes and antiheroes), around whom the plots revolved, were overwhelmingly male. The representation of gender was aligned with an archetypal world that evolved from their perspective. To be a *burattinaia* and to enter this long tradition then requires a certain perseverance.

In Italian, there is a different ending for the plural *burattinaia*; *burattinaie* indicates more than one female glove puppeteer. And there are quite a few! In fact, Italian women are having a glove puppet moment. Diverse and rich, it builds upon the tradition while pushing against it. Here I discuss the work of four women whom I interviewed in Spring of 2024: Federica Molteni (Bergamo), Margherita Cennamo (Bologna), and collaborators Laura Castellucci (Florence) and Adele Cammarata (Rome).

In *Crape de Lègn*, “a monologue with puppet incursion,” theater maker Federica Molteni pays homage to glove puppeteer Giuseppina (Pina) Cazzaniga Ravasio (1917-2015). The title, in the Bergamasque dialect, means “wooden heads”—a term used in the Lombardy region where glove puppets have traditionally had extra-large carved heads. In the show, Molteni memorializes a moment between Pina and her husband Benedetto Ravasio, a glove puppeteer whom she joined in the booth when they married (*Crape de Lègn*). Benedetto was known for his animation of the traditional character Gioppino who, like many Italian

glove puppet personalities, has a girlfriend (sometimes a wife) called *La Margi*. The puppet versions one sees of her character are not nearly as unattractive as other glove puppet wives—in fact, one might describe her as sweet. However, elegant or sexy, she is not. In many representations, she is from the impoverished working class and speaks in an unrefined manner.¹ Like Gioppino and the rest of his family, she has a pronounced goiter, due to the lack of dietary iodine.² For these reasons, Pina rejected her, seeking a female character that she could imbue with dignity. Pina chose Colombina, a character borrowed from commedia dell’arte, who is traditionally attractive and witty, the object of male desire—but also considered a trickster.

Molteni imagines the voice of Pina in dialect: “Is that wood one mine, Benedetto? Oh, but she’s ugly! Make me a different one! Come on! Make me a beautiful Colombina!” Benedetto protests: “Pina, there is a tradition we have to respect!” To this, she answers: “I’m not the least bit interested in tradition! Before I came along, women weren’t even allowed in the puppet booth!” (Molteni and Banco).

It is not completely true, but Pina’s challenge to the form was not insignificant.³ There have been quite a few prominent female glove puppeteers in Italy in the past centuries and some are receiving more recognition. Undoing these erasures and elisions to recuperate women lost to history is valuable—yet fraught, because pointing out exceptional females in a predominantly male domain both challenges

Le Gabbrie, the two glove puppet protagonists for whom the show is named. Photo by Alvisa Crovato.



wized glove puppets, who form a two-woman gossiping chorus, commenting as the story unfolds. Molteni laughs as she explains to me that in dialect the word for neighborhood gossips, a role that is associated with women, actually references female anatomy. Molteni is able to draw upon the deep tradition of Italian glove puppetry in the Lombardy region and to harness its history while also blurring the boundaries of the form, creating a metatheatrical glove puppetry performance. In fact, in an iconic moment, a puppet emerges to tell the audience that, unlike the marionette, the earthy *burattino* is like “a seed planted underground... that then breaks through the crust and emerges like a tree... no, like a *crapa de lègn* (wooden head).”

In *Crape*, Molteni creates a female protagonist, Pina, not as a puppet but as a voice and a force. Pina is exceptional for many reasons, not least is that Pina’s family has made sure she is recognized: “After Benedetto’s death in 1990, his wife Giuseppina continued her artistic career working as an actress and puppeteer..., receiving international recognition and awards” (Benedetto). Molteni’s piece adds to Pina’s presence in the collective consciousness. The participation of many other women is not well known, and their work is often subsumed under the man’s name: Mothers, sisters, and daughters routinely stepped up or pitched in when

needed. Family companies depended on women to balance the books, make costumes, and voice—and sometimes animate—the puppets. Although this labor was essential to the operation of the business, it was not publicly acknowledged in the same way. While one must be cautious to not project a contemporary sensibility onto those in the past, puppetry scholar Albert Bagno showed me a piazza and a nearby bar in Bergamo where, a century ago upon conclusion of a show, the heroic puppeteer would be carried to the backroom for celebratory drinks while the wife and children would be left to dismount the booth and pack up (interview, 2 March 2024). Women at the time may have remained in the background because of necessity, choice, custom, disposition, or myriad other reasons. And the puppet booth was not always a site of creative expression. Family companies had a fixed repertoire that they (and the audience) relied on. For many, during hard times, this was first and foremost a way to eat.

Glove puppeteer Margherita Cennamo has contemplated both the personal and systemic barriers for women in this *mestiere*. It isn’t unusual to hear women puppeteers equivocate when it comes to being referred to as a feminist or even as a female puppeteer. Yet Cennamo is clear about the need to recognize this reality and to respond—so

Le Gabbrié find themselves in jail. Photo by Alvisa Crovato.

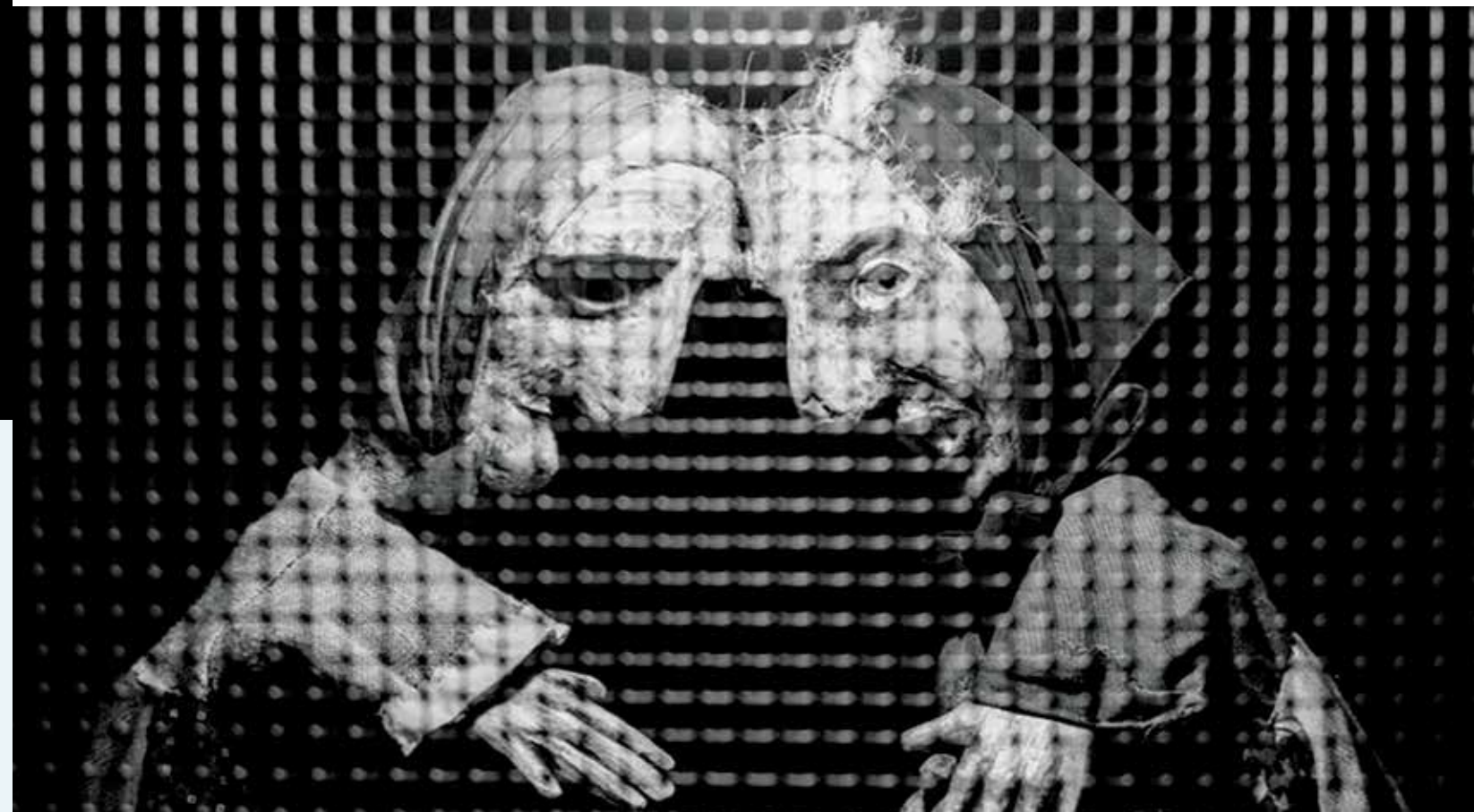


Promotional poster for *Le Gabbrié* by Adele Cammarata and Laura Castellucci.

and reifies women’s absence. Erasure alone doesn’t account for the disparity in numbers and prominence; there also needs to be an analysis of the systemic barriers to women’s participation.⁴ And barriers continue to persist for women who want to be *burattinaie*. Molteni struggled to find glove puppeteers willing to mentor her and carvers willing to make puppets for her. She ended up commissioning papier-

mâché puppets from artist Maria Barbara de Marco and a curvy, blonde, carved Colombina from Rossa Paganoni (interview, 5 June 2024).

In addition to the Colombina, the show features poignant scenes of Molteni’s bare, animated hands voicing the characters in dialect.⁵ There are also scenes with de Marco’s





Margherita Cennamo poses with one of her favorite puppets in her micro theater in Bologna. Photo by Felice Amato.

much so that she has developed a podcast called *Le Donne Raccontastorie: Dal Focolare delle Fiabe allo Spettacolo Itinerante* (Women Storytellers: From the Fairy Tale's Hearth to the Travelling Show). She works to build community, redefine spaces, and create opportunities—not only for herself but also for other women. Cennamo's podcast and the events that she hosts serve as an archive, collective memory, and informal collaborative research group. (For example, it is through her that I heard of Molteni).

Glove puppets are an important part of Bolognese culture; Cennamo grew up going to see shows with her father, a journalist and amateur glove puppeteer himself. As a child, she found the characters grotesque, with their toothless mouths and bumps and boils. The stories featured adult male protagonists speaking in a dialect that younger generations didn't understand. She says that something just changed one day and, from that point on, she has been dedicated to this expressive tradition. After completing a puppetry training in her twenties through Arrivano dal Mare!, run by Stefano Giunchi, she founded a company called *Burattinificio*

Mangiafoco (Fire-Eater's Puppet Factory). Returning to her Bolognese neighborhood, she started a microtheater with just room enough for a handful of spectators and many little wooden-headed beings (interview, 27 May 2024). She has struggled, noting quick dismissals she received from some prominent male puppeteers and the need to be extraordinary to be considered at all. And women, she notes, don't always support each other: A scarcity of resources can create competition (ibid).

For Cennamo, however, the dramaturgy presents the greatest challenges. The stories feature a pantheon of male characters, like the Bolognese Dottor Balanzone, each with a repertoire. This forces a choice for female puppeteers. A *burattinaia* must 1) choose to stick with traditional male characters, 2) break “softly” with the tradition by trying to change the gender, or 3) create a hard break, inventing entirely new characters. “[Women] who do not want to take on the role of male characters... to masculinize themselves, find they have to rewrite the repertoire from scratch,” she says (ibid). Cennamo cautions, though, that festivals tend to invite glove puppeteers specifically to perform the traditional repertoire in the traditional way—not to experiment.

The glove puppet world epitomizes the extreme binaries to which female characters are often relegated: the witch versus the angel. Contemplating new sources for female representation, Cennamo turned to fairytales. Like her mother did in her home, Cennamo argues that “the symbolic imagery of fairy tales has been nourished over the centuries by women.... The profession of storyteller, once relegated to the domestic sphere, is now open to the entire community” (Blog). In fairy tales, rich sources of alternative dramaturgies, women and children are often protagonists. Another important character that emerges is the *vecchia nutrice*, or old nurse, an archetypal storyteller and keeper of the hearth. Old women feature frequently and complexly in traditional glove puppetry, but the nurse allows for a different image of the older woman (ibid). Sitting in her theater, surrounded by puppets carved by artist Brina Babini, I am immediately drawn to an old woman with a severe but cunning look and silver hair. Her jowls hang from high cheekbones and deep wrinkles accentuate slightly crossed eyes. She is one of Cennamo's favorites: she can play a range of characters (including a witch) (ibid).

None of the women profiled here are older than their early 40s, but each has chosen to develop new older female personas, drawn to the dramaturgical possibilities of

the post-menopausal crone figure. Such is the case of *Le Gabbrié* (The Gabbys), a piece created by visual artist Laura Castellucci and film and stage actress Adele Cammarata. Their unexpected collaboration began in a training program at Teatro Gioco Vita in Piacenza where they worked with Roberta Colombo of Teatro del Drago. They were paired for an activity one day and the collaboration was born. *Le Gabbrié* is a raucous and poignant hero's journey of two old women, both called Gabriela. Endearingly grotesque (as glove puppets tend to be), the two confront death (a typical glove puppet trope). In this and other ways, the show is quite traditional—but the Gabbys are also DJs and their journey ends in an after-death techno dance party with the audience. Castellucci and Cammarata, who both affectionately now refer to each other as “Gabb” while brainstorming, don't seem to have encountered many barriers. They had access to mentoring in their program and the community and later a space to work at a cultural venue that Castellucci helped start in Florence (interview, 19 June 2024). An actor and an artist, they also have a foot in other worlds and other endeavors (a puppet show for the Verdi Festival at Teatro Regio in Parma).

In her garden in Florence, Laura Castellucci demonstrates one of the puppets that she and Adele Camarratta collaborated on. Photo by Felice Amato



Glove puppets are a unique form with a long tradition in Italy and it is not incidental that these four have chosen it (though only Cennamo works with it exclusively). Their work is firmly grounded in the form while they also test and push and resist it. All four of the *burattinaie* have been involved in creating new spaces for work to happen and new audiences. As has always been the case in the glove puppet tradition, the specific audience each of these women have cultivated—be it children, theater goers, the art community, or others—influences their work. It's a dance with tradition that wouldn't be the same in another place or time. Their work as *burattinaie* is not separate from their being *burattinaie*.

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Endnotes:

¹ These local mascot characters were not only puppets but featured prominently in advertising and other visual culture, where La Margi is shown as a much older and heavy set. The female glove puppet ideal is a curvy maiden.

² I write about this character and his condition in “When Goiters are Your Family Jewels: The Complex Embrace of Maladies and the Grotesque in Regional Heroic Hand Puppet Characters of the Northern Italy,” in the forthcoming book *Race, Gender and Disability in Puppetry and Material Performance*, Alissa Mello, Paulette Richards and Laura Purcell-Gates, eds.

³ Their influence was national. Often appearing on television, the Ravasios were the only glove puppet company to appear at La Scala in Milan (Benedetto).

⁴ Linda Nochlin laid out this dilemma well in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” There are dangers in the feminist tendency to “swallow the bait, hook, line and sinker... to dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history.” In ardently addressing erasure, one can fail to analyze the systemic barriers to women developing similar levels of artistic achievement (147).

⁵ Like other desirable females, Colombina is not a glove puppet at all. She is operated by a stick. There are many theories about this but one is that the iconography of an attractive female required curves that were impossible to obtain when a hand was inserted. Older women and witches, for example, were true glove puppets and were voiced by men, not women. I discuss this further in my forthcoming book, *Women, Puppets, Masks, and the Body* under contract with Routledge.

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