

HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PUPPET THEATRE. By George Speaight.  
(Harrap; 25s.)

Not so long ago, in a broadcast from Paris, Gordon Craig expressed his preference for puppets over actors. Although unable to agree with this myself—no inorganic actor at its best providing me with a tenth of the pleasure that even a moderately well-equipped living actor can give—I have found that the puppet theatre can yield a rare, evocative and stimulating experience; and, as Mr George Speaight has made clear in his admirable study, has kept the drama alive at times when prejudicial laws have forced the human players into limbo.

Mr Speaight's book is, so far as I remember, the only important work about the Puppet Theatre since Miss Olive Blakham's *Puppets into Actors* in 1948. He says of himself: 'I am a puppet showman, not a professional scholar, but I have tried to present this history with the elements of authority and scholarship', and he has achieved this aim with distinction and charm, tracing the evolution of the puppet from the religious devices of the ancients, through the elaborations of the *Commedia dell' Arte* and the Italian invention of that Pulcinello who eventually became anglicized into the hump-backed English Punch. We are initiated into the mysteries of glove-puppets, of shadow-puppets behind transparencies, and finally the elaborate creatures activated by hand or by rods. One of the most interesting points brought out in this monograph is the peak of popularity attained by the Puppet Theatre during the eighteenth century. In his enthralling review of the puppets and their masters, Mr Speaight reviews for us enchanted hours with the Italian puppets of our own day. Whoever saw the fabulous performance at the Scala some years ago can never forget Bim-Bam-Boul and the marvellous Tarantellas.

The book is lifted to a high place of scholarship by its notes and indices alone. It is superbly brought out, with profuse and fastidious illustrations, and the exquisite picture of the Mountebank on page 83, with his wistful histrionic allure and desperate need to live, make it a collector's treasure.

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