

**Stages on Pages.  
Theatrical Movable Books and Toy Theatres  
in McGill Collections**

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**ABSTRACT**

Theatrical movable books and toy theatres occupy a fertile middle ground between page and stage, where printed sheets become three-dimensional creative spaces. This paper examines that overlap through nineteenth-century theatrical movables and toy theatre materials preserved in two interrelated McGill Library collections: children's literature and puppetry. Focusing on Alexandre Capendu's *Grand Théâtre en Actions* (1879), Benjamin Pollock's *Sleeping Beauty* toy theatre sheets, and movable works by Franz Bonn and Isabella Braun, the study traces a continuum from flat, printed plates to fully realized three-dimensional dioramas, foregrounding their shared design techniques, modes of interaction, and destructive creation. Theatrical movables adapt toy theatre scenography and puppetry's *ensecretage* to invite readers into roles of interactor, puppeteer, and spectator at once. Comparative analysis of mechanisms – multiple-layer set-up dioramas, tab-lift stage sets, and lever-animated figures – shows how paper engineering choreographs gesture, scripting specific actions, while toy theatres allow for greater improvisation and open-ended play. The intersections of toy theatres and theatrical movables reveal a dynamic interplay of print, performance, and childhood creativity that enriches histories of the book, domestic theatre, and interactive reading practices.

**KEYWORDS**

Set-up diorama; theatrical movable books; toy theatres.

**CITATION**

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French publisher Alexandre Capendu's *Grand Théâtre en Actions* (1879) demanded a child's eye view for an undergraduate class visit to McGill's Rare Books and Special Collections, requiring adults to kneel to engage with its miniature worlds of Victorian juvenile dramas. This unique book format is what Hannah Field calls a "theatrical movable" (Field 2019, 21). Capendu's *Grand Théâtre* unfolds into four colour dioramas of well-known fairy tales like *Puss in Boots* and *Sleeping Beauty*. A red ribbon tab extends invitingly from the bottom of each illustrated panel, the only direction the interactor receives from the book. On lifting the tab, each scene unfolds into a full proscenium, setting the scene for the story just as one would if producing the same play on a toy theatre set with side wings, top drops, and scene backgrounds. Booksellers describe this as a "multiple-layer pull-up or set-up" (Movable Books n.d.). Each opening has four-layered colour die-cut scenes that rise into a diorama accompanying French-language scripts. By century's end, these scripts were well-known toy theatre productions sold by British toy theatre publishers. Sets sold for a "penny plain" and "tuppence hand-coloured" (Speaight 1969, 12). Coming in 1879, Capendu's edition blurs the boundary between page and stage. Just as the miniature theatre reproduced London theatre productions for new and nursery audiences, movable book makers reimaged the toy theatre scenes in book form for the emerging children's market.

McGill's children's literature collections are fruitful places to explore the overlap between toy theatres and interactive book design. Alongside early chapbooks and *harlequinades* are original movable books by British publishers Dean and Sons and Raphael Tuck, as well as facsimile works by Lothar Meggendorfer, Isabella Braun, and Franz Bonn. It is the intersections with the Rosalynde Stearn Puppetry collection that are of particular interest to the movable book community. Those meeting points allow for comparison between theatrical movable books and the toy theatres that informed them. Both collections are the legacies of remarkable female collectors Sheila Bourke for children's literature, and Rosalynde Stearn for puppets.<sup>1</sup> Each collector valued movable books; for Bourke the collecting impulse was for richly illustrated examples of intricate children's books to document the reader's, printer's, and publisher's histories. For Stearn it was the puppeteer's craft that was of interest – the paper puppets and the acts of interactive performance that toy theatres and theatrical movables invited. I spotlight the miniature theatrical works in these two collections. Both contain examples from every stage of their lifecycle, from the print shop to the parlor. From uncut character sheets to finished theatrical movable books, comparing these items opens areas of exploration in design, printing, construction, and the potential for narrative interaction. I will explore these ideas through a look at four specific items.

First, Benjamin Pollock's *Characters and Scenes for Sleeping Beauty*, a very commonly produced toy theatre production in the 1800s that was also often produced as movable and novelty books. Nineteenth century theatre sets and theatrical movables like *Sleeping Beauty* all began as flat, printed sheets which were transformed into three-dimensional spaces. The finished versions of both books and theatres featured multi-layered scenes with wings, framing top drops, scene backgrounds, and characters that combined to form a diorama. Capendu includes a diorama of *Sleeping Beauty* in his *Grand Théâtre* (**Fig. 1**), which refers to the depth and dimensionality of Pollock's toy theatre of *Sleeping Beauty*, which was in turn taken from the set created by J.K. Green (*Ivi*, 148). The construction and design follow a throughline from the early English miniature stages in the first half of the century through to European publishers in the late 1800s.

<sup>1</sup> For further information on these collections see the Children's literature research guide: <https://mcgill.ca/x/5ou> and the Rosalynde Stearn Archival holdings: <https://mcgill.ca/x/5oL>.



**Fig. 1.** | Réveillez-vous, Belle Endormie in *Grand Théâtre en Actions*, Paris, A. Capendu, 1879.  
McGill Rare Books and Special Collections.

Toy theatres inspired continental makers of movable books like A. Capendu and J. Schreiber, whose Parisian and German publishing houses produced movables from 1880 until the mid-twentieth century. Capendu's *Librairie enfantine illustrée* series featured colourful movable stage dioramas. While the earliest toy theatres reproducing London stage plays date from 1811 (Ivi, 34), these theatrical movables date from the later nineteenth century, having fifty years of miniature theatre sets to inspire them. By that time toy theatre publishers like J. K. Green and West, and James Webb, and Benjamin Pollock had refined their craft to a well-established form. Little English interactors were cutting, pasting, and staging many parlor productions, and the tradition was extending an influence across Europe.

Both theatres and theatrical movables also share destructive creation processes; toy theatre sets 'required' destruction to be usable! The flat sheets had to be coloured (if bought for a penny plain), mounted on cardstock, cut, and manipulated to act out the scenes of the play. Many scholars who write about toy theatres talk about this painstaking process as part of the joy of the theatre itself. Many of the examples in our collection, including the one pictured here (Fig. 2 a, b), are proof of meticulous handcrafting and fine knifework as the parlor artist assembled their sets according to the printed instructions included in the original sheets.

During production, movable books underwent similar destruction – being first printed in flat sheets, then cut, mounted, and assembled by hand by publishers and artisans. Both books and theatres were printed using comparable technology and methods – engraved plates and lithography (Powell 2009, 47).



Fig. 2 a, b. Pollock's Characters and Scenes in the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood! Or, Harlequin and the Magic Horn, n.d. Rosalynde Stearn Puppet Collection, McGill Rare Books and Special Collections.

Unlike toy theatres, movable books' mechanisms are secreted away between pages. Much like a puppeteer's manner of stringing a marionette is a trade secret – literally called *ensecretage* in French – the paper engineer usually hides their mechanisms. This preserves the wonder when the scene appears as if by magic when the interactor lifts the page. There is a strong link here with Lothar Meggendorfer's mechanical movables, where the paper joints and levers are enclosed between pages and the influences from the world of puppetry have yet to be fully explored. With theatrical movables like Capendu's *Grand Théâtre*, Franz Bonn's *Children's Theatre* (1978), and Isabella Braun's *Allerneuestes Theaterbilderbuch* (1981) the interactor gives life to cleverly connected scenes. All three feature a vertical set-up mechanism which echoes the raising of the curtain in the toy theatre. As the puppeteer changes scenes, drops, and characters, the viewer waits and every curtain opening is a new revelation (Fig. 3 a, b, c). With Capendu's and Schreiber's paper versions, the interactor borrows the puppeteer's magic to set a new scene on lifting the page. This creative act effectively bypasses the hours of hand-crafting that nineteenth-century toy theatres required. The movable offers instant magic with every lift of the page.

Both theatres and movables invite the interactor to stage a story. With Franz Bonn's *The Children's Theatre*, the interactor lifts the books' cover to bring a fully enclosed theatre scene to life. Part of the previous page folds out to create a roof for the stage, preserving more of the mystery of its operation than Capendu's movable, where the top of every scene is open. In Bonn's, the interactor must look at the scene from the spectator's perspective. On stage they see five layers of die-cut scenes and a sixth group of foregrounded musicians. The text invites the reader to "[s]et up the stage" (Bonn 1978, 1). The poems invite the reader to emulate the miniature scene and provides ideas for costumes and props like "a cardboard star" (*Ivi*, 3).

Practically speaking, this form and text suggest only one action: lift the page and set the scene. Not so with the toy theatres – they have the potential for open-ended play. Pollock's *Sleeping Beauty* provides directions in the script, however the interactor can choose whether to follow them. They have many roles and choices! They choose their pace, manipulate characters, and perform dialog. They are actors, readers, and producers. They could stage whatever story they choose, though there is little evidence to document this kind of free play in existing scholarship. Isabella Braun's *Allerneuestes Theaterbilderbuch* or *The Little Actor's Theater* (1981) is a unique

theatrical movable. Close in style and construction to Bonn's, both being originally produced by publisher J. Schreiber in the early 1880s, Braun's opens left to right. It still creates fully enclosed, multi-layered tableaux with three layers of scenery, but this is done with a vertical tab-lift, emulating the rising curtain. Two important differences distinguish Braun's work and bring it closer to a true toy theatre: the script, and movable characters within the set scene. She provides a full cast, dialogue and scene. In fact, the German facsimile provides four scenes for each tableau, whereas the English language version condenses each down to one scene (Braun 1981 b). The second key difference is that Braun's stage includes movable characters that the interactor animates by pulling a lever. The characters are jointed with small plastic rivets in the facsimile, replacing original spring rivets (Braun 1981 a). Seeing as J. Schreiber worked with Lothar Meggendorfer, the similarities between this mechanical tab-pull animation and Meggendorfer's later "living" picture books invite further study!



Fig. 3 a. || Capendu's *Grand Théâtre en Actions*.  
 McGill Rare Books and Special Collections.



Fig. 3 b. || Bonn's *The Children's Theatre*.  
 McGill Rare Books and Special Collections.



Fig. 3 c. || Braun's *Allerneuestes Theaterbilderbuch*.  
 McGill Rare Books and Special Collections.

Comparing theatrical movables and toy theatres reveals a dynamic overlap in design, construction, and narrative interactivity. Works such as Cappendu's *Grand Théâtre* blur the boundaries between page and stage, inviting readers to be interactors; to lift pages and reveal multi-layered scenes that echo the magic and mystery of curtain rises. Similarly, Bonn's and Braun's works combine intricate paper engineering with scripts and motions that encourage active performance, transforming the interactor into both spectator and actor. These examples show ways that movable books borrow from toy theatre traditions, which required painstaking cutting, coloring, and assembly before enabling open-ended play and reinterpretation.

This convergence of print and performance opens rich avenues for further research – from the hidden craft of paper engineers and their *ensecretage* techniques to the cultural histories of domestic theatres and movables. The enduring appeal of these theatrical movables and theatres lies in their ability to collapse boundaries – between reader and actor, page and stage – affirming their lasting relevance to both book history and performance studies and reminding us that the printed page can still serve as a stage for wonder.

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