# Good and Radical Bread: Bread and Puppet Theater's Sourdough Traditions

Sarah Plummer

Bread and Puppet Theater is a well-known politically motivated protest theater group, and much has been written about the theater and its puppetry. However, apart from essays and testimonials written by puppeteers themselves, there has yet been a close examination of the theater's bread, its relationship to puppetry, its role at performances, and its place as an ideological engine for this institution's cultural work. In this essay I argue that Bread and Puppet Theater mobilizes bread in the same way they use puppets, as a narrative tool and as a symbol drawing upon personal and global cultural understandings of bread.

The theater's name itself gestures to rallying cries that center bread as a symbol of resistance, counter movements, and forced displacement — Bread and Roses, Bread and Circus, and Bread or Blood. Bread is a symbol connected to many rituals, sometimes acted out during times of uprisings and sometimes during peaceful communion. A closer examination of how the theater's bread is made, its relationship to puppet construction, founder Peter Schumann's connection to bread during a war-torn childhood, bread as a global symbol for revolution, and bread breaking as an act of solidarity, reveals the theater's alignment with the working and peasantry class. Moreover, while puppetry and bread demonstrate the theater's ideological views, bread breaking traditions at the theater create a moment when puppeteers and audience members *join* materially and ideologically with everyday working people against state, military, and upper-class power.

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Bread and Puppet Theater is most known for its gigantic rod puppets often representing nature or redemption, and these puppets are almost always humanoid figures symbolic of the concept or idea. Similarly, the theater uses our cultural understanding and history of bread to convey symbolism, share ideas, and solidify the audience's understanding of the theater's political positioning. In White Bread: A Social History of the Store-bought Loaf Bobrow-Strain explains that when we talk about 'good bread,' "we are talking about a lot more than food. Dreams of 'good bread' are statements about the nature of 'good society." Implicit in the understanding of 'good bread' is plenty; it is not just bread you can survive on, it is bread baked for the joy of eating. At Bread and Puppet, good bread is a rye sourdough, a style and recipe brought to the theater from Schumann's experience in a WWII refugee camp. Bread and Puppet chooses to present rye bread as the preferred kind, despite its entanglement with hunger, displacement, and war. It is good because it resists industrialization and persists through war. If good bread is a window to our dreams of a good society, Bread and Puppet's dreams are articulated through bread as anti-capital, anti-industrial, pro-rural, and pro-peasantry. These dreams move from ideological to embodied as puppeteers and audience members break bread together, contemplating puppet skits that both reveal the evils of war and the potential for mutual aid.

Throughout this paper I draw on my personal experiences as an apprentice at Bread and Puppet Theater during the summer of 2004. In addition to extant publications in which puppeteers share their personal experiences, this article also relies on ethnographic interviews I conducted with longtime puppeteers and volunteers in 2021. I rely on an interdisciplinary, cultural studies approach to consider bread and its reciprocal relationship with society.

Bread and Puppet Theater was founded in 1963 by Peter and Elka Schumann as a street theater in New York City.<sup>2</sup> The theater moved to Vermont in the 1970s, first as an artists' residency at Goddard College and later to a 250-acre dairy farm in Glover, Vermont, in 1975. Today, the farm continues to be the site of the theater's puppeteer housing, performance spaces, museum, and the Bread and Puppet Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Aaron Bobrow-Strain. White Bread: A Social History of the Store-bought Loaf. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Bread and Puppet. 22 May 2023. (https://breadandpuppet.org/)

## **Bread Loaves and Puppet Theater**

Puppets and bread are seemingly simple material objects. Puppetry is considered, with the primacy of Jim Henson's work, a pastime for children. Bread, too, while a dietary staple, is often overlooked as a vehicle for other foods. Both seem commonplace but are complex products of knowledge, skill, labor, and practice. Sourdough, the style of bread made at Bread and Puppet Theater, begins simply with equal parts flour and water. Over time, naturally occurring yeast in the flour and in the air begins to breed, and the dough blooms with life, each a unique imprint of the starter's geographic microbial biome. Given equal weight in the theater's name, bread and puppets are channels for the theater to confirm and share a worldview in opposition to the trappings of the upper class, including war, which the theater sees as a product of the ruling class. How the theater constructs, philosophizes, and employs bread and puppets both in the theater's daily life and their performances reveal their positionality with regards to class.

In this article, I am primarily concerned with the way Bread and Puppet Theater treats bread materially and conceptually, and much can be learned by the way bread and puppets are conflated by Schumann. He relies on the way our culture dismisses the importance of bread and puppets to mask the seriousness and artfulness of the theater's work. Puppet Scholar John Bell describes this tendency as "rhetorical diversions." He explains that Schumann sometimes describes his work "in high moral and political tones redolent of Brecht or Piscator" and at other times says "[I]t's only puppet theatre; he is just a baker." This kind of posturing may point to the fact that Schumann is a trained artist, dancer, and sculptor, yet he is striving to enact his ideological view that art should be egalitarian. It is a way of decentering himself as an artist and creator; The theater is meant to be viewed as a collective rather than a singular effort. Resisting individual credit is tied to the theater's collective ethos. While the theater's aesthetic and vision are fully shaped by Schumann and, until the last couple years his has been the singular artistic vision, the theater utilizes group improvisation and collaboration in the process under his discerning eye.<sup>5</sup> While Schumann has considerable acclaim as an artist in Vermont, it is the theater itself that is known globally.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance, 193.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jason Hicks. Personal Interview. May 21, 2021.

The theater walks a tightrope between individualism and collectivism but also teeters between silliness and seriousness, fun puppet theater and serious political critique. Maintaining the silliness of their work, including use of the circus form, allows for political messages to seep in between laughs. There are many historical examples of simple-seeming puppet skits carrying politically charged messaging. Punch and Judy hand-puppet shows mocked royalty in the 1600s. Jim Henson, arguably one of the most widely commercialized puppet creators in the U.S., has always had a political edge, like Oscar the Grouch anchoring a trashy news show called "Pox News." Both Punch and Judy and Sesame Street are meant for the peasant and working class, and, similarly, Schumann aligns his theater with the masses. In Susan Bettmann's documentary Bread: Peter Schumann and Sourdough Ryebread, Schumann states, "A bakery is a bakery. It doesn't want to be anything else. Maybe puppetry just a little bit."6 This comment could be read as flippant, as one of his aforementioned rhetorical diversions, but I argue that bread is an act of puppetry at Bread and Puppet. It is an object that is formed and moved by a human, and its movement is meant to convey meaning.

The material aspects of puppets guide their performativity. The length of their arms, the amount of joints and articulations, and even how their features are socially interpreted guide the kinds of actions and characters they depict. Similarly, the material aspects of bread shape its function and performativity; It is unlikely, for instance, that a cheap sliced loaf of white bread would be dunked into a decadent balsamic reduction. Nor would it be as likely for a dark German rye to be used for a quick peanut butter sandwich. We have expectations of bread based on its form. Comparing similarities in the way bread and puppets are constructed, and the entangled relationship between their material and performance aspects, helps enliven our understanding of the performativity of bread at Bread and Puppet Theater. At the theater, as I will explain below, bread and puppets are born out of similar looking processes, and bread is meant to carry with it the same cultural and symbolic meaning that puppets do.

Couched in this conflation of bread and puppetry, we can understand Schumann's intent for bread to carry the same ideological and social value for the theater as puppets. During the 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 global pandemic, for instance, the theater held weekly Bread Days during which locals could drive up to the theater, listen to the band perform, and receive a free loaf of bread and a free

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Susan Bettmann, dir., *Bread Peter Schumann and Sourdough Ryebread.* (North Middlesex, VT: White Rock Productions, 2013).

puppet to take home.<sup>7</sup> Both are shown as equally important and equal necessities, much like the U.S. labor movement's call for both bread and roses, the sustenance of food and art. Moreover, there is the expectation that although the band's performance has ended, the bread and puppet will be taken home for a second life. The puppets will be played with or displayed, and the bread will be cut, shared around a table, or become a sandwich. In this way there is an expectation that both the bread and puppet will become part of later performances.

At Bread and Puppet Theater, both bread and puppets are made at home from what you have or can easily source for free. Bread making is a process that occurs in the same space and looks like puppet making. Loaves and clay puppet faces are formed on the same thin wood sheets within 15 feet from one another. Bread baked at Bread and Puppet Theater is a sourdough rye bread, made from grain milled in a shed outside a barn that houses their puppet museum, paints, musical instruments, and an assortment of raw materials used to create puppet circuses and pageants. The area adjoins the old farmhouse where puppeteers live and the same grassy area where apprentices use their feet to stomp and mix clay in a bathtub. This clay will become the foundation for papier mâché hands and faces, in a process not unlike the mixing and shaping of bread loaves, as both bread and puppets begin life in neighboring sheds on this 250-acre farm in rural Vermont.

Schumann mixes rye flour with one-third or one-half soaked and sprouted rye grains and pours the mixture into the top of a mill while cranking a large handle, setting the grinder in motion. This was a job Schumann used to do alone, but over the last decade as an octogenarian he has solicited help from apprentices and puppeteers to mill the grain. Once milled, the grain shoots out into a wheelbarrow where Schumann adds water and mixes it into dough using a large wooden paddle. Schumann points out that rye can grow in poor soil under poor conditions, and he calls his style of dough making, "the Silesian peasant bread that I learned to bake from my mother" in Lubin, which was part of Germany during his childhood but now part of Poland. 9

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Breadandpuppet. A puppeteer introduces Bread Day during the Covid-19 global pandemic. *Instagram.* 12 March 2021.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CMVHGj5FI3Q/?fbclid=IwAR3rVXHXKs8ppU-vDj43BthnePm9L1emyD25g8KKduytPP7efh2ctlsWeazo.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Bettmann

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid.

As an apprentice in 2004, I saw constant tell-tale signs of bread making. Large gallon-size jars filled with rye berries would appear in the windows of the puppeteer house. I noticed when they would sprout and then be replaced with soaking rye berries. On occasion I would be up early enough to start making coffee in the kitchen and see Schumann, most often shirtless and wearing boots with paint-stained pants, rotating bread loaves inside the brick oven. He kept what the group referred to as "bakers' hours." Schumann would execute large bakes once each week to feed puppeteers and volunteers during rehearsals and then add a second bake when performances began on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons. So, the bread attendees receive when they see a show at Bread and Puppet Theater is the same bread puppeteers and the Schumann family eat with their meals. Breaking bread is therefore never solely performative, it is sharing bread the theater itself uses to sustain its members and as mentioned above, it is the family recipe and method passed down in Schumann's own family.

Schumann uses an autolyze method of dough making, which is defined by King Arthur Baking as the process where water and flour are gently turned and mixed, followed by a period of rest 20 minutes to an hour prior to kneading. "This simple pause allows for some rather magical changes to occur in your bread dough." During these periods of rest, enzymes break down protein in the flour and starch is turned into sugar that is consumed by the yeast, causing the dough to grow and develop bubbles. Mixing rapidly in a mechanical mixer or with a dough hook develops the bread more quickly, but this shortened process means the flour appears whiter due to oxidation and has less fermentation flavor. The process of autolyze is one of self-destruction and regrowth. At this stage of the bread's life, it contains several cycles of new life and destruction, beginning with the sprouted rye berries that are milled into the flour. Each time the bread is turned and rests it begins the process of self-digestion. This is not unlike the clay figures that become papier mâché molds at Bread and Puppet before they are returned to the bathtub to be turned, mixed, and formed into new figures later.

When the dough is ready, Schumann shapes it into batards, classic football-shaped loaves. These loaves are lined up by the dozens across a large paddle. His loaves are generally the size of loaves one might find in a bakery. Once a paddle

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Alpern, Barb. "Using the autolyze method," King Arthur Backing Company September 29, 2017.

 $https://www.kingarthurbaking.com/blog/2017/09/29/using-the-autolyse-method {\it 11}\ Ibid.$ 

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

is full, Schumann uses a metal bread stamp to leave a simple image of a sun stamped into the tops of each loaf. The loaves are then shuffled into a large outdoor bread oven where they are watched and rotated like pizza might be baked in a pizza oven. The oven has been preheated with spruce, which Schumann says is the best kind of wood for bread making because it burns quickly and hotly. 13 After the bread is removed and the oven cools, it is stacked with wood in preparation for the next baking. This bread-baking wood and long thin saplings used in puppet construction are sourced from part of the property called "The Pine Forest." The forest includes an area used to memorialize puppeteers who have passed away through art and sculpture. So, much like bread making is an act of regrowth, we see the theater honors destruction and rejuvenation across many practices, including The Pine Forrest and what is provides.

There is parity between the materials used to make bread and puppets. Rye sourdough bread is made from simple, self-sprouted and self-ground material. Puppet material is sourced as cheaply as possible by repurposing older puppets and utilizing free cardboard, although historically it was not always done this cheaply at Bread and Puppet. The Theater company first began making masks and puppets out of Celastic, an expensive, resin-imbued cloth that was lightweight, weatherproof, and durable. Some of these puppets made from Celastic are still around today and used in performances. After seeing the way other theaters constructed sets and props (some wastefully with an unending budget and others repurposing and recycling), Peter Schumann decided the theater must begin to make puppets out of whatever they could find. Longtime puppeteer George Dennison recalls this shift:

Bread & Puppet, already poor, was to stop acting rich. No more buying hinges at the hardware store. We could learn the knotting and folding techniques used by Third World people who didn't have hardware stores. We would unbend every nail, or wire things together. We could use rocks if there were not enough hammers.<sup>14</sup>

The result of this commitment to shirk expensive products and to use whatever was at hand was simply that the "puppets started to look like the bread: brown,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Bettmann.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> George Dennison. An Existing Better World: Notes on the Bread and Puppet Theater. (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2000), 194.

rough, earthy."<sup>15</sup> The puppets (d)evolved from detail-oriented sculptures to expressionistic masks made from the simplest papier mâché — scraps of cloth and a cornstarch glue.

In New York City, Bread and Puppet commandeered building materials cast off from construction sites and picked through trash left on sidewalks in Lower Manhattan. <sup>16</sup> To create the forms for masks to be papier-mâchéd, the group dug clay from New Jersey hayfields. Once the theater moved to Vermont, they began using maple branches as rods to operate their large puppets and a local furniture factory began providing used cardboard. <sup>17</sup> Sculptures, once used to create masks, are smashed and watered back into clay. Cardboard signs are painted and repainted, and older puppets are constantly "harvested for parts." <sup>18</sup>

There is a learning process to creating puppets out of trash and recycling. For instance, a piece of cardboard attached to wood with a nail will easily rip off in a gust of wind. The group therefore uses a beer bottle cap as a washer. The cap's serrated rim grips the cardboard, and the larger size helps prevent the cardboard from tearing off the small nail head. The result of this practicality is that their work looks to be composed of recycling. Every puppet is therefore an expression of the theater's lowbrow, anti-capitalist ideology.

As the name suggests, Bread and Puppet Theater places equal importance on bread and puppets, and their conflation of and approach to both suggest that, like puppets, bread carries material and symbolic meaning for the puppeteers and their audience. Bread and puppets are made in a shared space and in kinship with one another, and both visually represent the theater's position as lowbrow and in step with the working class. This alignment is overt in the theater's choice of materials, processes, and visual appearance. As I explore in the next section, Bread and Puppet Theater uses bread, not only as a material way to align with the lower class, but as a symbol of resistance against those who oppose and oppress the working class.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Puppet Modernism, 225.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Marc Estrin. (2011) "The Sustainable Energy of the Bread & Puppet Theater: Lessons Outsidethe Box." *The Radical Teacher* No. 89, 25.

## A Symbol of Persistence and Resistance

Bread and Puppet Theater evokes the concept of bread as a symbol that expands from personal to larger cultural and historical processes, from the personal origins of Schumann's "Silesian peasant bread," to its use as a foil for the ruling class, military power, corporate power, and state violence. At the heart of the theater is Schumann's experience in a refugee camp in WWII where bread was a central, sustaining figure.

According to Stefan Brecht's study of Bread and Puppet, Schumann was born in 1934 to Protestant parents in Silesia, a part of eastern Germany that became Poland after World War II. Peter's wife, Elka, describes in an interview how Peter and his family left their home in 1944 fleeing the Soviet army with the whole horizon ablaze behind them and other frantic refugees clinging to the roof and windows of the last train. He remembers the town on fire, the black smoke and explosions from the inferno of Breslau as it burned. The family lived in a displaced persons camp in the German State of Schleswig-Holstein and survived on grains they could glean from harvested fields.

This kind of bread is meant to conjure the feeling of peasantry, poverty and hunger. Following each performance at Bread and Puppet Theater, whether the performance occurs at their grassy amphitheater, inside during a tour, or after a protest march, those who gather around receive a slice of bread covered in aioli, a spread made with garlic, oil, eggs, and lemon. After performances in Glover, audience members line up at the bread hut, which shelters a large brick oven, and wait their turn for a piece of bread. In this manner, audience members form literal breadlines. On tours puppeteers construct small mobile stone bread ovens and back bread on location, a nod to bread as a touchstone regardless of how far away they travel from home.

Breadlines exemplify the way in which performativity is enmeshed in bread's materiality. A loaf is meant to be sliced and shared among a group, and that act of slicing has ritual and performance aspects, in how bodies orient around a loaf being sliced and the physicality of pushing and slicing through thick crusted home baked bread. Feeding people en mass also calls to mind the biblical story the 5 loaves and two fish, in which the disciples believe it will be impossible to feed

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Stefan Brecht, The Bread and Puppet Theatre Vol. 1. (New York: Methuen/Routledge, 1988), 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ibid.

several thousand people with such a small amount. In the Bible story, the masses are fed with food to spare. We culturally understand bread as an object connected to both hunger as well as shared plenty.

Food shortages were commonplace across Eastern Europe in the years before Schumann was born. An estimated 6.5 to 7 million people died of hunger in the USSR between 1928-1933.<sup>21</sup> Schumann would have experienced food insecurity as a displaced person, as is common among those who experience forced displacement. Americans who were alive in the 1980s will remember images of breadlines, meatlines, and dairylines in Russia during the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> These images were meant to be a warning to American audiences about the perils of communism, but breadlines were common in the U.S. as well. The most famous breadlines in the U.S. were formed in the 1890s at the Fleishchmann Company in New York City where they gave away what was left of the day's bread at midnight to those in need.<sup>23</sup> The concept of the breadline as a line where impoverished people waited for food, bread or otherwise, was solidified in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. At their peak distribution in 1931, it is estimated that 82 breadlines served 85,000 meals each day in New York City alone.<sup>24</sup>

Bread and Puppet has many skits that highlight stories of displaced, refugee, and starving people around the world, often due to acts of war and violence, but always due to state action or inaction. Attendees watch these skits and are then asked to embody the role of deprivation themselves. They are given only a small piece of bread each. So, while they are fed, they are not offered enough to fill their stomachs. This tradition can be seen as creating community among those who experienced the puppet show together. Or, if we understand that everyone in the breadline is meant to represent or embody the disenfranchised, the tradition demonstrates a broader, global solidarity against the ruling class or bourgeoisie culture. The tradition functions to break down power structures associated with class distinction. Those receiving the bread must stand in line to receive it at a central location. In that regard, they stand in literal and symbolic breadlines. The audience must experience poverty, or at least re-enact these humbling motions and think about hunger, to receive the bread.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Nicolas Werth. (2016) "Food Shortages, Hunger, and Famines in the USSR, 1928-33." *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 3, no. 2, 35-50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> WDEF News 12. "Russia Food Lines" YouTube. 27 May 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcyqZKqaxUg

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Scott Cutler Shershow. *Bread.* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid., 93.

Cultural Studies Scholar Scott Cutler Shershow explains that bread always exists in relation to starvation; "Even for those of us who have never known real privation, our individual and collective experience of bread can never be entirely separated from violence and scarcity, from famine and dearth." As a material object it nourishes and feeds us, and because it has often been central to the human diet, symbolically it must always be a symbol for scarcity and poverty. Bread often accompanies stories of famine and dearth at the theater; at times even personifications of famine atrocities are played out in Bread and Puppet skits.

Bread is always given free after performances, and the importance of giving it away is hinted at when Schumann tells Bettmann the theater itself is "just a vehicle for the bread. It's not the other way around. There has to be a method of distributing bread."<sup>26</sup> He goes on to say that Americans are very suspicious of anything given for free and so they must be tricked. "This trick is called puppetry," he explained.<sup>27</sup> This is another one of Schumann's flippant phrases that could be viewed as a distraction, but we can understand bread and puppets as working together to share the theater's ideology, and puppetry is a way to attract people for a show. People expect a puppet show, but bread also performs in the way it is passed out in breadlines and as part of a bread breaking ritual. Watching a loaf broken and shared is a performance that has as much interpretive value as watching a dance or a circus skit. Characters can act out narratives of mutual aid in puppet skits, or the audience itself can take part in a bread breaking ritual that performs ideas of collectivity, family, community, and shared wealth across time.

Rooted in the bread customs at Bread and Puppet is the idea of it being given for free. It becomes symbolic of mutual aid and shared resources, an idea that presents a worldview counter to government aid or top-down means to alleviate poverty. Schumann's bread itself, as homemade rye sourdough, is representative of a specific social class in opposition to ruling elites. In the manifesto, What is Cheap Art?, Schumann situates the roughness of puppetry and bread alongside the roughness of the lower class. In contrast, he states that the upper class feeds on fluffy white bread: "Degenerate tastebuds of the fluffy white-bread-eaters (who inherited that dessert-like stuff which fattened Louis XVI from the French Revolution) must be challenged with the rough old sourdough rye, crusted with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Bettmann.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Bettmann.

smell of pine and cedar coals which bake it."<sup>28</sup> Materially, as it is crusted with pine and cedar coals, it is meant to be closer to the earth and its origins than industrial white loaves. When attendees receive a hunk of bread at Bread and Puppet, they feel, see and smell something that has a connection to how it was made and is symbolic of a pre-industrial life. The bread is meant to be symbolic of those who consume it: soft and wealthy in contrast to the rough and poor.

Until the Industrial Revolution, white bread was infinitely more expensive. The poor ate bread made from grains that were considered less desirable, like rye.<sup>29</sup> In Susan Bettmann's documentary, Peter Schumann states that rye grain can grow in poor soils. Even rye itself is a metaphor for perseverance in the face of deprivation. Estrin describes this as "coarseness" that "stands against Wonder Bread."<sup>30</sup> "Peter is not interested in the pasty way of life," he said. "He connects coarseness with rough, working life."<sup>31</sup> Rough bread is therefore synonymous with rough work. Bread consumption has long been central to human diets. Under Louis XIV, workers in Paris ate about three and a half pounds of bread each day with little else to supplement.<sup>32</sup> From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, Americans consumed an average of 25-30 percent of calories from bread every day.<sup>33</sup> How much bread someone eats and what kind of bread they consume is woven into the striations of social hierarchies and status.

Bread and Puppet Theater's handmade bread is meant to evoke images of working class and revolution, harkening back to a time when finely milled white flour was reserved for the very rich. But how we view white and dark breads have changed over time. Buying rough, brown bread is a mark of the wealthy, who have time to make or buy loaves that require more labor. In the past, people in poverty spent time rather than money transforming overlooked ingredients into palatable foods. In the United States, the industrialization of bread began in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Peter Schumann. What is Cheap Art? (Glover, Vermont: Bread and Puppet Press, 1987). As a note, there are a series of three posters called "the WHY CHEAP ART? manifesto, "Cheap Art Manifesto No. 3," and "Cheap Art Manifesto No. 4." This What is Cheap Art? is a manifesto printed in pamphlet form.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Shershow, 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Ronald T. Simon and Marc Estrin. *Rehearsing With God: Photographs and Essays on The Bread and Puppet Theater* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004), 188.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Bobrow-Strain, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

1840s alongside fear of contagion, disease, and the contamination of food in factory conditions. The sliced industrial loaf appeared white, unadulterated, and pure, and became a symbol of American food during a time of heightened European immigration and xenophobia. In *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-bought Loaf*, Bobrow-Strain explained that by the late 1800s and early 1900s, cultural messaging that accompanied the commercialization of bread — from political cartoons to church sermons — suggested "only savage peoples and unwashed immigrants ate dense, dark bread. Eating white bread was said to 'Americanize' immigrants."<sup>54</sup> Peter Schumann's bread can therefore be seen as an intervention to counter commercial white bread, to eschew assimilation into an envisioned homogenized American culture, or to embrace old traditions in the face of industrialism and capitalism. Bread and Puppet's loaves signify a reunification of the working class and the raw materials from which bread is made.

While finely milled white bread used to be reserved for the very rich, how can we understand its inversion now that white bread is a hallmark of the poor and rough artisan bread is a symbol of the affluent? In New York City in 2017, loaves of artisan bread cost between \$11 and \$20.<sup>35</sup> In addition to small niche bakeries, large brands now offer artisan supermarket loaves for between \$3-\$5, more than twice the cost of industrial white bread. This shift toward shopping local, small businesses is what some scholars call "The Artisan Economy."<sup>36</sup> Just as white bread was once seen as clean, healthy, and morally good, the artisan economy is promoted as moral, ethical, and more fulfilling.<sup>37</sup> In 2020, the global pandemic saw a renewed interest in at-home sourdough baking. Pandemic bread baking was often a symbol of class privilege, an activity done by those able or required to stay home, with time to invest in learning a new pastime (feeding and tending to sourdough starters), and the financial ability to purchase proofing baskets and baking implements. The fervor of pandemic baking has only increased the desire for artisan bread. A recent report suggests that the global artisan bakery

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Lauren Steussy. "New Yorkers are paying \$20 for a loaf of bread. *New York Post.* 3 October 2017.

https://nypost.com/2017/10/03/new-yorkers-are-paying-20-for-a-loaf-of-bread/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Kristin Muro and Chris O'Kane. "The Artisan Economy and the New Spirit of Capitalism." *Critical Sociology.* Vol 48(1) 2022, 37-53.
<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

market size will increase 5.35 percent between 2023-2028, up to \$4424.28 million.<sup>38</sup>

This is a dramatic shift in how bread is viewed in the United States, and possibly a shift that could confuse Bread and Puppet Theater's messaging. The rye sourdough is central to the theater's expression of fears around modernity and industrialization — a fall away from agrarian life. Schumann himself has said, "city life is an imitation of life. Real life is country life." Those who attend performances at Bread and Puppet and eat his rough sourdough are much more likely now than in years past to have purchased loaves of sourdough at farmers markets, made them at home themselves, or purchased artisan-style loaves now prevalent in supermarkets. Despite shifts in attendees' experience, because bread is mobilized in the same way as puppetry, as material and symbolic, bread is always engaging with binaries — rich versus poor, rough versus soft, free versus expensive. The bread at Bread and Puppet Theater has stayed the same for more than 60 years, but the audience's experience with similar artisan bread is shifting.

Despite this cultural shift in Americans' relationship with neo-peasant, artisan bread, the theater's alignment with rural, working people is likely not lost because bread always carries with it our memories of privation. Bobrow-Strain describes white bread, and by extension artisan loaves, at the center of Americans' conflicting relationship with industrialization — is it pure and safe or does it breed dangers and disease? For Bobrow-Strain, bread both "embod[ies] the promise of industrial abundance and the dangerous hubris of science." It is no surprise that a global pandemic, and a rise in paranoia surrounding masking, viral loads, and the cause of COVID-19, would see a resurgence of homemade baking, but our society could have manifested these fears in either extreme, purchasing only the most sterile white bread from factories or making the roughest bread at home. As a symbol it carries with it both extremes.

White or rye, bread lives at the tension between industrial versus homemade, upper class versus lower class, and health versus disease. Bread and Puppet's presentation of rye as the preferred, pro-peasantry loaf is rooted in Schumann's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Absolute Reports Pvt. Ltd. "Artisan Bakery Market Size Global Research Report, 2023-2028. *News Center*. 2 March 2023.https://www.newmediawire.com/news/artisan-bakery-market-size-global-research-report-2023-2028-

<sup>7061472?</sup>fbclid=IwAR1DL3ejiivpUnd2grTUzP5VjVMN6wXK9DhN-NBJKl7RLQ2tYX1q8rOea6ik

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Bettmann.

<sup>40</sup> Bobrow-Strain, 8-9.

personal relationship with bread. His relationship to bread is one of radicalization. His childhood home was not described as being political, neither in support of nor standing in opposition to the Nazi Party, yet his experience in the refugee camp was a formative one now staged repeatedly across Bread and Puppet skits -Yemen, Ukraine, Palestine — all conflicts presented from the perspective of those experiencing state-allowed or state-induced hunger. The theater's use of bread is symbolic of his radicalization through lived experience, but bread is also broadly a global symbol of radicalization. During the Hundred Years' War, French peasants known as the Jacquerie revolted under the slogan "Le pain se lève." The slogan, which means the bread rises itself, draws a direct connection between the lower class, bread, and revolution. The Bread Riots were peasant revolts that led to the fall of The Bastille in 1789. Then, during the French Revolution, thousands of women marched to Versailles chanting "Bread!" and, as the royals left in their carriage, the women surrounded it "brandishing loaves of bread speared on the tops of bayonets."42 During the American Civil War, a series of riots called the Southern Bread Riots occurred across southern states in response to the high costs of bread flour and supplies. Women commandeered horses and weapons from armaments to break into stores and warehouses, stealing food and supplies. 43 An 1863 edition of the Cleveland Morning Leader reported that "mobs of half-starved women" were heard shouting "Bread or Blood!"44 In these examples, it is clear how the material aspects of bread perform in a way that directly mimics its symbolic performance; Bread rises, is punched down, and rises again.

In 1892, the Russian political theorist Peter Kropotkin wrote *The Conquest of Bread*, often just referred to as *The Bread Book*, in which bread is a metaphor for essential human needs. The book has been a favorite of communist or anarchist movements since it was written. Kropotkin states, "We have the temerity to declare that all have a right to bread, that there is enough bread for all, and that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Shershow, 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Shershow, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Stephanie McCurry. "Women Numerous and Armed: The Confederate Food Riots in Historical Perspective." *OAH Magazine of History* 27 no. 2. (2013): 35-9.

<sup>44 &</sup>quot;Bread Riots." Cleveland Morning Leader. 13 April 1963. https://www.newspapers.com/image/75715206/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.ey-JmcmVlLXZpZXctaWQiOjc1NzE1MjA2LCJpYXQiOjE2ODQ0NDk5NDU-sImV4cCI6MTY4NDUzNjM0NX0.brXrD2injRJxp5R792zV\_v2XjahSWxWlwS-GqfoMnikE

with this watchword of *Bread for All* the Revolution will triumph."<sup>45</sup> "Bread for All" has been a rallying cry picked up by the American women's suffrage movement and, later, by way of a poem and song, morphed into the phrase "Give us bread and give us roses."<sup>46</sup> The song was first made popular during the famous Bread and Roses textile strike in 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Bread and roses have been used by many movements, including contemporary ones like the Cornbread Communists, "Appalachian folk: black, anti-racist womanist; queer syndicalists; leftist-organizing coal miner's daughters; agrarian anarchocommunists; and the like," a group that is represented by the image of an opossum eating cornbread from a cast-iron skillet surrounded by roses. <sup>47</sup> One of their rallying cries is to "raise hell and eat cornbread." The specificity of cornbread here is meant, much like Schumann's peasant bread, to connect to a specific geographical and cultural group, narrowed down by the opossum, which has become a symbol of identity for young Appalachians.

In 2011, "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice," was the rallying cry and three demands during the Egyptian revolution.<sup>49</sup> Demands associated with bread related to an inadequate food distribution system, but Amira Mittermair notes that bread in Egyptian Arabic means 'life," and charity through feeding the hungry is also a central tenant to Islamic life.<sup>50</sup>

In these examples, we understand bread as a complex symbol at the center of war, mutual aid, uprisings, and political action. Bread and Puppet Theater harnesses the global understanding of bread as a necessity for life often controlled or withheld by those in power. This drives home the messaging of the theater's skits, which often focus on exposing or thwarting power systems that oppress everyday people, especially the rural working class. Puppetry demonstrates these ideological views within the context of a performance, but the theater's use of bread as a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Kropotkin, Peter. *The Conquest of Bread*. (London: Chapman and Hall, LTD., 1906), 70. Ebook.

https://go-galecom.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/ps/i.do?p=MOME&u=viva\_vpi&id=

GALE%7CRZLELR655717009&v=2.1&it=r&sid=gale\_marc

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Robert J. S Ross. "Bread and Roses: Women Workers and the Struggle for Dignity and Respect. *The Journal of Labor & Society.* 16 (March 2013), 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Cornbread Communist Manifesto, 2.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1F4KG-Kt1wtfj8MdUB27odvSmTVArN-rRQ/view?pli=1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Amira Mittermaier. "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma." *Cultural Anthropology*, 29 no. 1 (2014), 54-79.
<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 62.

staple part of puppeteers' diets and as a gift to audience members brings these ideologies from performative to material and embodied. The theater places bread within the context of well understood religious rituals, not only placing the theater and audience in opposition to power, but as a group aligned against that power.

#### A Symbol of Unity

After loaves at Bread and Puppet Theater have been formed but before they go into the oven, Schumann uses a metal bread stamp to leave a simple image of a sun stamped into the top of each loaf. This is a carryover from when his mother baked bread in the refugee camp. Bread in the camps was baked in large communal ovens, and each family had their own symbol to differentiate their family's bread from that of other families. Peter's mother cut suns into the tops of their loaves. In this way, the bread stamp was a way to draw a line of inclusion and exclusion between families, to mark both who was and was not family. The stamp acted as a line of demarcation and ownership in the refugee camp. When the same sun-marked bread is cut and shared after puppet performances, it is an act that removes lines of demarcations between families and suggests one larger communal group. Perhaps it confirms the audience holds the same political beliefs as expressed in their skits. Or perhaps it is simply meant to indicate that everyone who experiences the show has a shared experience manifested materially.

When those who attend theater performances receive a chunk of founder Peter Schumann's rough-ground rye sourdough bread covered in aioli, it conjures images, not just of breadlines, but of religious traditions like communion. It is important to note that Stephan Brecht's history of Bread and Puppet Theater points out that Schumann's family were from Silesia, a highly contested area comprising German Protestants and Polish Roman Catholics. Schumann would have likely been exposed to a great deal of Catholic imagery and iconography growing up, which explains why it has become a feature of Bread and Puppet performances. At the end of a performance, often there are two simultaneous lines for bread, the way churches often invite congregants to form two lines, one from each side of the split sanctuary. Schumann is up front, cutting bread and drizzling aioli as audience members step forward one by one to receive their piece. Paired with the puppeteers who wear all white, it is an image that suggests high mass.

Concerning bread and its relationship to theater, Schumann wrote a passage in the early 1960s, which became a poster printed in 2002 and again in 2007. The poster reads, "The bread shall remind you of the sacrament of eating," followed

immediately by, "We want you to understand that theater is not yet an established form, not the place of commerce you think it is." It goes on to say that theater is like bread, "more like a necessity." If theater is not yet an established form, we can understand it as a moment of liminality, a space between in which attendees can question their existing beliefs and take on new ideas. In this poster we also understand the everyday act of eating as a sacrament. In other words, eating is not just about eating; It is an important moment for community building and shared experience. There's an opportunity for communion every day. For Catholics, eating bread – further symbolized as a wafer - within the context of the Eucharist is never just about eating, it is about consuming the symbolic body of Christ and receiving God's grace. If Bread and Puppet asks us to consider the sacrament of eating, are we meant to see the awesome in the everyday? Should we consider taking care of our bodies as something sacred and therefore an act that should not be denied?

Using religious language and conducting a bread breaking tradition allows for interpretations within Christian constructs. In *The Breaking of Bread and the Breaking of Boundaries: A Study of the Metaphor of Bread in the Gospel of Matthew,* Minkyu Lee states that food "exhibits symbolic and metaphoric meaning for representing cultural identity and ideological vision beyond their literal expression." We have seen cultural identity at play as we considered culturally different breads such as white bread, rye sourdough, and cornbread. The act of breaking bread carries with it the unmistakable allusion to the Christian tradition of Communion or Eucharist. In Susan Bettmann's documentary, she asks attendees what they think of the bread tradition and several also used the word "sacrament" in their responses.

Scholars of Christianity define ritual as "a symbol that is acted out. All rituals are symbols, but not all symbols are rituals." We can understand bread as a symbol connected to many rituals, sometimes acted out during times of uprisings and sometimes as an act of communing.

Religious customs celebrate cultural values as well as "maintain and legitimize that culture. Part of the process of legitimization necessarily entails the negotiation of power within a society, so that important rituals and symbols in every

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Poster owned by author, Glover, Vermont: Bread and Puppet Press, 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Minkyu Lee. *The Breaking of Bread and the Breaking of Boundaries: A Study of the Metaphor of Bread in the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy. *Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

society are essential for maintaining power structures of that society."<sup>54</sup> In other words, communion as part of Bread and Puppet's performance is meant to celebrate and solidify the values of the community comprised of puppeteers, audience members, puppets, and bread loaves. It is also important to note that the theater's tradition also solidifies Schumann's own position of power as patriarch. He bakes the bread, and when bread is given out at the bread hut, he is literally centered at the head of the two lines, slicing loaves and preparing them for the audience. Bread and Puppet Theater, despite moments of collaboration, has been his vision and aesthetic. Even if longtime puppeteers take on more leadership roles in the future, they work within the bounds of his traditions.

Bible scholars note that Jesus breaks bread with outsiders on several occasions, including gentiles and marginalized people.<sup>55</sup> These acts are meant to break down socio-economic barriers and redefine who is included in the community. Similarly, Schumann uses the bread breaking ritual to redefine community at Bread and Puppet. Bread that was once marked with a sun and only meant for his family is now cut and shared with whomever will take a piece. The tradition can be understood as an inclusive act that creates a community among those who experienced the puppet show together, or demonstrates a broader, global solidarity against bourgeoisie culture. The tradition is meant to break down power structures associated with class distinction. In this regard, bread is a continual negotiation between classes. It becomes a softer way to ask patrons to adopt the political values of the theater. The ritual is a way to seek more people willing to shout "Bread or Blood" in the street.

Longtime puppeteers George Dennison and Marc Estrin wrote essays that consider the bread tradition in relation to the shows. For Dennison, the sharing of the bread is meant to signal that the play itself "is not an entrepreneurial exercise but a communal one" and that financial contributions for theater would be contributions "to the egotism or greediness of the playwright or performers." Indeed, all performances held at the farm in Glover, Vermont, were once free, although the theater has always been paid by institutions or theaters to perform on tour in the United States, and especially on winter European tours. Sometimes these touring locations are still free for attendees, but the company has been paid to perform there. In recent years, the theater has begun asking for donations and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Lee, 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Dennison, 35.

suggesting a price, rather than placing a collection box in the amphitheater. This suggests another way the theater defines community; while the bread tradition at the farm may feel like solidarity across humankind, the theater privileges those who make the pilgrimage to Vermont. The theater decides who should pay, and those who come to Vermont can pay only on their own volition.

Interviews I conducted in 2021 with longtime puppeteers, former Bread and Puppet Theater puppeteers, and volunteers from Bread and Puppet demonstrate even those deeply connected to the theater view this bread breaking tradition in different ways, suggesting that no single ideological message is understood. For several, its proximity to Christian tradition is either unwelcome or subversive. Jay Mead, an artist and teacher who has volunteered with Bread and Puppet since the 1980s, sees the bread tradition as presented as "quasi-Christian" and alongside other pieces of Christian iconography in the puppet shows, it is a reference that is there, "but not presented in that way." Doug Fitch, founder of puppet and film company Giants are Small, describes the bread breaking ritual as subversive because it looks like the Christian ritual, but it is not the Body of Christ. 58 "It's not symbolizing anything other than, 'This is actually just bread, and you'd paid a small amount to be here, and we are grateful for your being here," he said. As a student of Art and Design at Harvard, Fitch said he worked on a thesis focusing on chairs because he wanted to highlight useful art. He noted that Schumann is doing the same thing, finding usefulness in art by saying, "Art is food."

For Clare Dolan, longtime touring puppeteer with Bread and Puppet and the founder of the Museum of Everyday Life in Glover, Vermont, the tradition is also less about the theoretical and about "a concrete thing." It is not religious but an everyday kind of exchange. For me, the bread in Bread and Puppet [is] just that, a physical expression of what is going on with the puppet show — 'We are giving you something to chew on. Hope it fills your belly in a good way, you know?" The bread breaking tradition plays on interplay between material and symbolic that exists in the Christian tradition of communion, but rather than focus most heavily on symbolic meaning so central to the religious experience, Schumann uses the language and form of religion while holding close to the ritual's secularity. In this way both rituals hold tension between the material and the symbolic, but each cleaves more tightly to one over the other.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Mead, Jay. Personal Interview. January 16, 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Fitch, Doug. Personal Interview. February 19, 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Dolan, Clare. Personal Interview. October 4, 2021.

Dolan wonders if attendees at Bread and Puppet Theater shows experience them differently because of the bread tradition, if opening their mouths and taking in a piece of bread orients their body to take in the show's message, too. She explains that communion happens without the gravitas of religion attached. "It provokes a certain shared group experience. For me there is a real parallel with the theater there as well[...] you are having a shared experience with others who are sitting in the audience with you. That kind of connection is really important as well."

Eli Nixon, a former Bread and Puppet puppeteer and a self-described "cardboard constructionist," is drawn to the fact that the bread tradition is grounded in the idea of needing both art and bread to survive. <sup>60</sup> And Nixon is in general "a big proponent of group snacking as necessary for cultural revitalization." They offer this as an important counterpoint about the tradition's connection to Christianity as a queer person with aversions to organized religion. At times they feel the ceremony takes itself too seriously. "When it is casual and there comes Jason Hicks with his loaf of bread and here comes someone else and, 'Hey, the bread is ready!', then it is great," they explained. "Do I think the bread is delicious? Yes. Do I need more ceremony around it at the end? No."

The name of Bread and Puppet Theater is a reference to the ancient Roman idiom "bread and circuses" that describes the mechanism of appeasing and distracting political subjects through food and entertainment. Are Schumann's gifts of bread and entertainment meant to turn us into docile subjects or meant to awaken us to political action? Bread and Puppet's performances entertain, but they are also cerebral and weighty. Mixed within the circus format of their performances are skits that are explicitly funny while others are solemn. For Mark Estrin, the bread provides a material avenue to think about the puppet performance. He describes what it is like to sit and chew on Schumann's sourdough:

You sit there chewing, salivating, feeling your commonality with others, with the puppeteers, even with the puppets. People with full mouths tend not to chat, at least until after the swallow, and it is in the munching silence, large messages sink in and soak.<sup>61</sup>

Estrin connects this chewing with work done in the mind, explaining that puppet shows contain large, meaningful messages. As mentioned above, Schumann con-

<sup>60</sup> Nixon, Eli. Personal interview. September 1, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Simon, 186.

nects rough bread with hard working peasants. As Estrin points out, the materiality of the bread itself forces the symbolic, dense chewy bread forces silence and thought. It also forces physical labor, as biting and chewing its thick crust is a manual, physical labor. This is another way in which the physical aspects of the bread force behavior and meaning when attendees interact with the bread.

Early Christianity, like many of the other movements mentioned above, comprised a radical group of outsiders who often challenge Roman authority and power. The act of communion as articulated in the religious Last Supper is a political call to action as Jesus asks his disciples to carry on their traditions. Audience members who attend Bread and Puppet Theater's performances are shown humanitarian crises, acts of violence, and people living in despair. By accepting the bread at the end of the show, audience members are receiving a similar call to action.

Thinking about bread as a tool used by the theater in much the same way as puppetry — a tool to allow the audience to imagine the privations of war and the challenges of poverty and displacement — pushes us to think about bread outside other scholarly explorations linking bread and revolution. Bread is part of the theater's performance, depicting a pro-peasantry way of life. Moreover, because its performance is entangled with bread's existing relationships to communion and revolution, bread becomes central to the theater transmission of ideology. Those who eat the bread are part of a larger group, and the implication is one of global working-class solidarity. Just like sourdough blossoms from the microbes available in its environment, so too does Bread and Puppet create with what's readily available and at hand. The way the bread performs materially evokes adaptation, resilience, breaking down and building up. The bread is symbolic of the theater itself and the disenfranchised. Bread is an invitation to resist through empathy and shared resources.

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