

# CONTEMPORARY PUPPETRY AND CRITICISM



Contemporary puppetry has been transgressing its own limits for decades by continuously expanding and getting more prolific. On that journey, active viewers and critics represent the necessary interlocutors and final co-authors of the performance – the aforementioned premises form the basis of the book *Contemporary Puppetry and Criticism*. In the first part of the book, the authors provide a theoretical and historical approach to puppetry in Croatia, Slovenia, Scotland and Lithuania, while the second part focuses on criticism and the critics. In order not to dwell merely on ideas, the book is complemented by examples of reviews created at workshops of the Creative Europe project “EU Contemporary Puppetry Critical Platform”, this book being one of the outcomes of the project. Thus conceptualized, the book represents a possible basis for further dialogues and interweaving of contemporary puppetry expression and theory, that is, criticism.

— Igor Tretinjak, editor-in-chief

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Editor-in-chief: Igor Tretinjak

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## INTRODUCTION

In a time when a new reality is shaped in the meeting and interweaving of virtual with real, technological with animate, puppetry art, as Didier Plassard writes in the essay *Scenes of Disquiet*, takes off on the wings of new creativity in a dynamic and pulsating vortex and at the meeting place of animate and inanimate, human and non-human. With a renewed creative power, puppetry outgrows its own conventions and broadens the focus from the puppet to other elements of the performance and relationships between them, to the context of the performance and the performance as a whole, the unspoken word and the sound made by words, the technologically enlivened light, object or prop, mechanically driven puppet, material or camera... and in that rush towards total theatre it oversteps and erases performance boundaries.

Although present for several decades now, this artistic expression continues to change and expand, which indicates freshness and numerous potentials from the performative point of view, and from the theoretical aspect it shows the need to try to define or at least to name novelties. Since it successfully avoids any firm and final definitions, due to constant changes, and is built and developed in a close dialogue with the space and time in which it is created, for the purposes of this book the term in focus will be called contemporary puppetry. It is this broad sense of the meaning of the term that will prove rewarding, because it steers attention toward two directions – on the one hand toward temporal freshness and currentness, and on the other toward the freshness and novelty of the expression itself. In the first part of the book, entitled *Contemporary Puppetry (in Croatia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Scotland and Beyond)*, the term contemporary will be used in both ways, and Igor Tretinjak, Tjaša Bertoncej, Kristina Steiblytė and Ramunė Balevičiūtė will analyze contemporary puppetry in Croatian, Slovenian and Lithuanian performance space through the expression, whereas Gareth K Vile will focus on the temporal characterization in his depiction of Scottish puppetry, in which freshness of the expression are still elusive.

This “non-unified” approach will further confirm the theoretical “elusiveness” of contemporary puppetry, which, beside society and time, is more than before influenced by a wider environment and global puppetry. The analysis of the aforementioned puppetry environments will point to the specificities of Lithuanian puppetry which developed and grew in constant experiments, to the specificities of Scottish puppetry formed in the encounter with the neighboring English puppetry and strong international influences; it will also point to the similarities and differences between the historically, socially and spatially close Slovenian and Croatian contemporary puppetry expressions. Along with numerous specificities and some common elements, the essential common feature will connect all the four puppet environments - the need for an active spectator.

One of the main characteristics of contemporary puppetry and the main distinctions from the traditional puppetry expression is abstraction. Abstraction means creating of a semantic layer further away from the clarity of the dramatic plot, words and dialogue, in the space of a visual dramaturgy that escapes from classical conflict and the expression that is sought in the metaphor and metonymy, further in the lyricism and poetics of the image, the undefinedness and openness of the sound, the overabundance of parallel information and their nudity to the point of absence. The unity formed in this way asks for an active spectator who will offer her or his own answers to the questions posed in the performance and wrap semantical abstractions in her or his own concreteness or new abstract veils. In this openness, in which the content barrier and unidirectional state are destroyed and negated, the spectator becomes a co-author, and the critic gains special importance as an expert and public viewer, as well as a representative and spokesperson on behalf of the audience. Therefore, the second part of the book, entitled *Contemporary Views on Puppet Theatre Criticism*, is directed towards puppet theatre criticism in Scottish, Lithuanian, Slovenian, Croatian and Serbian puppetry. Although the golden days of theater criticism are supposedly a thing of the past, and its importance is presented as increasingly questionable, the introduction to theatre criticism by Lucija Periš and the texts of Benjamin Zajc, Ljiljana Dinić, Kristina Steiblytė, Ramunė Balevičiūtė, Igor Tretinjak and Gareth K Vile about contemporary puppet theatre criticism in

specific environments will point out the closeness between contemporary puppetry and criticism and the need for critics as co-authors and partners in a creative dialogue, but also in defining and naming the tools and terms of this insufficiently systematized expression. But, is the former criticism a good response to the contemporary puppetry expression and time, or does it need to be adapted to the circumstances in which it is created?

While the essays in the second part of the book try to offer an answer to these questions mainly on a theoretical and historical level, and also through one’s own methods (social criticism by Kristina Steiblytė and artistic criticism by Igor Tretinjak), the texts in the third part of the book entitled *Examples of Contemporary Criticism*, seek the answer in practice. These are reviews created during the workshops on contemporary puppetry criticism that were held within the two-year project “EU Contemporary Puppetry Critical Platform” (2020-2022). Young people built and shaped their own critical attitudes in the meeting and clashing of contemporary puppetry and contemporary life, searching for an expression that will be an attractive bridge between the performance and audience, critics and readers.

The project “EU Contemporary Puppetry Critical Platform” brought together four partners: Ljubljana Puppet Theatre from Slovenia as the leader of the project and the Academy of Arts and Culture from Osijek, Croatia, Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”, Lithuania and Puppet Animation Scotland/Manipulate Festival from Edinburgh, Scotland as their partners. The project approached contemporary puppetry and criticism on multiple levels and from different angles, from lectures and workshops on puppetry criticism, through the design of the Internet platform [contempupuppetry.eu](http://contempupuppetry.eu), the thematic issue of the magazine “Lutka” dedicated to contemporary puppetry to the book entitled *Contemporary Puppetry and Criticism*. All these projects and their outcomes with their potential permanence and sustainability indicate a great need for a critical dialogue with contemporary puppetry even after the end of the project which is conceived as a springboard into this performance world of endless possibilities. A springboard that does not define the area of its interests, but represents a potential basis for further dialogues, interweaving and questioning of the contemporary puppetry expression and theory, i.e. criticism.

Igor Tretinjak, editor-in-chief

# CONTEMPORARY PUPPETRY

In Croatia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Scotland  
and Beyond

The Creative Rise of Puppetry in the Vortex of New Realities

## SCENES OF DISQUIET\*

Didier Plassard

### ENTER THE EFFIGIES

“On the path generally believed to be safe, followed by the man of the Age of Enlightenment and of Reason, there appear, suddenly coming out of obscurity and increasing in number, CLONES, MANNEQUINS, ROBOTS, DISFIGURED GNOMES – artificial creatures which are, each and every one of them, insults to the creations of NATURE and convey all the lowering, ALL the dreams of the humanity, death, horror and dread” (Kantor, 1977: 216).

This is how the Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor, in his manifesto *Theatre of Death*, describes a large movement that, during the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, brought out and made reappear from under the crust of classical culture a fantasy world thought to have been lost forever at the closure of the Middle Ages: lost or at least marginalised, ever since, in a space far from civilised art and literature. Vaucanson’s or von Kempelen’s automata, spectres and zombies from gothic novels, disturbing shadows and doubles pulling faces Romantic tales swarmed with, vampires haunting theatre stages of Europe (See Pasqualicchio, 2013.), Robertson’s phantasmagorias upsetting Parisian audiences... although they officially celebrated Progress and Reason – did the French Revolution not dare try to impose the cult of the latter? – Voltaire’s, Kant’s and Hegel’s contemporaries were fascinated by this interplay of lookalikes and simulacra, these alternative “imaginary beasts” produced by “the dormancy of Reason,” offering an endless range of variations between things that are dead and alive, natural and simulated, human and nonhuman.

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\* The text *Scenes of Disquiet* was originally published in the journal „Puck“ as an introduction to the theme of the issue “Human / Inhuman” (more in Plassard, 2014: 11)

Similarly, nowadays there is another movement carrying novel “mixed presences”<sup>\*</sup> that invade broader and broader spaces of imagination and sensibility. These amount not only to insults to the creations of nature, but even much more to those of man, adorned with his ambitions of technical mastery and scientific rationality. Both screens and stages, as well as the virtual space of video games and, then, pages of novels or fantasy comics, abound in all the “lowering,” all the “dreams,” death, horror and dread, combining explorations of science and technology, investigations of unprecedented arrangements of real and virtual and utopian developments of commerce and communication, with creaking and limping, awkwardness and rictus, screams and defects of the most troubling and unsettling creatures, the living dead, avatars, androids, hybrids, clones, mutants. Thus, the accumulation of knowledge and improvement of skills come along, in the layers of imagination, with a proliferation of fantastic beings that blur the dividing lines on which we construct the ordinary representations of what we are.

#### A DOUBLE VISION

The ancient art of puppetry, in the context of the generalised diffraction of the signs of the human condition as, on a more global level, of the category of the level of being alive, has taken a renewed power, since it is woven right at the meeting place of biological and mechanical, of animate and inanimate, of human and nonhuman: those liminal zones where we are invited to project and recognize ourselves in what is radically other, whereas what we considered ourselves to be suddenly reveals an unexpected alterity. Even if the imaginary worlds that nourish the contemporary marionette stand apart from those virtual ones, overflowing with monstrous creatures, which are on the bill and are shown on large retailers’ big displays and the screens beleaguering our everyday environment, yet a common sensibility, differently structured and steering another course, seems to unite them – at the very least, what unites them is the same questioning about the boundaries and prerogatives of man.

<sup>\*</sup> The name which Villiers de l’Isle-Adam uses for Hadaly-Sowana in his novel *L’Ève future* (*Cœuvres complètes*, vol.1, Bibl. de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 833).

▼ Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *The Sky Above* / photo: Jaka Varmuž



This common sensibility stems from the fact that the puppet, today less than ever, cannot be reduced to what people were sometimes ready to see in it: a miniaturised actor. And it is especially not a simple imitation of a man anymore, nor of an animal, nor of an imaginary being produced by an animated object; has it ever really been one? It rather brings together, in an ambivalent figure, the human and the nonhuman, the still world of things and the noisy one of the living. The opalisation phenomenon Henryk Jurkowski presented as a distinctive feature of the perception of the western puppet emerging with the 18<sup>th</sup> century (See Jurkowski, 1988: 41), has in fact always existed to a certain extent: by its nature, the theatre makes two images overlap mentally: one of the objects perceived in its material reality and another one representing the living being we project in it. The process mixes up their traits in a blurry, swaying figure, the one that Steve Tillis defines more correctly as a result of a kind of “double vision” (See Tillis, 1992: 67-76).

Every puppet is in fact double: from its face, that can be totally realistic, via playing with dimensions and a reduced limb and face mobility, right up to odd-sounding materials that make it up, or even the discrete presence of the puppeteer (indeed the only conscience of this presence, while it remains hidden), all this adds up to vivify a kind materiality underneath its illusory life, a materiality that takes issue with it and deconstructs it. Between the object – the instrument of the theatrical play – and the appearance of a living creature we bestow on it there is always a gap, a fissure, that no lasting illusion can plug completely. Whatever the perimeters, the definitions and the respective roles we confer to the physical world and the imaginary one, the puppet, in a way, remains intrinsically fantastic: in an infinite mirage, it joins suspicion and belief, awareness of the reality of the tools implemented and desire to see another thing in it – a shiver in front of the sacred, joy of playing, taking pleasure in a fiction.

More and more complex and radical artistic strategies have been used to put this gap in the contemporary puppet theatre right. What wasn't but a crack in visualisation becomes a split; a divide and even – a gulf: between what is given to perceive and what is given to fathom or sense there's a founding dissemblance which maintains an incompatibility, a distance the

spectator has to cross by way of her or his imagination and sensibility. She or he has to muster fictionalisation powers of a child (a child can invent a world in front of any object). The double vision does not get absorbed in aesthetics of theatrical illusion; conversely, it is kept at a maximal deviation, using all of the resources offered by the choice and alteration of materials, volumes, weights, forms and dimensions, in order to assert the oddity of the appearance, its non-compliance to plausibility demands. The head is split up to the ears, the limbs are distorted in fantastic twists, the body unfolds or droops in shapeless heaps, in wobbly assemblies, in flimsy geometrical structures on occasion... Whether they display absolutely smooth or contorted faces, animal rumps or grotesque stomachs, an outline consisting of a few strokes or even the hyperrealist reproduction of a real person, the marionettes, with their stiffness resembling death and their sudden jolts, air glides, faltering walk and bizarre crawling, present the whole fluctuation range between recognition and discovery, between memory of common forms and the emergence of the unexpected. In both its material aspect and its movements, every animated image, in its own manner, shifts, redrafts and rewrites the contours of living things.

### SIGNS INVERSION

Convincingly dominant on stages nowadays, the visible presence of the actor-puppeteer, who manipulates the figure i.e. the puppet or is its partner in play on the set, takes on new meanings in this regard, since it reveals to the spectator similarity alongside dissimilarity, a common man-like-us grappling with creatures smaller or larger than him... It puts on show shapeless or deformed, symbolic, schematic, caricatural, metamorphic apparitions... Whatever the role he takes on – a narrator, witness, accompanying presence, double, interlocutor, operator and so on, the appearance of a living mouthpiece is an event, it proclaims an actual existence next to an appointed existence, a loan from the real world within the imaginary world constructed by play. Propelled to the marionette space, having brokered a place and a role for himself in a fiction he himself begot, the actor-puppeteer forms the visible benchmark on which we can



▲ Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”: *Sandman* / photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas

measure the distance between the images and what they represent: he is a complete body that contrasts with animated logs, live flesh that reveals inert materials used, a familiar shape that underlines the oddness of the caricature or of the abstract form, a free intermediary who denounces enslavement to an exterior will.

And to all appearances, at least, it is true: because what is produced by the puppet and puppeteer, in his role as an active actor, entering together into the same visual field is definitely the opposite of what one would expect. For the animation to take place, that is to say for the puppet to seem to have been given an inner life and a will which belongs to it as its own, it is necessary to conceal and enshroud the manipulation. The artist delegates his capacity to represent a character to the object he manipulates. This transfer is accompanied by a focus shift, at the spectators' end, which induces a redistribution of symbolic tasks belonging, respectively, to the human and the nonhuman.

Whether he is only an instrumentalist, a quiet operator, all absorbed in serving the puppet, or whether he himself represents an other character of the theatrical play, or whether he grafts parts of another creature on his body, a creature with which he is going to meld, the actor-puppeteer is there only for someone else, for himself or for a bit less than himself: a character, at most, that is to say an individualised image in any case, a woman or a man among so many others, “and who is worth all of them and whom any of them is worth,” we could add with Jean-Paul Sartre in his *The Words (Les Mots)*. Permeated by voices and gestures he produces and slips, weighing his acting so that the artificial performer whom he animates or opposite whom he plays can actually attain the maximum effectiveness, the artist at least temporarily occupies the weakened part in the performing act, the periphery of the puppet theatre stage he is busy with.

Inversely, since it comes from another plane of reality, the object-puppet, in light of the fact that it gives us illusion of being alive, does not only take on the character it is supposed to personify. The focus of the attention of the public as well as of the puppeteer, it brims over the limits of the

individuated figure to become, since its first movement, an allegory of human fate, a condensed image of our desires, experiences, fears and memories, whatever the nature of what it represents. All our destinies suddenly seem jeopardised through it: they get ejected out of our inner self and lodge themselves in an artefact.

It is about a reversal taking place during the head-to-head between the face of the puppeteer and the cardboard, latex, wood or foam head he is putting fake life into: the site of the human shifts from the living instrumentist towards the puppet he twists around. A thing that arises from the world of inert objects is all of a sudden charged with humanity: even when not anthropomorphic, even when formed out of unrefined materials or of readily recognisable utensils, even when reduced to several rudely sketched lines, the marionette does not only lend itself to theatrical character play, but it is an emblematic representation of what founds the human being as well (first of all?).

#### A THRESHOLD FIGURE

This is why it is so easy, by means of a marionette, to represent the limits and extremities of the human: either those which separate being from non-being (birth and death scenes, ghosts, dreams or memories), or those which keep society away from other living kingdoms or other components of the physical world. Puppet theatre, as has been long noted, is naturally metamorphic: its stage language is the one of becoming-an-animal or becoming-a-thing, that is of a surge we carry in ourselves – we could call this a development transforming a man into a non-human – as well as the one of becoming-human with regard to animals and objects. In it are tied together then undone the threads of our destiny, but those of our identity, too. If, on one hand, the puppet, like a new Janus with a double face, is a threshold figure, keeping an eye on the world of things it comes from and at the same time on the world of humans it creeps into (See Plassard, 2011: 103-108), on the other it keeps swivelling, forcing us to grasp, in the same mental space, what founds us and what threatens us.

Well, it is not about shapes: becoming-inhuman of a human being does not come down to the sheer comical side – be it the darkest of all – of a caricature; more than that, it opens out directly onto the memory of the most traumatising events of the last century (mass killings, world wars, deportations, extermination...) as well as onto the deepest fears of those who are just getting started. The bestiality of behaviour, the objectification of men and women, and similar are not just bad dreams, nor stylistic devices, but very real dangers which surround our lives. We have to bear them in mind continuously. Inversely, becoming-human that concerns what is not human helps us remember the small number of feelings, values and essential gestures (affection, education, solidarity, emancipation...) that make life worth living and constitute the modest baggage we think we more or less universally share. Consequently, any motion done from outside humanity and directed towards this founding nucleus, where our representations of all things human condense, immediately becomes bearer of emotional impacts and potential meanings.

Beyond doubt, the puppet is today but a name given, on the theatre stage, to these motions of entering and exiting humanity, and that in a double sense – biological and moral one – of the term. Accordingly, it is profoundly disquieting.

Contemporary Croatian Puppetry

## A FIELD OF UNEXPLORED POSSIBILITIES

Igor Tretinjak

### INTRODUCTION

As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, the notion of contemporariness can be observed from two perspectives – as a determinant of time and as a determinant of expressions, namely, poetics. In the text dedicated to Croatian contemporary puppetry, contemporariness will be viewed in terms of poetics, since traditional and homogenous puppetry expressions predominate in today's Croatian puppetry, with a superficial use of heterogeneity and only occasional forays into contemporary expressions. Thus, by temporal observation we would get a “traditional image of contemporariness.”

In search of sources of poetic contemporariness, this text will step into the second half of the 1970s, which in Croatian puppetry represent a point of separation in two directions – the traditional one with a focus on the content and the puppet, and the contemporary one which focuses on the research, that is, a stage play with puppet medium and its performative possibilities.

Prior to reviewing contemporary puppetry in Croatia, it is necessary to define the key to its reading, as seen by the author of this text, which he finds through the encounter of Croatian and European puppetry.

### A SHIFT OF FOCUS AS A KEY TO ANALYSIS

The development of puppetry can be observed through multiple perspectives – from the changes in content and themes through the development of folk puppet heroes and types of animation to the mobility of puppet and puppeteers and the shift in the focus of the play. The aforementioned, but also many other potential keys to the analysis indicate the richness and stratification of puppetry and its long history through which it was built in parallel with or despite social, temporal or artistic changes. Likewise, most of the mentioned reviews would linger on puppetry history, while the shift in the focus of the play penetrates the deepest into the contemporariness of Croatian puppetry, which will prove to be the most beneficial key to noticing, reading and writing the contemporary expression in the puppet theatre in Croatia.

For centuries, the focus of a puppet show has been on the plot, which has overshadowed all other elements of a performance. In this expression, which we could name drama puppet theatre, the puppets were reduced artificial actors, namely, material illustrations of the characters, while set and costume design functions focused on mere illustrativeness and suggestiveness. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus shifted from the plot and the text to the puppet itself, which led to a homogenous puppetry expression in which all elements of the show are adapted to the puppet. In that artificial environment, there was no place for visible animators to hide behind a screen, on a puppet bridge, or in stage darkness. Placed in the focus, the puppet at this stage enriched verbal communication, and in some places replaced it with visual – artistic characteristics and type of animation, namely, its specificities. Very quickly, the focus shifted from the static and “chatty” puppet to its movement, which opened up the possibility of continuous changes in visual information.\*

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the time of great changes in puppetry, the focus did not stay on the puppet and its movement for long, but in the 1960s

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\* Visual features in a static puppet are only initial information with no potential for change and development.

the most important shift in the recent history of European puppetry took place – a shift from the (dynamic) puppet to its relationship with the animator who stepped out of the darkness under the spotlight. This led Henryk Jurkowski to redefine puppetry in 1978. In the new definition, he replaced the puppet in the central position by pulsing the relationship between the puppet and the physical source of energy, explaining how “it turned out that the system of dependence between the puppet and its driving forces is more permanent than the components of that system” (Jurkowski, 2006: 127).

The shift from the puppet to its relationship with the until recently hidden animator has created tectonic shifts in puppetry. Until then, the puppet came to life and died on stage only once – at the beginning and at the end of the show. At the moment when the relationship with the source of its stage life became more important than the puppet itself, the puppet did not become less important, which was feared by puppetry practitioners, critics and theorists at the time. Moreover, the possibility of playing with its own stage liveliness is open to it, which is no longer something necessary and unchangeable, but an additional space of creativity – in one show, the puppet has the opportunity to die and be born again, serve as a prop, a character, a partner and a demiurge to its own animator. At the same time, the shift from the puppet to puppet-animator relationship opened the door to performance heterogeneity, that is, the functional use and encounter not only of the puppet and the actor, but also of different types of puppets and other elements of the play, which will lead to further liberation and contemporary puppetry as understood in this text.

#### TOWARDS TOTAL EXPRESSION

Prior to the next developmental stage, thanks to heterogeneity, puppetry expression was penetrated by a characteristic originally related to postdramatic theatre, as defined by Lehmann, which permanently merged and intertwined puppetry with acting, dance, physical and non-verbal expression in the pursuit of total theatre. It is a dramaturgical release of all elements of stage play – from set design, costume design, lighting and

puppetry technology through sound and music to new media.\* Until then, all elements were subordinated to plot (in drama puppetry expression) and puppets (in homogeneous puppetry) and functioned mainly as a context, so that with heterogeneity, as one of the pioneers of contemporary puppetry in Croatia Luko Paljetak said, they became puppets (See Paljetak, 2007: 56).

By liberation and independence, elements of stage play were no longer just context or illustration, but potential bearers and builders of the plot, play and performance. Set design was no longer just a decor, but a teammate and a character, costume design shaped the character's movements or took precedence over them with its own characteristics, light became a guide through the plot, an important part of the set design and an independent character, and the auditory layer was no longer just a background noise, but became the bearer of the show's rhythm, a shaper of the atmosphere, abstract space and the play itself. The verbal layer is not expelled from this dramaturgically revived environment, but in the footsteps of Lehmann's visual dramaturgy "is subject to the same laws and judgments as virtual, auditory, gestural, architectural and other signs" (Lehmann, 2004: 16), so it is equated with other elements of the play. Also, the sound layer can be recognized in it and not just the content layer as it used to be before.

The independence of all elements of the play has enriched the puppet theatre with many new expressions such as theatre of objects and materials, sound and visual theatre, but also with an additional change of focus. This time it did not shift from the relationship between the puppet and the actor to some other aspect, but gained the potential of its own expansion, redirection and dispersal, or fragmentation. Thus, it could move from the relationship between the actor and the puppet to the relationship between set design and the puppet, the actor and costume design, the actor and the costume, the light and the mask, the sound and the material..., but also to the parallel relationships of a number of elements, such as the sound, the puppet and the set design. In these numerous possibilities of building

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\* While Lehmann in this context speaks of the dramaturgical independence of the elements of the play, Jurkowski speaks of the atomization of puppet theatre.

play through relationships, the concreteness of the meaning of verbal communication has largely been replaced by the abstract, metaphorical and metonymic visual and sound communication, while classical (drama) puppet dramaturgy has been replaced by visual and artistic dramaturgy as well as dramaturgies based on sound, atmosphere, abstraction and others. In such a performance environment, the hitherto one-way communication with the spectator, who became an active participant in the performance act, was layered and dynamized. Thus, a space of complete freedom to design and read a performance, its constituent parts and interrelationships has been created in contemporary puppetry. The authors are allowed to release certain elements of the play and focus on their dialogues, encounters and conflicts, while viewers have the freedom to read these relationships and enrich the performance with their own layers of meaning.

Below is an overview of contemporary puppetry in Croatia, in this part of the reading divided into several focuses: focus on the relationship between two inanimate elements of a performance, animate and inanimate element, two animate meta-elements and more than two elements of the show. The focus itself is not fixed, but can be shifted from one relationship to another or built through several relationships in parallel during the performance.\* This shift in focus is one of the indicators of freedom of design and the possibility of contemporary puppetry expression.

#### OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY PUPPETRY IN CROATIA

We find the beginnings of contemporary puppetry in Croatia in the years of Jurkowski's redefinition of puppetry. In the show *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (*Postojani kositreni vojnik*) of the Zadar Puppet Theatre, created in 1978 and directed by Luko Paljetak, for the first time in Croatian puppetry the set design became the character. Until then, the rigid and static background in Paljetak's show came to life and became a whale, and the relationship between the puppets and the stage became the bearer of the whole.

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\* Because of this possibility of shifting the focus, some shows will be mentioned in multiple contexts.

In such a performance environment, the text of the fairy tale was redundant, so it was reduced to just a few necessary words and sentences that spoke both semantically and with rhythm and sound.

In Paljetak's show, the focus was on the relationship of inanimate elements of the show, but although it has all the elements of previously defined contemporary puppetry – dramaturgically independent elements whose relationship carries the play – the show can be seen as transitive because this shift of focus occurs in a homogeneous environment in which there is no place for a visible animator.

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTIFICIAL ELEMENTS OF THE PLAY

Playing with the possibilities of the relationship between inanimate elements is present in Croatian puppetry to this day. Here we can highlight the anthological show of the Zadar Puppet Theatre, *Judita* from 1991, in which stage-director Marin Carić and art designer Branko Stojaković confronted different types of puppets – from small table puppets through actors with masks to head puppets which indicate the superiority of soldiers and instability of the heads on their shoulders. At the same time, they created a stage dialogue of puppets and revived set design, which became one of the bearers of the semantic, metaphorical and metonymic layer by zooming in on the play inside the walls and reviving the well. The fusion of puppetry and set design was the basis of the show *Veli Jože* (2011) by the Rijeka City Puppet Theatre, in which director Rene Medvešek combined puppets and parts of set design on several levels, inscribing them into each other: he designed the set on the basis of small puppets, and turned the components of large puppets into parts of the set design – screens and canvases for the shadow theatre.

In the show *The Frog Queen* (*Žabica kraljica*, 2013) by the Zagreb Puppet Theater, Medvešek replaced the set design with music and focused on its dynamic and layered relationship with puppets. In this relationship, Sara Glojnarić's live music “was not only a dramaturgical guiding thread, but also rhythmically shaped the show, wrapping it up with a very attractive

▼ Zadar Puppet Theatre: *Judita* / photo: Archive of Zadar Puppet Theatre



poeticism. Also, in a subtle and clear way, it intertwined with the content layer, pointing to its own rich eloquence and communicativeness” (Tretinjak, 2017). At the same time, it guided the puppets rhythmically and atmospherically with its own airiness and ethereality, forming in places an interesting dialogue between sound and movement, audibility and visibility. In the project *Knit, My Soul, a Love Song* (*Pleti mi, dušo, sevdah*, 2018), students of the 5<sup>th</sup> year of acting and puppetry at the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, under the mentorship of Tamara Kučinović and Maja Lučić, formed a whole series of etudes in which they intertwined music and material, primarily thread, with the auditory layer as the source and bearer of the stage play. The dialogue between the auditory and the visual was one of the important aspects of the play *One Day in the Life of Ignac Golob* (*Jedan dan u životu Ignaca Goloba*, 1977) by the Coccolemocco company, in which director Branko Brezovec separated the giant puppet from the voice. He placed the spectators between them and by this “positioning ‘within’ the parts of Ignac Golob he brought the spectators to an equal level with the hero” (Tretinjak, 2021: 98).

Another relationship between inanimate elements of stage play appears in Croatian contemporary puppetry, but much less frequently than would be expected in this media age. It is a relationship between the camera and the puppet, which is the focus of the play *The Emperor's New Clothes* (*Carevo novo rubo*, 2020), co-produced by the Rijeka City Puppet Theatre and the Maribor Puppet Theatre. Director Zoran Petrovič handed over the task of puppet animation to the camera that animated static puppets with its own movements and changes in the width of the viewing angle, but also with parts of the set design, such as the conveyor belt, which moved it from place to place and thus brought it to life on stage. This type of “animation” of a static puppet in the history of puppetry is determined by the zero point of puppetry in which puppets, namely, icons, were not animated, but moved from place to place. Thus, it has been present since the very beginnings of puppetry, and its metaphorical potential has been recognized in contemporary puppetry, but in the Croatian puppetry space it has only just been touched upon. And it is not the only one. Contemporary puppetry in Croatia is an expression whose stage research and use are still in its infancy, despite its almost 50-year duration.



Rijeka City Puppet Theatre & the Maribor Puppet Theatre ▲  
*The Emperor's New Clothes* / photo: Boštjan Lah

In this space of unexploredness, the next relationship, however, was more often in the focus of the puppeteers. It is a relationship between the living performers and inanimate elements of performance that can be divided into several sub-relationships – the conflict of the animate and the inanimate in the relationship between the actor and the puppet and the actor's penetration into the material, reconciliation of ontological contradictions between the actor and inanimate environment, a twist in which the puppet animates its own demiurge and ascending to the meta-relationship of live performances and inanimate recordings.

#### MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE ANIMATE AND THE INANIMATE

Two years before Paljetak's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, the great Polish director Wiesław Hejno directed the show *Celestina* (1976) in Zadar. In it, he confronted on multiple levels puppets and actors who were their animators, teammates and rivals. With these relationships between the living actors and artificial characters, Hejno's show confused Zadar viewers, who were unaccustomed to contemporary thinking about puppetry and thus declared it – pornography. This premature puppetry pearl opens the second round of interest of contemporary puppetry in Croatia – the relationship between the animate and the inanimate, the actor and the puppet.

#### Conflict of Ontological Oppositions

The layered relationship between the puppet and the actor is the focus of a number of shows that have shaped contemporary puppetry, from *Celestina* and the following two Zadar projects by the Polish director – the anthological shows *The Passion of St. Marguerite* (*Muka svete Margarite*, 1990) and *Don Juan* (1998) – to recent projects by students of Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, who, among other things, turn to the poorly researched field in Croatian puppetry – autobiography.

Zlatko Bourek unobtrusively multiplied the relationship between the puppet and the animator in the most performed Croatian puppet show *Hamlet* (ITD Theatre, 1982), in which he presented a new technique, the so-called *guzovoz*, in the role of director, author of the puppets, costume designer and set designer. He found inspiration for *guzovoz* in the Japanese *kuruma ningyo* technique, adapting it to his grotesque world – animators on wheels lent their legs and arms to the puppets, which gave them a caricature expression and enabled much freer play of the limbs, thereby enriching and awakening Croatian puppetry with opalization.



▲ ITD Theatre: *Hamlet* / photo: Archive of ITD Theatre

By the term opalization, Henryk Jurkowski implies the easy transition of a puppet “from one state of existence to another, that is, its ability to be both a puppet and a stage character” (Jurkovski, 2007: 234), thus enabling easy and effective play with stage reality and fiction. Opalization was present in *Hamlet* almost the entire time, but it was especially noticeable in the scene in which the wounded and lying Laert tried to get up. The animator, his creator and life giver, comes to his aid, using his and Laert's joint hand to raise the head of his own character. In those moments, the actor consciously pointed to his demiurge position, not in the function

of destroying the puppet, but for the purpose of theatricalization and play with the puppet, as well as emphasizing the grotesque and humorous world. With *Hamlet*, Bourek enriched Croatian puppetry with opalization and transmediality, by Croatization, that is, Bourekization of Japanese puppetry technique. Nevertheless, he did so in the “safety” of the dramatic text so that, regardless of contemporary elements, the play is situated at the border between traditional and contemporary expression.

A year later, in the anthological show *The Miser (Skup)* created as a co-production of the Dubrovnik Summer Festival and the Zagreb City Theatre “Comedy”, Bourek, this time as an art designer, along with director Josip Juvančić, turned reality around. They turned the puppets into an element of stage reality, while the actor – the puppet’s stage partner and occasional stage prop – was transformed into an intruder into the world of puppetry artificiality.

Various forms of autobiography have been present in European puppetry since the earliest days, but they appeared in Croatian (contemporary) puppetry expression only with the productions of the Osijek Academy. These are exam productions *No One Like Me (Ni'ko kao ja, 2015)* and  $\pm\infty I/8$  (2016) in which 2<sup>nd</sup> year students of acting and puppetry set out to research possibilities of designing intimate etudes with the help of wayang puppet under the mentorship of Hrvoje Seršić. Following the “problem that concerns them” task, the students, in collaboration with an artificial stage partner, penetrated deep into their own interior, exposing themselves on stage with the help of a puppet as their own other, alter ego or close interlocutor.

Less often than the relationship between the actor and the puppet, the relationship between the living performers and other artificial elements of the show appears in the contemporary Croatian puppetry space. In the show *The Ingenious Knight Don Quixote de la Mancha, Second Part (Bistri vitez Don Quijote od Manche, drugi dio, 1999)* of the Children’s Theatre Branko Mihaljević from Osijek, directed by Zlatko Sviben, the actors became just characters from a book emerging from the pages of Cervantes’ work (set designer Željko Zorica), communicating with its literary source and its author. In the same theatre, director Marin Carić in the show *The Little*

*Match Girl (Djevojčica sa žigicama, 1995)* silenced the verbal layer as much as possible and spoke with the visual aspects of the show. In that stage world, he subordinated the title Girl (Aleksandra Colnarić) to giant set design and puppets (set design and puppets by Željko Zorica), thereby reducing it on stage. In the show *Shoemaker Martin (Nadpodstolar Martin, 1998)* by the Rijeka City Puppet Theatre, Rene Medvešek almost film-wise broke, framed and shredded the title character (Ranko Lipovšćak) and the frame of the play with various light sources and parts of the set design.

The multiple relationships between the living actor and inanimate material appeared in the play *The Rainbow (Duga, 2014)* by students of the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, directed by Tamara Kučinović and mentored by Maja Lučić. In the show, the performers shaped the characters with material that spoke on macro and micro level, creating an authentic space of the famous Croatian short story\* and inscribing characters into the material (stone) and playing with it. Also, by penetrating into the raw material - clay, they supplanted the stage “representation of the characters”, replacing it with “shaping” (Knoegden, 2013: 60), which took on a double role on stage.

#### Reconciliation of Ontological Oppositions and a Great Turn

The relationship between the ontological oppositions of the animate and the inanimate in previous examples has been built on conflict, penetration, subjugation and fragmentation, where the presence of living performers enhanced the inanimateness of artificial objects, while inanimate elements enhanced the vivacity of actors. A major change took place in the projects of Kruna Tarle and her company the Facades created between 1996 and 2008. In the plays *Kaleidoscope (Kaleidoskop, 1996)*, *Hourglass (Pješčani sati, 1998)*, *Clair-obscur (1999)*, *Maiden’s Jump or Spring in Dead End (Djevin skok ili proljeće u slijepoj ulici, 2001)* and *Nadir (2008)*, performed at the Zagreb Youth Theater, Tarle and the Facades reconciled ontological contradictions on the stage and replaced conflict with encounter.

\* The source of the show is the required reading title *The Rainbow* by Dinko Šimunović.

They did this by questioning the relationship between the living body and inanimate materials such as paper, cardboard, and elastic fabric. With their own fragility and elasticity, the materials silenced the vitality of the body, which at the same time revived the inanimateness of the material. The performances of Kruna Tarle and the Facades make a hitherto lonely penetration into the object theatre in which the animator cancels his role of a living subject and becomes part of the inanimate environment which he revives with his liveliness (See Weitzner, 2011).

After the conflict and the meeting of the inanimate and the animate on the stage, we come to a logical turn - the puppet's rule over his own demiurge. We'll look at that twist in a few shows - Zagreb Puppet Theatre's *Why Are We in Vietnam, Minnie?* (*Zašto smo u Vijetnamu, Minnie?*, 1988) directed by Branko Brezovac, Zadar Puppet Theatre's *The Evil One and the Girl* (*Nečisti i djevojka*, 2014) directed by Rene Medvešek, and *Oedipus the King* (*Kralj Edip*, 2020) by Croatian National Theatre Ivan pl. Zajc in collaboration with Rijeka City Puppet Theatre, directed by Luciano Delprato. In Brezovac's show, the puppet, in the role of the hero's past, took over its own character and the animator, which turned the content layer into a performative one - the accumulated weight of the past was inscribed in the puppet, which became large, heavy and inanimable, that is, too heavy a weight for the character.

Unlike the puppet in *Minnie*, which went from animable to sluggish and inanimable, in *The Evil One and the Girl* the puppet was non-animable from the start, that is, "a passive icon completely dependent on its animator. Thus, it did not become a character, but remained in the position of a sign, that is, a symbol of a character. On the other hand, with its passivity and inanimability, it directed, encouraged and forced the animator to inhale the movement into the character with his own body and thus copy the characters and puppets into himself. Thereby, the animator became a sign of the sign and left his initial role of demiurge to the puppet, now the initiator of its own initiator, the demiurge of its own demiurge" (Tretinjak, 2021: 203).



Zadar Puppet Theatre: *The Evil One and the Girl* ▲  
photo: Archive of Zadar Puppet Theatre

One of the focuses of the show *Oedipus the King* was on the relationship between the actor and the puppet, which changed and was questioned throughout the play, so that the puppet went through all the positions in one scene in a furious rhythm - from props to a living character in the hands of the animator to his equal partner and finally ruler. This short-lived triumph of the puppet over his own demiurge took place in a stage tension in which Oedipus uses physical force against everyone, from puppets to animators, and finally overcomes the stage father, taking matters into his own wooden hands and taking over his own demiurge.



▲ HNK Ivan pl. Zajc & Rijeka City Puppet Theatre: *Oedipus the King*  
photo: Archive of HNK Ivan pl. Zajc

### Meta-Relationship between the Live Performance and Non-Live Recording

Puppet's stage victory marks the final point of the relationship between the actor and the puppet in Croatian contemporary puppetry and takes us to the meta-relationship between live performance and non-live recording in which non-live recording is usually controlled and partially curbed the liveliness and unpredictability of live recording. In *Shoemaker Martin*, the verbal part of the play, translated into audio recording, controlled and guided the live play of the actor and other visual elements with its rigidity and firm determination. The film *Death of a Salesman* (*Smrt trgovačkog putnika*, 1951, d. Laszlo Benedek) which was projected on screen in the show *Why Are We in Vietnam, Minnie?* had a slightly more demanding task. Marin Blažević rightly called this play "the hysteria of parallel projections" (Blažević, 2007: 47) which "brings the concept of multimedia theatrical polyphony to saturation, precisely to the extreme" (Blažević, 2007: 78). The whole, full of multiplied parallel information, was held together by the film's fixation and default, as well as its relationship, namely, dialogue with the play on the stage, where the actors played a puppet adaptation of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. These two content-related threads overlapped, intertwined and separated, with the film as a reference point. But the film did not stay only in the position of the "controller," but in some scenes it entered into a layered dialogue with the live performance. The moment he gets fired, the film's Willy Loman stares at the camera, that is, at the viewers, thereby connecting with them, while at the same time the stage Willy reacts to the dismissal by looking at his film predecessor, immersing himself in himself and indirectly in the audience. With this postdramatic act\*, Brezovec additionally layered the interplay of the characters with themselves and their own semantic and emotional layers.

\* "While film images once documented reality, a typical video image in postdramatic theatre does not refer primarily to what is outside the theatre, but to what circulates in it" (Lehmann, 2004: 309).

The equal and most complex relationship between a non-live recording and a live play in the Croatian puppetry space was shaped by director Larry Zappia in the show *Romeo (and Juliet)* (*Romeo (i Giulietta)*, 2007) by the Rijeka City Puppet Theatre. In collaboration with set designer Dalibor Laginja and Luči Vidanović as the co-author of the puppets (along with Zappia and Laginja) he connected two worlds in the show – Shakespeare’s and the contemporary world, confronting them and clashing with two expressions – he shaped the world of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Giulietta with small Sicilian puppets and chess pieces, while he connected contemporary RM and JC\* with on-screen chat, which is the first use of a dramaturgically functional chat in Croatian puppetry. Although clearly separated by different media and a degree of stage fiction, the real and the literary world in the show referred to each other, indirectly communicated and grew in parallel with the video wall as a place of key encounters between the two realities. While the present has completely spilled over to it, the little Sicilian puppets and static pawns on the video wall were zoomed in and stripped out in the function of a contemporary revelation of literary idealisms. In that focus, their flaws came to the fore through movements that look real from a distance, and stiff and unnatural on the screen. However, the video projection did not remain just a passive space of realization, but by spreading the frame on the background of the stage, it drew the live actors-animators into the projection in which it equated them with their own puppets and thus directly confronted the demiurges and their creations. Therefore, with this intermedia\*\* penetration into the space of the play and the relationships between the characters, the video projection became a theatrical, that is, a filmed space of the play.

\* The initials of Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet, and perhaps Julius Caesar.

\*\* The notion of intermediality, writes Darko Lukić, “literally means the permeation of different media, cooperation and interaction of several media which exchange their media characteristics and thus create completely new (media) effects” (Lukić, 2011: 51).



Rijeka City Puppet Theatre: *Romeo (and Juliet)* ▲  
photo: Archive of Rijeka City Puppet Theatre

## BROKEN FOCUS

The relationship between the video, puppets and animators in *Romeo (and Juliet)* introduces an overview of contemporary puppetry in Croatia into the next area of interest - focusing on the relationship of more than two elements of stage play. It appears in a number of plays, including *Why Are We in Vietnam, Minnie?* in which a series of multiplied relationships develops within the meta-relationship between the film recording and live stage play – the relationship between the actor, the puppet and the film character, then the relationship between the actor, the puppet and the sound layer, as well as the relationship between the actor, the puppet and the set design by Tihomir Milovac, which penetrated among characters with the projections on screens and the light which cuts frames.

In the show *Desnica: The Games of Spring and Death* (*Desnica: Igre života i smrti*, 2017) by Verrdi Theatre, director, dramaturge and performer Juraj Aras combined an audio recording with a puppet expression in which the performer acted as a clasp, pouring parts of the reflexively shaped existential novel *The Springs of Ivan Galeb* (*Proljeća Ivana Galeba*) by Vladan Desnica onto the stage. The puppet, therefore, took part in a plot “which does not exist,” that is, which is reduced to reflections, which implies stillness or, in the traditional sense of puppetry, the stage death of the puppet. If we add to this the radio-recorded voice, which is performatively inanimate, we get a double stage inanimateness which resulted in the ontological instability of the puppet. In that “lability,” the puppet was constantly born and died on the stage, moving from the position of prop, part of set or costume design to an independent character, the animator’s partner, and in some moments the demiurge of its own demiurge. In the midst of that stage “dynamic inanimateness” was the performer who equally used the puppet and the radio expression as stage partners. In his hands, the puppet’s head was a common sense in a diseased body, attached to a coat rack it became a patient walking the hospital corridors with an infusion, and by lying in bed it became the disease itself, while the reproduced sound became an inner



▲ Verrdi Theatre: *Desnica: The Games of Spring and Death* / photo: Ivana Jenjić

voice and partner in the game of chess. In this complex performance tris, the hero constantly danced between the visual and the auditory elements, but also between the springs indicated in the title and the death, separating and merging them as well as transforming them into unity.

In the show *The Overcoat* (*Kabanica*, 2013) of the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek created under the mentorship of Tamara Kučinović and Maja Lučić, the text of Gogol’s short story is reduced to just a few words or sentences that created a sound layer by repeating and rhythmic pronunciation. This “eloquent” sound built a dynamic relationship with the performers’ bodies and the material and through harmony, tension and uniformity shaped the rhythm of the play and the content layer, transforming characters and the environment into parts of a machine that sucks and grinds everything in (and around) itself.

### New Expressions and Relationships at the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek

In the last 15 years, the Osijek Academy has established itself as the main, but also one of the few remaining places of research in both traditional and contemporary puppetry. Thereby, the most courageous breakthroughs into the contemporary expression have been coming from it lately, such as the aforementioned shows, but also others which have grown and emerged in student research of new performance elements as well as fresh stage interpretations of known elements and dynamic and multiplied relationships between them.

In the performance experiment *Who Are You? (Tko si ti?, 2017)*, authors Marijan Josipović and Lino Brozić annulled the flatness and the potential monotony of shadow theatre, replacing the screen with a conical coil of smoke in whose dynamic frame and interior space they built abstract relationships with light, laser and shadows.

In several shows, the animation focused on the space, that is, on reviving the invisible, in which the animators developed a relationship with all the elements of the play. In *The Boy Who Saw Me (Dječak koji me vidio, 2014)*, Ivan Pokupić and Marijana Matoković revived the invisible Tihana on stage by animating props, sheets, space and with Pokupić's "self-animation," as well as with the help of shadow theatre and black light theatre, while in *Self-Isolation in 40 Minutes (Samoizolacija u 40 minuta, 2020)* Jura Ruža formed a relationship with an invisible partner by reviving objects and space, building a relationship with objects on his own body such as gloves and clothing, and in the space around him.

In the project *Death or about Life (Smrt ili o životu, 2019)*, 5<sup>th</sup> year students mentored by Kučinović and Lučić shaped a life story into the death of selected materials and objects in a series of etudes. By choosing unstable artificial elements such as feathers and a kettle, they pointed to the transiency of life, but also tested animation in an uncontrolled environment. Therefore, the focus in this show was on the performer, the object/material and the unstable environment (unexpected wind gust, power of the current, instability of the candle...).

The fragility of the puppet and its stage life was the focus of the meta-show *Fragile (2017)* mentored by Kučinović and Lučić, in which the death of the marionette was shaped by the animation of the puppet, objects and set props and the verbal layer whose meaning faded into sound on the way, which directed the puppet's stage presence towards the visual layer. The necessity of visibility for the puppet's stage life was confirmed by its final stage murder by its confinement in the darkness of a suitcase.

### DIALOGUE OF LIVE PERFORMANCE AND ACTIVE AUDIENCE

The density of information in Brezovec's *Minnie* or in *Romeo (and Juliet)*, the richness of stage metaphor in *The Rainbow* and in *Death or about Life*, the rich minimalism of *Desnica*, the performance playfulness in *Who Are You?* and the poetic abstraction of philosophical ideas in Tarle's and the Facades' stage fantasies counted on an active audience which in contemporary puppetry expression, unlike in the traditional one, does not offer ready-made answers, but opens questions and spaces for writing one's own meanings. In Brezovec's show, the audience had to break through the plethora of information and choose the ones they considered crucial, so they had to "delete" redundant information, while in Tarle's and the Osijek Academy's projects the audience had the freedom to write meaning.

The audience's activity in contemporary puppetry ranges from playing with the content, for example contemporary readings of the classics (*Hamlet, Romeo (and Juliet)*), through searching for the key to dramaturgical reading of the show (projects by Morana Dolenc), playing with layers of stage reality and illusion (puppetry projects by Theatre Company Pinklec) to deciphering stage metaphor (most projects of the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek), inscribing stage metonymy (*Judita*), layered play with contemporary puppetry tools on a macro and micro level (*Hamlet, Romeo (and Juliet), Oedipus the King*), and so on. These examples show that contemporary puppet theatre reckons with an audience that is not merely a passive recipient of information, but a co-author of a performance act. In such an expression, each show has as many meanings as there are spectators.

## CONCLUSION

Another aspect of the audience's activity is the concrete one - participation in the performance itself. As in many aspects mentioned so far, Croatian puppetry did not use all the possibilities in this aspect as well, moreover, it only briefly touched them. Director Marin Carić and art designer Mojmir Mihatov designed the show *Mountains (Planine, 1997)* by the Zadar Puppet Theatre as a puppet procession through the city of Zadar, that is, as "a revived exhibition of characters from the underworld and fairies, in which they combined dramatic and puppetry approach, actors, different types puppets, masks, machines and revived set design" (Tretinjak, 2021: 167). In this procession, the performance and the spectators who actively participated by penetrating the space of the play and choosing their own angle and duration of viewing individual stages merged, which critic Anatolij Kudrjavcev described in a review named *Gridlock (Ulična gužva)* with the following words: "A strong impression remains that the Zadar audience was, to put it mildly, confused by these strange stage events on the streets of their own city and in their famous buildings" (Kudrjavcev, 1997: 11).



▲ Zadar Puppet Theatre: *Mountains* / photo: Archive of Zadar Puppet Theatre

If we paraphrase Kudrjavcev's words, after this review, a strong impression remains that the Croatian audience has not had much opportunity to enjoy the contemporary puppetry expression, which is almost at its beginning even after 50 years. Only a few rare expressions and relationships have been firmly established, while most of the possibilities have just been touched upon, and many, such as robotics or video games, are not even mentioned because they have not yet found a place in contemporary puppetry in Croatia.

If we briefly look at contemporariness in terms of time, the puppetry tradition still dominates in Croatia today, both on and around the stages. Awareness of contemporary puppetry expression and its unexplored possibilities is slowly spreading on both sides of the theatre ramp, which leads to poor representation on theatre stage and repertoires. When a contemporary puppet show appears, it is generally not accepted by the audience, both by the target audience and the profession, and is removed from the repertoire after only a few performances.

The Osijek Academy plays a key role in the necessary change in the perception of puppeteers and spectators of contemporary puppetry, on the one hand by educating future puppeteers, puppet technologists and designers, on the other by developing critical and theoretical awareness of the possibilities of contemporary puppetry. However, this process is slow, and is further hampered by the difficult situation among independent puppeteers and is only slightly easier in institutional puppet theatre. But the hope lies in the constant influx of new young forces that will not be satisfied with the traditional relationship with the puppet, but will look for their performance language in numerous possibilities of contemporary puppetry and performance language...

## Contemporary Slovenian Puppetry

## ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Tjaša Bertoncej

Following the previous chapter, when considering contemporary Slovenian puppetry, the concept of modernity is considered as a poetic characteristic and represents an innovative principle of work, understanding and interpretation, which in puppet theater leads to new ideas and fresh stage interpretations of familiar expressions. The following text will highlight some of the main tendencies of contemporary Slovenian puppetry, which are keeping up with contemporary puppetry practices outside of Slovenia.

## INTRODUCTION – CREATIVE PROGRESS TO THIS DAY

There are several important creative points that have brought puppetry in Slovenia to its present contemporary form. At the root of it lies a break from the classic form of puppetry and the puppeteers' stepping out of the shadows. That symbolic end of the classical period of Slovenian puppetry took place in the 1980s and marks the beginning of a comprehensive research into the forms of puppetry.

According to Martina Maurič Lazar, "as far as Slovenian puppet theater is concerned, one cannot speak about tradition as a distinctive national style, but rather establish new aesthetics and a broad understanding of puppetry through the continuous research on artists who have created Slovenian puppetry" (Bertoncej, 2021a).

Regarding the projects from the 1990s, Silvan Omerzu was one of the first to break with the traditional notion of puppetry as an art form for children. His visually refined grotesque performances were based

on the philosophical approach to the puppet and its dialogue with the puppeteer. Omerzu intertwined existentialist-oriented themes with social criticism and dark humor, thus enriching Slovenian puppetry with a more contemplative aesthetic and artistic component.

A major step into the contemporary art and one of the key points in the revival of Slovenian puppetry is the beginning of the artistic work of Matija Solce around 2007,\* about whose performances Uroš Trefalt says that "they change the established perception of Slovenian puppetry and demonstrate its potential for more creative possibilities than our theaters are aware of or are willing to accept." Trefalt adds that Solce is a "magnet for young artists and an important incentive to motivate them to create art with puppets" (Trefalt, 2014: 21).

The main focus of Solce's work is a blend of puppetry and music; it is primarily a scenic research of the "musical perspective" of puppetry with rhythm as the central element of the author's aesthetic and the supporting element of the performance. He structures his performances rhythmically (in terms of words, animations, sounds, movements...) and in a wide range of expressive forms and genres – from puppet and object theater to cabaret, musical theater, concert performance, installations and beyond. Through this eclectic style, he combines tradition and modernity, both in terms of meaning and performance.

Solce often uses established texts as a source for his performances, which he then deconstructs and breaks down into fragments. The fragmented dramaturgy is typical for contemporary puppetry. In fragmented dramaturgy, the traditional roundness is replaced by the multi-layeredness, complexity, associative jokes, provocation, parody and irony, as well as the unexpected and lucid twists, often following the tone of Monty Python humor. Different media of expression overlap and allow the viewer to generate numerous interpretations. Such apparent chaos is the result of a thoughtful arrangement of elements into a complete and complex

\* Matija Solce began his activity already in 2003 with Little Night Stories [Male nočne zgodbe], produced by the International Center for Puppetry Arts Koper – Teatro Matita, and since 2007 he has continued his work with the *THE NOSE [NOS]* (2007), *Cabarethole [Kabarethuknja]* (2008), *Attention, MOOSE! [Pozor, LOS!]* (2009) and other.

composition. Moreover, in this fragmented environment, the stage expression and the viewer's experience become more important than the narrative itself.

In his plays, Solce places the puppet and the puppeteer side by side and layers their relationship, questions the relationship between the stage and the audience, active performers and passive spectators, conventional theatrical environment and ordinary places, as well as the reality and theatrical illusion, reason and absurdity, and firmly defined structures and improvisations. In line with contemporary thinking, he denies dichotomy and departs from established performance conventions at all levels. By doing so, he enriches and expands his own theatrical and musical expression and, with the whirlwind of rhythms, motifs, themes, perspectives and performance repertoires, points to the possibilities of intermedially formed puppet theater and the fluidity of performance repertoires.

Matija Solce first began his creative activity at a time of "crisis" and stagnation of puppetry, something that the profession warned about in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At that time, Slovenian puppetry was dominated by performances lacking any artistic risk-taking, with an emphasis on commercialization and didacticism. As the selector of the 4<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Puppetry Artists of Slovenia, Rok Vevar, wrote in 2007, that Slovenian puppetry in those years was lacking a more intense questioning of the puppet medium and problematization of the connection between animators and animated bodies, as well as young generations and the performance reflection (Vevar, 2007).

That conservative puppetry environment in Slovenia was revived and changed by Solce and several other individuals and theaters. The Maribor Puppet Theater, which relocated to a new building in 2010 and received new management and new ensemble, played an important role. Uroš Trefalt specifically emphasizes the important role of the animator Elena Volpi "who is a unique example of a versatile puppeteer who proves time and again how futile it is to separate actors into drama and puppetry. The versatility in her performances embodies the notion of a complete actor and an alternative puppet artist. She breathes a new aesthetic 'air' into the Slovenian drama, which is essential for a confident stage performance"



▲ Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Darkroom* / photo: Jaka Varmuž

(Trefalt, 2014: 21). Trefalt draws attention to the importance of the educational programs introduced at that time at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana, which led to the emergence of a special puppet genre – interactive experiential theater for children, which was introduced into Slovenian theatrical scene by the AEIOU theater in 2010. The author also noted the increasing quality and importance of the Biennial of Puppetry Artists of Slovenia with respect to organization, dramaturgy and representation.

The next important step in the development of contemporary puppetry in Slovenia is the stepping up of Ajda Rooss to the position of the artistic director of the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre in 2013. In an effort to continually improve the artistic standards, Rooss expands the understanding of the puppetry form of expression, which is acknowledged by Gregor Butala, who wrote that the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre “has shown an increasing tendency in recent years to go beyond the established framework of (generally) successful puppetry performances for the youngest, towards more ambitious (and genre-challenging) projects that would appeal to teenagers and adults” (Butala, 2018). Today, together with the LUTKE Festival, the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre largely dictates contemporary puppetry practice in Slovenia.

Another important element in the development of contemporary expression is the emergence of new young generations who have both experienced and want to engage in the use of the puppet medium and explore it on a performative, theoretical and critical level. Stage director Tin Grabnar is an important representative of the new generation in terms of performance. In an effort to develop and “strengthen” the puppet media, not only is he focused on the production aspect, but as a comprehensive author – writer, visual and technical designer, and educator – he promotes and expands the expressive possibilities of puppet theater. His puppetry is characterized by continuous research of the medium, both in terms of content and staging strategy. It is this contemporary urge that puppet theater does not mold into the approved and established forms, but continually redefines the art of puppetry. Grabnar recognizes puppetry to be without boundaries in terms of innovation and delves deep under the skin of important social issues. He takes an authorial approach to the



Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Still Life* / photo: Jaka Varmuž ▲

topics and, through the active and creative engagement of the performers, designs a complete theater laboratory. In it, he emphasizes the audience's thought and emotional processes, thus continuously reflecting and problematizing the act of watching.

Nika Bezeljak, Mojca Kreft and Martina Maurič Lazar write in the explanation of the award of the Pengov Charter for the excellent achievements in puppetry the following about the author's work:

His bold and emotional confrontation with technology and ethics in the award-winning and outstanding projects such as *Somewhere Else (Nekje drugje)*, *Silent Boy (Tibi dječak)*, and most recently *Still Life (Tihožitje)* help us hear ourselves over the noise of today, where technology seems to only drive us into regression. The innovator, magician, mediator between reality and illusion continuously successfully stimulates his own imagination, the imagination of the performers and spectators, as evidenced in his plays *The Pirate and the Moon (Pirat in luna)*, *Snow Queen (Snežna kraljica)*, *Martin Krpan* and *The Sky Above (Nebo nad menoj)* (Bezeljak, Kreft, Maurič Lazar, 2021).

Important role in terms of theory and criticism is played by the "Little School of Criticism" ("Mala šola kritike"), an informal critique seminar that has been held since 2016 under the mentorship of Zala Dobovšek and brings together young professionals specialized in the field of puppetry. The seminar aims to introduce young audiences to puppet theater, educate them to express themselves critically and reflectively, and establish a basis for the criticism of puppet productions. As the logical follow-up to the "Little School of Criticism", 2020 saw the launch of a new platform for criticism of contemporary puppetry, the "EU Contemporary Puppetry Critical Platform". Another important role in the development of theoretical and critical thinking about contemporary puppetry is played by "Lutka", the journal for puppetry art and theater of animated forms. Theory and criticism are important partners in contemporary puppetry tasked with identifying and systematizing new forms of expression. As such, the aforementioned critical and media environments represent a valuable aspect of the development of contemporary puppetry in Slovenia.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY PUPPET THEATER

### Hybridity

Among the key features of contemporary puppetry is its merging and intertwining with other forms of stage expression and creative fields such as animated installations, dance, mime, visual, physical, dramatic and musical expressions, thus expanding contemporary puppetry's own expression. At the same time, it influences other performance genres, and imposes puppet-like thinking and logic on them, for example in the performances of *Things Thing (Reči reči)*, EMANAT, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2021, d. Jan Rozman, Julia Keren Turbahn) and *The Last Temptation (Poslednja skušnjava)*, GVR Zavod, Kino Šiška, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2020, d. Vlado R. Gotvan). Today's performance expression therefore is defined by intermediality and its manifold possibilities of combination.

Henryk Jurkowski heralded the unlimited expressive possibilities in the propagation of the puppet medium, writing that the puppet "by broadening the definition [...] is transformed from a material object into an abstract artistic idea that the artist projects to the audience. It will be a new form that will completely change the way we view puppetry" (Jurkowski, 1998: 16). Following Jurkowski, in contemporary forms, the puppet moves away from its traditional figurativeness and takes on more abstract levels of representation. Object theater, along with figurative forms of puppetry, predominates in Slovenia, and in the interweaving of various puppetry techniques there are elements of material theater as well as animation of light, perception and imagination of the viewer, space, sounds, shadows, robots, bodies, thoughts and symbols.

Social progress and development represent one of the important elements in expanding the creative possibilities of the puppet theater. In this respect, Slovenian puppet theater is continuously incorporating modern technical innovations. New media of expression, from live video projections and cameras to robotics and mechatronics, create a new stage poetics. Among

the best-known plays that successfully combine the puppet and the use of modern technology is the award-winning *Somewhere Else* (2017) by Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, directed by Tin Grabnar. In this work, the use of modern technology does not alienate the viewer, but rather creatively intertwines animation with technology, i.e. traditional puppet animation and chalk drawing techniques with spatial video projection and virtual drawing. In doing so, the chalk drawing, accompanied by a projected image based on the principle of stop animation, erases the boundary between the real and the projected image. This intermedial performance creates a visually animated experience and combines all the theatrical elements into a functional whole.

Due to the popularity of the puppet medium, Rok Vevar introduced the term “theater of animated forms” (Vevar, 2007) several years ago, which refers to the animation of anthropomorphic objects and all inanimate objects, in addition to puppetry. It is common to use the terms *animation of puppets and objects* within the same context in Slovenia, whereby the concept of a *puppet* is limited to its figurative nature. There have been several attempts to define and redefine modern forms of puppetry both in the European and global puppetry, but there is a question about the meaning of definitions that typically shape the *puppet* into its traditional forms and separate it from hybrid forms and new alternative concepts. In this sense, therefore, we understand the *puppet* in all its aspects of expressions – in figurative forms and heterogeneous animated entities. Hence, in terms of contemporary forms, it makes more sense to derive the definition from the act of animation itself rather than from the subject of animation and the form of appearance. Following this notion, Nika Arhar states that “the definition of a puppet is not so important for contemporary puppet theater. More important is the definition of puppetry and how we can think of animation. The very perspective of the artist is what gives something the status of a puppet. It is not important for the ‘puppet’ to be brought to life as a fictional character, but rather that it is ‘brought to life’ in its distinctiveness (as the imagination can be ‘brought to life’); it can raise questions about the nature of our own and/or our reality” (Bertoncelj, 2021b).



Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Somewhere Else* / photo: Jaka Varmuž ▲

### Relationship between the Animator and the Puppet

In traditional puppetry, performance elements have the function of creating the illusion of the realistic world on the stage and independence of the puppet. For contemporary puppetry, the deconstruction of the illusion theater is significant with the purpose of creating a sense of astonishment. The creation of illusion is still present, but in terms of the creation of life and the falsification of reality, resulting in the contemporary “augmented reality of the stage” (Gostiša, 2021).

In addition to the multi-layered expression of animation, another equally important transition point to contemporary puppetry practices is the generalization of the puppeteer’s presence, which “allows him to move through different positions (from subtle shadow in the service of the puppet, to its observer and narrator, to stage partner) and to underline the level of symbolic positions compared to the puppet” (Sermon, 2019: 12). The relationship between the puppet and the animator is redefined and becomes a new mean of expression, and in contemporary puppet performances it appears as an important element of reflection and one of the main vehicles of the concept of performance. This relationship breaks down the previous hierarchy and creates new relationships and meanings in which the living and the inanimate, the human and the object, and the free and the dependent are more clearly intertwined.

Additional references of contemporary puppetry are focused on the animator himself, whose role multiplies, an illustrative example of which is the play *Pinocchio* (Ostržek, 2019) by the Maribor Puppet Theatre directed by Matteo Spiazzi. There, actor Miha Bezeljak performed acting, improvisation, animation, physical, technical and performance skills, as well as playing with his own character and stage reality. Thus, modernization and communication in contemporary puppetry occur on several levels simultaneously - within the actor and the puppet and their mutual relationship. The focal points of the performance are already scattered at this level in continuous motion.

The development of technology and new stage forms is partially aimed at the emancipation of the puppet. Unlike traditional puppetry, where the “liberation of the puppet” is achieved by creating an illusion, in some aspects of contemporary puppetry the puppet is indeed an independent, equal and “living” individual, only indirectly under the influence of man. Specifically, we are referring to mechanical puppets and the aspects of analog puppetry in which puppets (often everyday objects) are placed in active contexts and symbolic relationships, aided by current social discourses that re-examine the inanimate and inhuman world.

The performances of plays *Things Thing* and *Objectification* (Predmetenje, EMANAT, 2018, d. Jan Rozman) address the relationship between people and objects through the movement-rich animation of objects together with the fusion of thematic theater and contemporary dance. Instead of the functionality as such, the ideas of manipulation and emancipation of objects and objectification of performers, as well as the choreographic possibilities of the objects themselves and their semantic layer, take center stage. Initially, this concerns the diminishing of the anthropocentric perception of reality, which places humans above all other non-human entities. The hybrid performance *Requiem for the Future* (Rekvijem za prihodnost, Aksioma, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre in partnership with the City of Women Festival, 2016, directed by Maja Smrekar) moves away from the latter by shifting between the anthropomorphic, technomorphic, and zoomorphic in its animation of animals and drones. In the plays *Bestiaries* (Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, Duda Paiva Company, Kilden Theatre in Riksteatret, 2012, directed by Duda Paiva) and *Love Dolls* (Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, Duda Paiva Company, 2009, directed by Duda Paiva), there are two worlds alternating through a dialogue between dancers and puppets: the animator forms two characters who are in an equal (and erotic) relationship, but it is not entirely clear who is leading and who is being led. The play *Happy Bones* (Teatro Matita, 2011, directed by Vida Bren Cerkenik), on the other hand, focuses on the direct thematization and reproduction of the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet, between the living and the artificial, life and death, freedom and subordination.

## The Versatile Engagement of the Viewer

While the role of the viewer in traditional puppetry was to recognize the revived puppetry world on stage, in contemporary puppetry the viewer assumed a more active role of reading and understanding the complex meanings of the play. Contemporary performances are characterized by an associative dramaturgy with minimalized or accumulated layers of meaning. The conventional one-sided narrative line multiplies, intersects, and twists, offering different relationships and types of associations simultaneously in a series of parallel and vertical dramaturgies. The viewer's task is to search for and shape the meaning in multi-layered networks of interpretation and is thus dependent on his or her own thought processes.

In this context, the plays worth mentioning are: *Still Life (Tibožitje)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, Flota Murska Sobota, Flota Ljubljana, 2020, d. Tin Grabnar), *Strength (Moč)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2019, d. Jiří Zeman, Martina Maurič Lazar), *The Rite of Spring (Posvetitev pomladi)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2019, d. Matjaž Farič), *Mission X (Misija X)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2016, d. Jiří Havelka) and *The Man Who Planted Trees (Mož, ki je sadil drevesa)*, Maribor Puppet Theatre, 2012, d. Nika Bezeljak). The associativity and exploration of the material of animation can be seen in the play *Sand Pit (Peskovnik)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2021, d. Miha Golob), while the animation of lights and spotlights is demonstrated in *The Last Temptation, Beambreaker (Žarkolom, Osmo/Za [Atol, Lyudmila, Delak]*, Kino Šiška, 2020, d. Tadej Droljč) and *Luftbalett II* (Kino Šiška, GVR babaLAN Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2013, d. Vlado G. Repnik). In the play *Snow Queen (Snežna kraljica)*, Maribor Puppet Theatre, 2018, d. Tin Grabnar), the artist creates and animates picturesque landscapes using sound narration, imaginary soundscape, and sound animation replacing the visual. A fanciful scenographic platform in the *The Sky Above (Nebo nad menoj)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2020, d. Tin Grabnar) plays with the viewer's perspective and animates the viewer's imagination through an innovative moving picture book, whereas the *Aquarium (Akvarij)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2017) and *Little Blue and Little Yellow (mali modri in mali rumeni)*, Maribor Puppet Theatre, 2015) by Miha Golob, play layer by layer with the imagination and associations.

▲ Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Strength* / photo: Jaka Varmuž

In contemporary puppetry forms, the viewer's perceptual and imaginative apparatus becomes more active, and so does the engagement of the viewer in general. This leads to the direct participation in the stage action, i.e. the theater where there is an open communication with the recipient, where the performance is adapted to the situation and to the audience, emphasizing the character of the theater as a living and unique experience. This type of performance features animation of the viewer, who at the same time becomes the co-animator of the play. This group is comprised of participatory theater forms whose focus is on the active physical participation in the performance, thus deepening the viewer's sensory and physical experience. Especially noteworthy are the early days of the aforementioned AEIOU Theater, which paved the way for an interactive experiential theater in 2010. Significant plays in this genre include: *Peak! (Pokukaj!)*, Hiša otrok in umetnosti / House of Children and Arts, 2020, d. Irena Rajh), *The Master and Margarita (Mojster in Margareta)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2018, d. Matija Solce), *Japanese Fairy Tales (Japonske pravljice)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2016, d. Chiara Guidi), *Little Salamander Goes Across the Road (Močeradek gre čez cesto)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2013, d. Matija Solce) and *In the Land of Finger Puppets (V deželi prstnih lutk)*, Hiša otrok in umetnosti / House of Children and Arts), Zapik Puppet Theatre, 2014, d. Jelena Sitar).

The modern history of the puppet theater in Slovenia obviously lacks puppet dramaturgy. The lack of a well-defined dramaturgy is common in plays whose content and interpretation are open, confirming that a wide range of forms of expression does not necessarily make for a more efficient or thematically rich whole. Moreover, performances that revolve around a new form, expression, or technology often lack dramatic finesse, stagecraft, and a well-thought-out whole. One example where the technical aspects of performance were excessively involved is the *Monkeys* project (*Opice*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2018, d. Amit Drori), who uses mechanized monkey puppets to expand the reference space of the puppets to contemporary hybrid performance forms, questioning puppetry and the animator-puppet relationship, but at the same time sticking to the installation plane, as he does not elaborate on the original idea.

### Redefining the Performance Spaces

The versatile engagement of the viewer is often complementary to the contemporary approach to the performance space, where the conventional stage is modified, and the stage ramp removed. The audience is introduced to the performance spaces, often enhancing the ambience to the non-performance spaces and the surrounding area.

An important example of the stage's reorganization can be found in the *Pirate and the Moon (Pirat in luna)*, Maribor Puppet Theatre, 2016, d. Tin Grabnar) where the audience are seated in a pirate ship in the Minorite Church, while a theater of shadows and sound animation unfolds between and around them in a space that is atmospherically used and inscribed in the play. Similarly, the auditory is also re-imagined in the play *About a Boy and a Penguin (O dečku in pingvinu)*, Maribor Puppet Theatre, Mini theater, Moment, 2015, Zoran Petrovič), which invites the audience into the very center and envelops them in a performance.

Site-specific composition and multilayered spatial animation in the play *The Master and Margarita* takes place in various spaces of the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre building (offices, stages, corridors, etc.) and shapes the communication between space and performative expressions. In the play *In the Whirlwind of Time (V zavetrju časa)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2016, d. Meta Grgurevič, Urša Vidic, 2016), the inside of the tunnel of the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre is decorated with the motif fragments that emerge through the multimedia installation and spatial placement of moving images, objects, music, and light. The play *Gimme Shelter* (Compagnie Yokaï, Le Manège - Scène Nationale, Studio Césaré - CNC, Maribor Puppet Theatre, 2019, Violaine Fimbel) creates an unusual scenographic experience by alternating two different settings – the inside and outside of the electric transformer. Inside the transformer, the viewer is claustrophobically “oppressed” and then transported to an open environment where he or she sits on the top of the abandoned amusement park facilities. One interesting example of openness is provided by the project *Open the Owl (Misterij sove)*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2017, directed by Renaud Herbin), in which the space of the audience is indeterminate:



▲ Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *The Master and Margarita* / photo: Jaka Varmuž

the viewer is free to move around the space and choose his or her position and perspective, while the director plays with the viewer's perception of different stage perspectives and abstraction of the stage.

Matija Solce places the scene in different spaces, from prison to living room, contrasting it with the closed circle and "elitism" of theaters. By doing so, as Zala Dobovšek points out, Solce "establishes contact with the traditional traveling puppeteers, so the performance will grow in importance, since it is not tied to a specific space and audience but is accessible to all" (Bertoncelj, 2021b).

Contemporary forms therefore include the animation of space, stage and audience. They reimagine the theatrical space and experiment with the scenographic layer of the performances and the perception of the audience. They form new relationships between a human, a puppet and a space or environment, which supports the idea that the puppet theater today is understood as a total theater that uses all artistic means of expression and their mutual relationships.

### Contemporary Themes

Contemporary puppet shows in Slovenia frequently address the modern world. In this regard, in Slovenia, the most common performances are those based on popular fairy tales and stories, auctorial projects and the instances of abstract theater. Most of Slovenian puppet shows are for children, whereas a smaller percentage is intended for the youngest and adults. The shows aimed at children's audiences also include thematically audacious projects with space for provocative and taboo topics.

Ivana Djilas explores the marginal, bold and important topics in children's plays, reinforcing the principle of equality within the sphere of prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination – *Jack and Jim (Jure in Jaka*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2019); *Goose the Bear (Medved in mali*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2016). The renowned Italian director Fabrizio Montecchi introduced his work at the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre with a thematically and aesthetically compelling play *Duck, Death and the Tulip (Račka, Smrt*

*in tulipan*, 2014), which subtly addresses death as an integral part of life, whereas in *Virginia Volk* (2017) he explores depression and melancholy. Tin Grabnar's play *Somewhere Else* (Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2017) raises the question of the pointlessness of war and war suffering, and his most recent play *The Sky Above* addresses the current environmental issues. The aspects of modern society and the socio-political system are introduced to children's audiences through the plays: *The Emperor's New Clothes* (*Cesarjeva nova oblačila*, Maribor Puppet Theatre, Rijeka City Puppet Theatre, 2020, Zoran Petrovič), *Seal* (*Tjulenj*, Ljubljana Puppet Theater, 2019, d. Matija Solce), *White camel* (*Bela kamela*, Maribor Puppet Theater, 2017, Nika Bezeljak), *Krabat* (Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, Gledališče Konj, Ulrike Quade Company, Oorkaan 2014, d. Ulrike Quade) and *Animal Farm* (*Živalska farma*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2012, d. Vito Taufer).

Contemporary puppet shows for adults approach philosophical and social issues in a complex and challenging manner, surrounding them with performance novelties that question artistic expressions and open up new creative questions. The topics normally originate from the current social moment and contemporary social phenomena. Prevalent are the topics of the environment, critical insights into the present, and the problematization of universal philosophical aspects of reality. The problem is often embedded in the thematic potential of puppetry and the relationship between the animate and the inanimate.

The play *Still Life*, stems from the very essence of puppetry – the revival of the inanimate, while the animation in the play permeates real life – the animated being is a being that once lived and died at the hands of humans. The play seeks to inspire the audience's awe of nature and respect for wildlife. It is characterized by the dramaturgy of the state\*, which, apart from the dynamic anthropomorphic depiction of nature, constructs the aesthetic and philosophical ideas and seeks an intellectually engaged viewer.

\* Zala Dobovšek defined the type of the dramaturgy (after Bertoneclj, 2021c).



▲ Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *The Rite of Spring* / photo: Jaka Varmuž

“Visually captivating hypnotic meditation” (Arhar, 2018) *In a steady point of the spinning world* (*Na mirujoči točki vrtečega se sveta*, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, TJP Centre Dramatique National d'Alsace Strasbourg, TNG - Centre Dramatique National de Lyon, 2018, d. Renaud Herbin in collaboration with Julie Nioche, Sir Alice and Aitor Sanz Juanes) brings the puppet to the fore in terms of body and movement. As music, dance, and puppets collide to form an animated visual landscape, the play shapes the relationship of the individual to the collective. Animation and movement are thematically intertwined in the *The Rite of the Spring*, which, through the spectacular visual imagery, addresses the manipulation of an individual and the relationship between the victim and the igniter. The manipulation of the individual and power relations between different symbolic actors (animator – manipulator – human – puppet – object, etc.) is thematized through an intimate and atmospherically strong miniature *Power*.

*Being Don Quixote* (*Biti Don Kibot*, Teatro Matita, 2019) The characteristic aesthetic of Solce “is not merely a play, but an unusual experiential act that, through a collage of short, animated scenes, music and improvisation,

creates a dynamic atmosphere of surprising flashes and playfulness and critical insight into reality” (Dobovšek, Čadež, Waszkiel, 2021). It proceeds to problematize the role of the individual in the world and his relationship to society. It thematizes the past and present, the puppeteer and the puppet, madness and normality, and raises questions about identity, culture, and art.

### CONCLUSION - RESEARCH AND LAYERING AS THE CONNECTING FACTORS

The starting point that connects all aspects of the contemporary puppetry is *the research*, i.e. the constant challenging and experimenting with *puppetry* which is not content with its own “safe” terms, but tries to always rethink it in a different way. Martina Maurič Lazar identifies the creative tendency focused on research as a key feature of the Slovenian puppetry space “which is always contemporary, curious and open. It is daring and always has a different outlook.” Maurič Lazar adds that “the history of puppetry in Slovenia has usually been focused on the development of the medium. It is possible that the tradition of Slovenian puppetry is indeed its modernity” (Maurič Lazar, 2021).

Throughout the history of Slovenian puppetry, experimental approaches and thematically bold performances often prevailed on the noninstitutional scene. However, this has been significantly diminished in recent decades as a result of poor conditions regarding the production, and a small number of independent companies have survived. Noteworthy in this context is the activity of the cultural and artistic association Moment, which, since 2006, gives the room for the authorial and exploratory puppet shows – *Transitions (Prestopi, 2007; EDdA2, 2008)*; *Action without Words (Dejanje brez besed, 2010)*; *I, Legend (Jaz, legenda, 2013)* – and develops independent intermedial theater production (*Victoria 2.0, 2016, d. Zoran Petrovič*). Nevertheless, the majority of performance experiments are conducted by two main institutions – the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre and the Maribor

Puppet Theatre. These houses with permanent ensembles have become quintessential places of creativity, innovation and courage. However, performance experiments in institutions have always been determined to a certain extent by cultural politics, so that in institutions, despite lucid contemporary productions, it is harder to speak of completely independent and unlimited contemporary puppet experiments that were performed by the independent troupes in the past.

The current Slovenian puppetry scene is primarily focused on creating commercial and conventional puppetry production, which is accompanied simultaneously by modern productions and researches. Many performances feature innovative approaches, but lack the comprehensiveness of all performance elements within a complex whole.

The achievements of the international co-productions are largely defining the *contemporary* aspect of Slovenian puppetry. Foreign directors and foreign co-productions bring new poetics and genre twists to the Slovenian puppet theater, thus expanding the spectrum of the puppet theater.



▲ Moment: *Victoria 2.0* / photo: Toni Soprano

Another important foundation of modernity is *layering*. It is presented on all levels of contemporary puppetry: the theme, dramaturgy, the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet, intermediality, hybrid flow of performance genres, multi-layered scenes and multi-layered role of the viewer. In a broad kaleidoscope of meanings in constant transformations. With a wide range of thematic and interpretive focal points, contemporary puppetry is characterized by an explosion of ambiguity.

As a synthesis of various arts, puppetry expands in the modern era into exploratory and multi-layered hybrid forms. A more elaborated language emerges at the intersection of various forms of expression, suggesting the breadth of transformations and manifestations of puppetry. Contemporary puppet theater in Slovenia hints at the potential of the puppet medium, defined by the infinite possibilities of philosophical and scenic expressions.

Contemporary Lithuanian Puppetry  
 A CONSTANTLY REDISCOVERED  
 PUPPET THEATRE\*

Kristina Steiblytė, Ramunė Balevičiūtė

INTRODUCTION

Currently Lithuania's only regular puppet theatre festival, *Materia Magica*, has been held in the port city of Klaipėda since 1997. It is hard to think of a more fitting name for a puppet theatre event, as matter and magic are the two key words that describe the essence and power of puppetry. In contemporary culture, puppet theatre manifests itself as education, as therapy, as contemporary interdisciplinary art and, indeed, as magic. The uniqueness of the stage art form could be largely determined by the alloy of perceived archaism and modernity. Even when watching a performance based on the most modern technologies, the feeling of touching something from a very distant past while encountering oneself as a child remains. Therefore, the influence of puppet theatre on adults is no less than on children, although there is still a prevailing opinion in Lithuania that this form of performing art is only suitable for children, as puppet theatre is ideally suited for their world view due to the perceptual characteristics of a growing individual, i.e., the belief in the vividness of the surrounding objects or the possibility of them coming to life. It is in the nature of puppet theatre that it reflects and plays with the dialectic of animate and inanimate objects. They can manifest as a creative analysis

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of the performer's relationship with the puppet, a revelation of the link between live performance and mechanisation, and finally, at the level of themes, the proximity of life and death. The most interesting examples of performances show how puppet theatre can become a space for artistic experimentation that can foster the development not only of this form but of the performing arts in general. On the other hand, the disappearance of boundaries between the different forms and the simultaneous expansion of the concept of puppet theatre can be observed. For example, the penetration of film art into the field of puppet theatre can be observed, while the influence of puppet theatre is evident in the mastery of stop animation films for children and adults.

#### THE BEGINNINGS

From the very first attempts, Lithuanian puppet theatre was inseparable from experimentation. The artist and stage designer Stasys Ušinskas (1905-1974), who had assembled a team of like-minded people in the interwar period who, like himself, had no experience in puppetry, experimented by creating puppets and searching for more diverse means of expression. He also transferred puppet theatre to the screen by creating the first Lithuanian stop-motion film *The Fat Man's Dream* (*Storulio sapnas*, d. Henrikas Kačinskas and Stasys Ušinskas 1938). Currently, Stasys Ušinskas' experiments rest in a museum and have little to no influence on modern Lithuanian puppet theatre. However, the influence of Vitalijus Mazūras (b. 1934), one of the most important puppet theatre experimenters of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on puppeteers working today who are looking for innovations is still felt. After resisting the prevailing trend in puppet theatre towards realistic representation, Vitalijus Mazūras experimented not only with increasingly abstract forms, but also with distancing the content from realism. The space of an open and experimental puppet theatre also emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Lithuanian port city of Klaipėda. Jūratė Januškevičiūtė, together with like-minded people, began to build not only a theatre but also a school of puppetry.

#### DISTINCTIVE SCHOOLS - DISTINCTIVE EXPERIMENTS

At the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jūratė Januškevičiūtė and her colleagues in Klaipėda not only founded the KU-KŪ puppet theatre, but also created a unique training programme for puppeteers. Its effectiveness is obvious: the graduates of this programme, led by director Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė, are perhaps the most prominent experimental puppeteers in Lithuania.

After graduating from Klaipėda University in 2004, Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė won the debut prize of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture for her performance *The Only One* (*Vienintelė*) for adults, created at Klaipėda Puppet Theatre in the same year. Already in this work, which combined puppets, masks and the actor's body sculpture, the director's inclination to experiment with forms and materials was evident. After her successful debut at the Klaipėda Puppet Theatre, she staged several lively performances for children and families, using various puppets and objects as theatrical devices. In 2008, she came to critical attention after directing another performance for adults at the Klaipėda Puppet Theatre. The political puppet ballet *Ubu* (*Juoba*), based on Alfred Jarry's play *King Ubu*, confirmed Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė as one of the most interesting experimenters in the performing arts, searching for new, more expressive forms with each performance, often unique to Lithuanian puppetry.

For the *Ubu* performance, the director used household utensils, food, parts of a mannequin or limbs that function separately from the rest of the actor's body to reveal the absurdity of the drama. Here, in the small acting space that resembled a box or an aquarium, the associatively connected objects, the content of the play and the performance itself alluded to an absurd play. In 2014, Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė presented her modern concept of puppet theatre, which includes contemporary dance, masks, puppets and acting, to the Lithuanian audience with her performance *Sandman* (*Smėlio žmogus*), based on the work of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann. An interesting dialogue emerged with the Lithuanian vision of puppet theatre as sculpture theatre, represented by Lithuania's most famous puppeteer Vitalijus Mazūras, who has created a unique stage world enriched with original visions for more than half a century.

In the performance *Sandman*, Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė, together with set designer Renata Valčik, choreographer and performer Sigita Mikalauskaitė and composer Rita Mačiliūnaitė, tells the story of a creator, his contradictory and divided inner world and his relationship with his beloved. The creators of the Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė” have reshaped the romantic creation by compressing it, removing all romantic excesses, and noticeably adjusting the plot, but preserving the essence - the core of the story about a man touched by madness and the atmosphere of horror. However, the order of the episodes in the performance was not determined by the development of the narrative, as the audience had to construct the story themselves, but rather by the technical and visual possibilities. As the plot progressed, the visuals of the performance became more and more condensed, the images, such as the figures of the dreaded Sandman, multiplied and appeared not only in the movements of the actors but also in the rich musical background and the interplay of lights. This shift further condensed the uneasy, dreamlike atmosphere and immersed the audience even deeper in a certain audiovisual fog. This performance confirmed that Radvilavičiūtė is an active experimenter who likes to try out new ways of communication between the actor and the puppet and/or the mask, incorporating elements of dance and circus, as well as different ways of existence of the actor and the puppet at different points of the three-dimensional space.

When staging *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*Doriano Grėjaus portretas*) at the Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė” in 2018, the director experimented further with the relationship between actor and puppet, body, and object. The play is performed in a small space for a small number of spectators. Similar to *Ubu* ten years ago, the action of the performance takes place in a golden picture frame. In this frame, people, and their body parts act, only not with kitchen utensils and vegetables, but with miniature copies of famous sculptures. As in most of the director’s other works for children or adults, the narrative in this performance is mainly constructed through images. Compared to *Ubu* or *Sandman*, however, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is rather static. It attracts the viewer not so much with the unexpected transformations of the body, the mask and the puppet resulting from their

▼ Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”: *Sandman* / photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas





▲ Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* / photo: Laur Vansevici

interaction, but rather with the spatial compositions on the small stage behind the golden frame. Here, most of the transformations are realised through the manipulation of the actors' bodies using mirrors and their reflections, which become the portraits of the characters' souls in the performance.

The images created by the director always move away from literary works. In *Ubu*, for example, after a short audio introduction of the plot fragments, the audience was presented with a dance-like jumble of different objects. In *Sandman*, there were more actors and live acting, but also transformed bodies. It captured the audience's attention with unrecognisable shapes and movement sequences, luring them into an abstract space where everyone could face their inner world. It needed neither text nor action. In the performance *Moominpappa by the Sea* (*Tėtis ir jūra*, Klaipėda Puppet Theatre, 2017), created for children aged four and up, Tove Jansson's characters are replaced by the abstract, meditative narrative of light and shadow and the story about the mysteries of the sea told by a cello. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is more in line with other works by the director, which focus much more on the plot. However, despite some means to flesh out the plot on stage, this performance, like all other works by Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė, affects the audience mainly through images, atmosphere, and materiality. The director's world of images and visions challenges the audience's mind and emotions, because by forgoing text and often plot, one must rely on personal associations, intuitions, and interpretations. Or one simply surrenders to the hypnotically precise form.

Even if one can identify in Klaipėda a bright mind with a penchant for experimentation, Radvilavičiūtė's works do not eclipse the other interesting creators of the port city and their works. These mainly refer to the graduates of the 2012-2016 course for puppet theatre directors and actors at the University of Klaipėda. After a slight adaptation of the programme prepared by Jūratė Januškevičiūtė, this course was led by a large team of professionals. Among them was the director and student of Jūratė Januškevičiūtė, Karolina Jurkštaitė. Under her direction, the young

puppeteers of Klaipėda created the play *Love, Don't Stop* (*Meile, Don't Stop*, Troupe 495, 2015), which was awarded the most important Lithuanian theatre prize - the Golden Stage Cross. Eight boxes of miniatures on the theme of love were presented one after the other to a single spectator.

In this work, not only the intimate, personal encounter with a differently interpreted theme of love was experimental, but also the different artistic means of expression and materials of each box - from miniature puppets to water or the eyes of the actress staring at the spectator.

Part of this small but particularly creative class of puppeteers has taken up residence at the Klaipėda Puppet Theatre. At present, the works of director Aušra Bakanaitė are probably the most interesting to watch. Although they are not yet complete, they convey Klaipėda's spirit of experimentation by combining different types of performing arts and playing with different materials. In the performance *Malina* (Klaipėda Puppet Theatre, 2017), for example, puppet theatre was combined with movement art, masks, objects, needles, mirrors and even the heart of an animal.

#### EXPERIMENTS IN THE CAPITAL CITY

Involving and encouraging young artists is one of the most important tools to bring about change in a particular field of art. In Vilnius, young puppeteers are very rarely trained. Until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the last time a specially trained puppeteer course joined the team of the Vilnius Theatre "Lėlė" was in 1979. Therefore, the course for actors and puppeteers established at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century raised many hopes. At least some of them were justified: Several actors of the younger generation established themselves at the Vilnius Theatre "Lėlė" and at the Kaunas State Puppet Theatre, where they brought younger blood into the troupes and more life into the creative work of the theatres. Two directors and experimenters also emerged from this course:

Karolina Žernytė and Šarūnas Datenis. Their first experimental works were created outside of puppet theatre, but Šarūnas Datenis eventually managed to form his identity as a director of children's theatre, while Karolina Žernytė established herself in the non-governmental sector as a creator of socially sensitive theatre and educational projects.

With his very first directorial work *Rooster the Money-booster* (*Gaidelis pinigautojas*, 2012), actor Šarūnas Datenis revealed a preference for visual and interactive theatre. Together with the artist Antanas Dubra, the puppeteer dispensed with the usual tools of puppetry and created his performance with live animated images and sound material. The latter was also created by Datenis directly on stage with the help of the audience.



▲ Vilnius Theatre "Lėlė": *Rooster the Money-booster* / photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas

In the director's second work *The Little Match Girl* (*Mergaitė su degtukaiis*, 2014), visibility and images brought to life directly on stage also played an important role. This performance was also a film created right before the eyes of the audience. The audience could either see the performance of three actors or a film projected simultaneously on the backstage. The manipulation of different art forms and interactivity that became evident in the first performances staged by Datėnis remained important for him in his further directing work at the Vilnius "Lėlė" Theatre. Probably the most obvious of these was the 2020 performance of *Cipollino* (*Čipolinas*), which was also adapted for television. The performance not only conveys the plot of Gianni Rodari's fairy tale, but also invites the audience to explore different spaces of the theatre inhabited by fairy tale characters. Datėnis' experiments do not change the entire field of puppet theatre, or at least the face of puppetry in the Vilnius region. However, his work contributes significantly to paving the way for new creative directions and experiments in the public sphere.

Šarūnas Datėnis' fellow student Karolina Žernytė is involved in somewhat more radical creative experiments. In 2010, while completing her studies at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, she began to realise her idea of a then seemingly not very realistic theatre for blind people. Together with her colleagues and in consultation with the community of visually impaired people, the puppeteer created the performance *Tales of a Bee for Six Senses* (*Bitinėlio pasakos šešiems pojūčiams*). Today, more than ten years after the premiere of this performance, Karolina Žernytė has founded the Theatre of the Senses, gathered a small group of like-minded people around her, staged performances in Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia, and developed and implemented educational programmes for children and adults with various learning difficulties. She is still exploring the possibilities of theatre and learning based on all senses except sight. In such a theatre it is impossible to remain just a spectator: The Theatre of the Senses makes both sighted and blind spectators, as well as those who dare to cover their eyes, participants in the performances.

The director's first work *Tales of a Bee for Six Senses* was based on fairy tales of Lithuanians and Eastern, African, and Northern nations. The content was less important in this performance than creating a dramaturgy of the

senses, so quite simple stories were chosen to allow the interplay of different atmospheres and spaces. Sounds and props were experimented with to give the non-sighted participants the impression that they were sailing, walking in the forest, or visiting a temple. The makers of the performance explored how to touch the audience to convey encounters with different creatures or plants whose tastes and smells could be influential. They also tried to find out if it was possible to balance serving several visually impaired spectators with the visual appeal of the performance to spectators watching from outside to ensure the success of the performance.

*Tales of a Bee for Six Senses* paved the way for Žernytė to adapt and improve her method in professional theatres. In 2013, she was invited to create a performance in Moscow, for which she was nominated for the "Golden Mask" award in the Social Experiment category. This success guaranteed new commissions in Russia until the director returned to work in Lithuania in 2015. The works created in Russia, like her first work during her studies, were based on existing texts: Gogol's *May Night* (*Mayskaya noch*, Moscow Puppet Theatre, 2013), the stories *Hedgehog in the Fog* (*Ežiukas ir rūkas*, Naberezhnye Chelny State Puppet Theatre, 2014) and *Caliph Stork* (*Kalifas gandrais*, Irkutsk Regional Puppet Theatre, 2015). The 2015 performance *Stone Water Sting* (*Akmuo vanduo geluonis*) at the Klaipėda Youth Theatre shows that during her work in Russia, the director not only improved the form of her invented theatre, but also thought about the possibilities of expanding the range of stories and means of expression.

*Stone Water Sting* was Žernytė's first work created without the use of a pre-formulated or selected text or story. In collaboration with philosopher Kristupas Sabolius and artist Eglė Lekevičiūtė and in a creative laboratory with actors from the Klaipėda Youth Theatre, Žernytė created an abstract narrative based on Lithuanian mythology. In this performance, speaking and literary narration were almost completely dispensed with. Only a few folk songs were sung, and more space was used to create and perform sounds directly on stage, but not to illustrate the plot but to create a certain atmosphere. Žernytė and her team continue this work. In the performance *Before Seeing the Light* (*Prieš išvystant šviesą*, Theatre of the Senses, 2015), which tells the story of the state before birth, in the ever-changing performance *Tense in Sense* (Theatre of the Senses, 2015)

about childhood memories, in the performance *Primordial (Pirmapradis)*, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 2016), which is based on the theory of Carl Gustav Jung, and in the performance installation *Weight. Pull (Svoris. Trauka)*, Theatre of the Senses, 2017), participants have to listen less to the stories being told and instead create their own actions based on acoustic, tactile or action references.

#### EXPERIMENTS WITH PUPPETS AND OBJECTS BY NON-PUPPETEERS

The interdisciplinary means that transcend the boundaries of puppet theatre, or the interdisciplinarity of drama theatre, are nothing new. Recently, however, inspired by modern technologies and in search of new visual expressions, the creators of puppetry and drama theatre have been converging. Puppets appearing in non-puppet theatre performances are even making it to the major European theatre festivals. And sometimes performances dispense with actors altogether, relying on animated or static spatial objects and their communicative powers.

When thinking about how puppet theatre in Lithuania transcends its boundaries, the creators of the performing arts who became active in the 1980s and 1990s come to mind first and foremost. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jonas Vaitkus (b. 1944), who actively collaborated with set designer Jonas Arčikauskas, established himself as a creator who reflected on the place of the individual in society, often portraying the individual as a victim of circumstances, society, or the gods. To this end, he chose both the dramatic works and the means of expression that emphasised this theme. Therefore, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this director's productions used the acting method of transforming actors into puppets of the director, as well as masks and costumes that expanded or deformed the human body or animated objects that supplemented or destroyed the lives of the psychologically realistic characters. One of the most significant creators of visual theatre in Lithuania, Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952-2018), often gave objects the status of independent characters in his performances. His visual communication, his play with materials and objects sometimes even recalled Vitalijus Mazūra's theatre. But perhaps the most vivid and daring means of puppet theatre were and are used by director Gintaras Varnas

(b. 1961). The beginning of his creative path relates to "Šėpa" - Theatre of Puppetry Satire. Even after he had established himself in the drama theatre, Gintaras Varnas often used puppets in his performances. They were created by Julija Skuratova and appeared in the performances *Doña Rosita the Spinster or The Language of Flowers (Donja Rosita, arba Gėlių kalba)*, Kaunas State Drama Theatre, 2003), *Crime and Punishment (Nusikaltimas ir bausmė)*, Kaunas State Drama Theatre, 2004), *Audience (Publika)*, Utopia Theatre, 2010), *Ghetto (Getas)*, Kaunas National Drama Theatre, 2018).

And perhaps the most impressive Varnas' use of puppets was in the staging of Claudio Monteverdi's operas *The Duel of Tancred and Clorinda (Tankredžio ir Klorindos dvikova)*, 2008) and *The Ballet of the Female Ingrates (Nedėkingųjų šokis)*, project *Baroque Dialogs*, Vilnius – European Cultural Capital, 2008).

Olga Lapina, the director who works on particularly interesting performances for children, has also demonstrated her ability to communicate with objects, atmospheres, and space, sometimes resorting to the means of puppetry. In 2015, Lapina directed the performance *On How Kolka Pankin Flew to Brazil and Marčius Nepankin Did Not Believe in Anything (Apie tai, kaip Kolka Pankinas skrido į Braziliją, o Marčius Nepankinas niekuo netikėjo, arba Ga ra rar)* at the Vilnius Theatre "Lėlė", based on a work by Daniil Charms (design by Julija Skuratova). In 2016, in collaboration with the artist Renata Valčik, the director staged the play *The Long Pause (Ilgoji pertrauka)* at the Keistuolių Theatre and a performance play for adults *Code: HAMLET (Kodas: HAMLET)* at the Russian Drama Theatre. In these two performances, she creatively combined the actors' acting with refined storytelling, using transformable or space- and character-changing objects. Continuing her collaboration with the same artist, Lapina directed the performance installation *About Fears (Apie baimes)*, State Youth Theatre, 2017). Here, the actors' acting was almost completely abandoned, while the audience travelled through skilfully and sensitively specially arranged spaces and communication took place through sound recordings.

Birutė Banevičiūtė, a choreographer who creates for children and babies, approached puppet and object theatre during her artistic research on creating for the youngest audiences at Dansema Dance Theatre. Her performances gradually incorporated things and objects that were not only shown to the young audience, but also served to invite the babies



▲ Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* / photo: Laur Vansevici

to play along. From the visually impressive objects in *Mosaic* (*Mozaika*, Dansema, 2012) that children could not touch, Banevičiūtė's theatre gradually grew into impressive installations in *Meadow* (*Pievelė*, Dansema, 2019), where children could move and explore undisturbed. No wonder Banevičiūtė has recently started creating puppet theatre in collaboration with designer Medilė Šiaulytė: In 2020 she staged the performance *Little Worlds* (*Pasaulėliai*, Kaunas State Puppet Theatre) and in 2022 - *Without End, Without Edge* (*Be galo, be krašto*, Klaipėda Puppet Theatre), revealing the lesser-known combination of puppets and objects theatre and dance in Lithuania and adapting it to the youngest audience.

#### CONSTANTLY RENEWED AND RENEWING

Since its emergence in Lithuania, puppet theatre has been characterised by its willingness to experiment. By rethinking the puppet constructions, the materials used on stage and the relationship between the actor and the object - puppets, masks and props - creative directors and artists give this archaic art form unexpectedly modern nuances. But even as it transcends the boundaries of puppet theatre and helps other performing arts to renew themselves, puppet theatre itself, especially for adults, remains on the fringes of the performing arts in Lithuania. It may seem sad that this extremely interesting type of performing art receives little to no attention from audiences, critics and institutions. On the other hand, such a marginal status opens up a larger space for artistic research with less responsibility towards the audience and the institution funding the production of the performance. And even after a commercial or artistic failure, the proposed new approach to creating puppet and object theatre can still take root. Therefore, these open spaces and creative freedom are still attractive for puppeteers and other performing arts artists.

## Contemporary Scottish Puppetry

## A DESIRE TO RESIST THE OBVIOUS

Gareth K Vile

## INTRODUCTION: SCOTLAND THE WHAT?

The twenty-first century has seen a remarkable and dynamic re-evaluation of Scottish identity: from the foundation of the devolved parliament in 1997, through the referendum for independence in 2016 to the controversial Brexit process, the Scottish people have increasingly discussed the status of nationhood, identity and the relationship between the United Kingdom and Scotland. In 2021, far from being a clearly defined geographical location with an easily recognisable collection of cultural icons, “Scotland” is contested, an evolving series of fluid ideas that contain both historical and contemporary visions. And the performing arts are impacted by, and contribute towards, this ongoing debate.

Puppetry’s role and status has been involved in these debates, but mostly in the broader context of performance: one of the key questions for the arts is the examination of how far Scottish performance has a distinctive dramaturgy either against or within the trends and traditions of the United Kingdom. This conversation, whether explored inside performances or through the various funding and touring opportunities, opens up questions about Scotland’s history with England, its attitudes towards migration and the empire and whether there exists a shared theatre heritage. Scripted theatre, for example, has presented lively discussions of an independent future – most notably during the 2016 referendum – and a desire to include the voices of marginalised communities and individuals. *Feral*, by Tortoise in a Nutshell (created in 2012 and revived in 2021), used puppetry and film to embody a socially aware and political examination of small-town alienation in a manner typical of much contemporary Scottish performance.



▲ Tortoise in a Nutshell Theatre Company: *Feral* / photo: Amy Downes

## SCOTTISH AND BRITISH PERFORMANCE CULTURE

Historically, Scotland shares a great deal with the United Kingdom in terms of theatre traditions. Both have their foundations in the mystery plays of the medieval period – large scale outside productions that retold Christian stories, usually during festive celebrations. Shakespeare commands a powerful place in scripted theatre, with “The Scottish Play” (*Macbeth*) exercising a hold over the public imagination in Scotland and England. Puppetry is not a native tradition, as its earliest recorded appearances were through visiting Italian marionette companies, but the growth of Punch and Judy Shows, based on characters found in the *commedia dell'arte*, as a popular seas-side entertainment for families perhaps dictated the subsequent association of puppetry with children. British television promoted puppetry in the twentieth century: Basil Brush, Sooty and Sweep and, from North America, the Muppets cemented this stereotype and, to this day, many of Scotland’s permanent puppetry companies major in works for young people. In London, the Little Angel Theatre remains an important focus for puppetry aimed at younger audiences. During the late twentieth century, performance from continental Europe influenced

more experimental dramaturgies: Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, which appeared in the UK during 1956, remains a tremendous influence on contemporary direction, and the institution of the Edinburgh International Festival after World War Two has ensured that a constant stream of performers from Europe and beyond have arrived annually in Edinburgh.

English and Scottish theatre also share a division between commercial and funded performance: the former relies on income from audiences, while the latter is often supported by the state or charitable institutions. This divide can be broadly seen as between a populist theatre with familiar dramaturgies and scripts (and appearances from North America musical successes), and a more experimental performance culture. However, there is cross-over between the two domains: The Scottish National Theatre and the National Theatre (London) frequently transfer to commercial theatre venues, while *The Play that Goes Wrong* and *The Woman in Black* are both contemporary examples of plays which originated in the Fringe before becoming national successes.

### SCOTTISH DRAMATURGIES

However, Scottish performance has been additionally influenced by the influx of international work that arrives in Edinburgh during the August festival scene: the International Festival and its Fringe provide opportunities for audiences and creators to experience large- and small-scale productions in a variety of media and genres. While it is easy to over-estimate the importance of these festivals which, in the case of the Fringe, is promoted as a market-place of art, it still offers an opportunity for Scottish companies to reach wider audiences. At the same time, debates around Scottish identity have fed into Scottish performance: a recent revival of *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black Black Oil* re-asserted a native interest in the traditional "ceilidh" play (a cabaret-like format that draws on Scottish folk arts) which examined history through songs and skits, by turns hilarious and tragic, and playwrights like Kieran Hurley have consciously probed contemporary culture to both critique and celebrate Scottishness.

Entering the twenty-first century, the landscape of Scottish theatre is best characterised as a mixture of English and European influences, with a series of producing houses – Glasgow's Tron and Citizens' theatres, Edinburgh's Lyceum and Traverse, and Pitlochry perhaps the most well-known – and hosting commercial venues operating amongst a plethora of special interest organisations, such as Puppet Animation Scotland, and individual theatre companies often specialising in particular genres. Behind this is the funding body Creative Scotland which supports both organisations and theatres, providing money for productions and tours. The diversity of styles and interests prevents the description of a specific Scottish theatrical identity beyond identifying those concerns that exist within public debates around independence, identity and the contours of a twenty-first century cosmopolitan society.

### THE SCOTTISH PUPPET

The history of the puppet theatre in Scotland largely follows the British narrative: suggestions of puppet shows are found in Chaucer and Shakespeare, and diarist Samuel Pepys speaks of an Italian marionette show in Covent Garden in the seventeenth century. An influx of Italian companies in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are gradually replaced by cheaper glove puppet performances, and Punch takes his very British turn having been adapted from the Italian Punchinello. The marionette loses ground in the twentieth century, although "trick puppetry" remains in the popular theatres, but it is the appearance of puppets on children's television during the 1950s, from Andy Pandy to Basil Brush that re-ignites the form, leading to the association with family, rather than adult, entertainment. Punch and Judy shows are a favourite at sea-side resorts – often for nostalgic reasons – while theatre companies incorporate elements of puppetry within scripted performance. Handsprung's *Warhorse* (2007) encouraged a revival of complex, life-sized marionette figures, both inspiring younger companies with the potential of the marionette and training the artists needed to operate their protagonist. Indeed, even the anarchic *Boris and Sergei*, two morally suspect puppets who took the late-night Edinburgh Fringe by storm in the mid-2010s, were operated by former *Warhorse* veterans.

The influence of Punch and Judy and children's television can be seen in the many puppetry companies that exist across Scotland: from Shona Reppe's involvement with lauded children's company Catherine Wheels, through Clydebuilt Puppet Theatre and its programme for schools, to Purves Puppets based at the Biggar Puppet Theatre, there is a healthy and diverse range of performances aimed at younger audiences. There is no single style of puppetry that dominates across the industry, however. Purves Puppets, who have been established for fifty years and manipulate life-size puppets in the bunraku style, have the only purpose-built venue in Scotland, while Clydebuilt offer workshops in shadow and rod puppetry alongside a series of productions that often include explicitly educational elements (their *Dinosaur Detectives* (2021), for examples, features a "fossil table"). Shona Reppe describes her work as "highly visual" and explores object manipulation in highly imaginative and sometimes surreal stories (*Potato Needs a Bath* (2022) places the spotlight on the humblest vegetable), and Edinburgh's Flotsam and Jetsam use multi-sensory props to transcend merely visual storytelling. Meanwhile, in Glasgow, The Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre offers a mission that includes "a regular programme of weekend shows, public workshops and children's birthday parties... cultural animation projects, professional training, international residencies, touring exhibitions, mask work, publications and book sales," with its home venue containing a museum that documents and preserves the legacy of puppetry in Scotland.

However, as the annual rash of headlines for Puppet Animation Scotland's *Manipulate* festival remind the readers of Scotland's newspapers, "puppetry is not just for kids." While many productions include elements of puppetry – Douglas Maxwell's 2015 *Fever Dream: Southside* featured a life-sized pterodactyl – this annual festival of "visual theatre" has championed international and local puppetry since its first edition in 2007. In the absence of either an indigenous or dominant tradition of puppetry, *Manipulate*'s eclectic curation has placed puppetry within an inclusive category of performance that is at once distinctive and experimental.

## VISUAL THEATRE

At first, visual theatre appears to be an empty phrase: after all, most plays, with the exception of those created for the radio, have an immediate visual element. However, visual theatre is now an international category, and is perhaps most tellingly defined by the Jerusalem based CCOT, a visual theatre company.

Visual theatre may be described "as an act the language of which is first and foremost that of visual images. This language is not limited to the creation of a visual image... it is a material, physical language that addresses all the senses and evokes mental images, a language in which every component - space, object, movement, voice or sound - may be equivalent to the actor and the human character... it defines itself as a form of expression that inherently rejects definitions, an area that subverts the delineating of areas" (CCOT).

It is associated with such numerous definitions and modes of performance: performance art, installation, multimedia, puppetry, theatre of objects, dance theatre, theatre of images, total theatre, experimental theatre and alternative theatre.

The development of a post-visual theatre, most notably in Complicite's 2016 *The Encounter*, helps to shed light on this ambivalent definition. Post-visual theatre is often performed in darkness, emphasising listening without simply re-iterating the centrality of the script or text. Visual Theatre, then, becomes, performance which privileges the visual as the bearer of meaning, the foundation of communication between the stage and the audience. It is not simply dance or physical theatre, since it can prioritise light or scenography. As in the case of *Manipulate*'s 2021 commission *Restless Worlds*, it includes installations as well as choreography and marionette puppetry.

In terms of Scotland, the visual theatre aesthetic aligns *Manipulate* with a variety of other festivals. *Dance International Glasgow*, despite its title, shares a similar open aesthetic, and the experimental *Episodes* curated by



▲ Tortoise in a Nutshell Theatre Company, Figurteatret and Nordland with MacRobert Arts Centre: *Ragnarok* / photo: Mihaela Bodlovic

Arika expand the definition of performance to juxtapose music, spoken word and more abstract performance art. In the 2010s, The Arches' *Behaviour* festivals created a platform for genre-busting theatre that was lent a site-specific energy simply through the nature of the cavernous venue. Even if a Scottish performance aesthetic is hard to identify, the desire to resist the obvious, reject the traditional script and incorporate all of theatre's elements into a provocative and innovative performance would all be elements of a tentative definition.

### THE PUPPET AS VISUAL THEATRE

For Puppet Animation Scotland, which was founded in 1984 and presents two festivals every year, the puppet is perhaps more central to its definition of visual theatre. While the Puppet Animation festival, which presents work in multiple venues across Scotland, leans towards work for young people, *Manipulate* is far more eclectic, but both festivals share PAS' celebration of innovation and experimentation.

*Manipulate* has consistently introduced international companies of the highest quality to Scottish audiences. Regular visitors include Editta Braun from Austria, who uses the body in a contorted choreography to blur the lines between the human and the alien, Gisele Vienne, Scottish multi-media explorers Tortoise in a Nutshell, and Belgian Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté. Furthermore, its *Snapshots* programme has given space to developing Scottish-based artists, with a selection of works-in-progress. There is undeniably a vision for visual theatre, but given the organisations roots in puppetry, much of the work speaks to the aesthetics of object manipulation.

The commonality between many of the productions staged at *Manipulate* is a challenge to the notion of the human body on stage. It becomes the focus of attention and the carrier of meaning, but it is also pushed beyond its familiar boundaries. Choreography is less about the reiteration of ballet form and beauty, or even contemporary dance's fascination with new movement vocabularies, than chasing towards the mutability of inanimate

objects. Heinrich von Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre* (H. Kleist, 2009) speculates on the innate gracefulness of the puppet, and the relative failure of the human body against its artificial rival: much of *Manipulate's* programme seems to be experiments in expanding this singular vision. The uncanny nature of the puppet is translated onto the human body, and the human actor becomes another object to be manipulated. Anthropological studies of puppetry's origins suggest a primitive attempt to connect the animate and the inanimate object: visual theatre becomes a modern response to this ancient and spiritual project. By talking the puppet as the starting point for a visual theatre programme, questions about agency, artistry and intention become embedded in the festival's identity.

### SCOTTISH PUPPET COMPANIES

It is unsurprising that three of the most prominent dedicated puppetry companies, Vox Motus, Vision Mechanics and Tortoise in a Nutshell, have been regular performers at *Manipulate*: but they also share something of this particular visual theatre aesthetic. None of them can simply be limited to puppetry, since they all have a lively attitude towards juxtaposing genres, finding the appropriate form for their varied narratives.

Vox Motus were founded by Jamie Harrison and Candice Edmunds, and from their first production *Slick* have integrated object manipulation, magic and powerful scenography into a theatre that is restless, provocative and mysterious. *Slick* (2008) encased actors into puppetry suits for a surreal comedic effect: *Dragon* (2015) brought together the National Theatre of Scotland and The Tianjin Children's Arts Theatre, China in an almost wordless but emotional study of childhood alienation. *Dragon* demonstrated a theatrical intensity in the Chinese dragons more commonly seen in processions, while stage magic is a feature in many of their productions, setting manipulation of objects at the centre of their shifting dramaturgies. Harrison and Edmunds often allow a sharp wit to drive their shows, but the serious themes are emphasised by their disorientating use of the animate. Even their large Edinburgh Festival entry *Flight* (2017) created an entire story from models and dioramas, rotating frame by frame, to reveal the horrors in the journey of refugees.



▲ Tortoise in a Nutshell Theatre Company: *The Last Miner* / photo: Amy Downes

Tortoise in a Nutshell are a younger company, and have been regular performers at the Edinburgh Fringe and *Manipulate*. Their recent revival of *Feral* embodies many of their qualities: an interest in complex social narratives that speak of marginalised voices; a combination of visual forms, including small puppets, live animation and large video projections; a restless energy that explores the interaction between personal experience and the community. From their first production, *The Last Miner* (2010) to their recent *Ragnorok* (2019), the company have never been afraid to grapple with huge themes and experimental approaches and their self-description as “visual theatre” does express something of their imaginative and challenging aesthetic.

Symon Macintyre and Kim Bergsagel founded Vision Mechanics in 1995 and while their current project *Storm*, a huge marionette who is touring across Scotland, explicitly puppet-based, they are another example of a



▲ Vision Mechanics: *Storm* / photo: Neil Hanna

Scottish company which can range across genres. In terms of content, they are often concerned with environmental issues, with site-specific productions exploring historical acts of resistance – such as 2014’s *Embrace* which celebrated an Indian movement to protect forestry – alongside the spectacular massive puppets which roam free of traditional theatrical venues. 2013’s *Giants in the Forest* set up a series of heads in various locations across the country, a statement of how nature and art can co-exist, with art sneaking into places of natural beauty and reframing even a casual stroll through the woods.

These three companies are founded in puppetry, but refuse to be held to a single style, or vision: each have their own agenda, and express different ways of thinking about the media through which they manifest their striking productions. Aristotle defended performance as a more philosophical way of thinking about existence than history, and all of these companies recognise visual theatre’s propensity to negotiate complicated ideas, and give physicality to abstract and metaphysical concepts.

There are puppetry companies that exist outside of this serious – if playful – and rigorous aesthetic. The Scottish Falsetto Sock Puppet Theatre, who have been producing and touring since 2005, create performances which are a unique combination of satire, song, puppetry and adult humour, yet somehow manage to represent a wider Scottish sensibility. Anarchic and playful, their annual visits to the Edinburgh Fringe have seen producer Kev F Sutherland tackle superheroes, Shakespeare’s sonnets, Star Wars and Westerns, garnering a dedicated following and winning multiple awards, including the “Best Joke of the Fringe” in 2018. Sutherland’s approach is raw and immediate: two sock puppets in a face-paced dialogue roam around diverse topics, wryly exploding the myth that puppetry is for children while delighting in a child-like sense of fun and chaos. Despite the increasingly commercialised atmosphere of the Edinburgh Fringe, the Falsetto Sock Puppet Theatre recall an earlier, more dynamic Fringe spirit of late-night show and alternative dramaturgies. They may use the familiar puppetry booth, but the puppets’ attitude echoes the stand-up comedian as much as Mr Punch.

## CONCLUSIONS

There are, of course, many problems with this survey of Scottish contemporary puppetry. Above all, the bias of the author towards activities in the central belt of the country – effectively the line from Glasgow in the west and Edinburgh in the east – and for work made for adult audiences obscures the hard work and quality of companies outside of this remit. It also ignores that much of the performance seen within Scotland comes from outside of the country, and the influence of European performance is only recognised within the work of *Manipulate* or the selected productions.

However, a tentative conclusion is possible, if only as a foundation for further discussion. Scottish puppetry is often politically engaged, and forms part of the nation's increasing interest in exploring its own identity: the arts are an important facet of public discourse at a moment when Scottishness is in a state of flux. The lack of a particular puppetry tradition, an indigenous and distinctive style, means that an eclectic dramaturgy draws on multiple traditions, whether bunraku, marionette or glove. The lack of boundaries, or the weight of the past, or even a cohort of dedicated critics for the medium ensures that artists are willing to play, collate and experiment, as if in the early days of a new direction.

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS  
ON PUPPET THEATRE  
CRITICISM

Introduction to Contemporary Puppet Theatre Criticism

ABOUT THEATRE CRITICISM

Lucija Periš

GENRE DEFINITION

Theatre review is a text which describes, analyzes and evaluates all elements of a theatre performance, published in print or electronic media. The peculiarity of theatre criticism in comparison with other types of art criticism stems from the specificity of theatre arts. The value of a work of art which is tangible and thus immortalized (such as a literary work, a film, or a painting) may not be acknowledged at the time it is created, but a subsequent period may recognize its worth and importance. It is different with theatre. The value of a theatre performance is judged by the audience immediately after the performance is over, and the spokesperson of the audience is a theatre critic. This genre has a double significance: primarily current and informative one, since a theatre review emerges shortly after the play is performed and has the role of an informative guide for the potential audience who intends to see the performance, but it also has a long-term value as a historical document. Since theatre art differs from other arts in the sense that it is ephemeral, theatre reviews represent an important material for documenting and reconstructing the theatrical life of a certain period. Despite the fact that theatre has been written about since its inception, dating back to ancient Greece, theatre criticism is a relatively young genre since its existence required the systematization of daily newspapers in which it would be published. Although the beginnings of theatre criticism date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and are associated with the emergence of the daily press, this genre has remained insufficiently explored to this day. In an attempt to systematize the analysis of the

genre, it is necessary to answer the following questions: What are the characteristics of this genre?, Who writes theatre reviews? and Where are theatre reviews published?. This chapter will provide a brief overview of this genre in an effort to provide answers to the above questions.

### GENRE FEATURES

Theatre criticism is an interdisciplinary genre studied by the science of art (theatrology and dramatology), philology (theory and history of literature) as well as information and communication sciences (journalism). Theatrology is the study of theatre arts and all phenomena related to it, including theatre criticism. A theatre critic needs to have basic theoretical knowledge of theatrology and master theatrical vocabulary in order to write a good theatre review. Since theatre criticism in terms of drama theatre evaluates the text of the play as one of the elements of a theatre performance, this genre also belongs to the field of literary theory. In order to write a successful drama theatre review, "it is necessary to know how to skillfully balance between the analysis of a literary text on the one hand, and some basic directing, dramaturgical principles and acting on the other" (Žigo, 2015: 103). Given that one of the prerequisites for writing a theatre review is the existence of mass media in which it will be published, this genre also falls within the field of communication studies which explores various forms of communication such as mass communication through print, Internet, television, radio, social media, etc. At the same time, writing theatre reviews is closely related to the journalistic profession, as theatre critics are often journalists who write for the culture section of newspapers.

In accordance with the above, theatre review is created as a mixture of scientific and journalistic writing style. Scientific discourse and theatrical knowledge help the critic in analyzing the elements which constitute a theatre performance (the play, directing, dramatization, set design, costume design, acting, stage music, lighting, stage movement, speech and voice), while the journalistic approach helps him systematize and complete information by responding to questions of who, what, where, when, why

and how. The demands of the contemporary media have led to changes in the genre, thus in contemporary theatre criticism the emphasis is partly shifted from the analytical to the entertainment function, resulting in theatre criticism losing on expertise. "The application of market principles in the media treatment of culture, giving priority to sensation and gossip at the expense of problematizing the artistic features of the work and the pressure for more fun and attractive writing about theatre have affected theatre criticism, hence it is not an exaggeration to talk about the increasingly pronounced phenomenon of reducing criticism to the level of show business or scandal" (Petranović, 2008: 153).

The basic tasks of this genre are mediation between the theatre performance and the audience and recording the theatrical repertoire of a period on the basis of which the history of theatre will be written. Theatrologist Richard H. Palmer distinguishes eight functions of a theatre review: it is a consumer guide, it documents an artistic event, evaluates the success of a performance, provides commentary on performance, educates audience, entertains readers, advises artists and producers, and promotes theatre (Palmer, 1988: 5). This means that the theatre critic, with his evaluation of the performance, helps the consumer decide if the performance suits his taste and whether he should spend his money to watch it. If the critic has theoretical knowledge of theatre arts, knows the laws of the genre and skillfully expresses herself or himself, the review can have an educational role for a less experienced audience, but also for those familiar with theatre arts. The critic's clear articulation of views and reasoned evaluation of theatre performance will enable the audience who watched the performance to compare their own opinion with the critic's, which means that theatre review stimulates the exchange of views between the critic and a viewer after watching a theatre performance. This genre is equally helpful for all theatre practitioners involved in setting up a show as a guidance for future endeavors because it names the successful aspects of the performance, but also those which should be improved. In addition to trying to educate the audience, the critic must not forget the entertainment function of the genre to keep the reader's interest in going to the theatre and reading reviews. Finally, a theatre review has a greater role than to mediate between the critic and the consumer of theatre arts.

It documents theatre events, which is useful not only for the part of the audience who has not had the opportunity to see the performance, but also for theatre historians for whom reviews can serve as material for writing theatre history. This genre advocates greater support for theatre and promotes the importance of theatre arts, and since it serves as a guide for audience, artists, and theatre, even a negative or a poorly written review is more useful than not writing theatre reviews at all.

### THEATRE CRITICS

One of the peculiarities of a theatre performance in comparison with other arts is that its success depends on the direct reaction of the recipient, namely, the audience. The most influential among them is the theatre critic, who watches, analyzes and evaluates a theatre performance for the needs of print or electronic media and who builds his own judgment based on theatrical experience. A theatre critic does not merely describe what happened on stage, her or his task is to evaluate the performance based on the pre-established criteria, and it is precisely the element of evaluation which distinguishes a review from a scientific paper, a newspaper article or a literary text. A theatre critic must have a developed style of writing to connect the numerous elements of the performance discussed in the review into a meaningful whole. Most theatre critics develop a recognizable writing style over time, hence after reading the review, the reader can identify who the author is without knowing it in advance.

Although it is a single profession, it is impossible to unite theatre critics under one definition, since the organization of theatre differs around the world, which is why the tasks of theatre critics also vary. The United States of America and Europe stand out as the dominant parts of the world in writing theatre reviews, but the way this genre works in America and Europe is significantly different. The differences in the European and American way of writing theatre reviews stem from the differences in the organization of theatre on these two continents. European theatre is largely non-profit and repertory, and due to the fact that the repertoire is established before the start of the season, theatre criticism does not

have a decisive influence on the repertoire as it does in American theatre.\* On the other hand, American theatre is for-profit and commercial, which means that the theatre piece plays as long as it is attended and making profit, which is greatly influenced by theatre criticism. If a theatre critic rates a particular performance as bad, the attendance will be lower, it will be removed from the repertoire. Negative theatre review in America therefore does not only affect the popularity of a performance, it often means that everyone involved in the production of a theatre performance loses their gig. In short, the American critic has the power to “destroy”, but also to “make” a theatre performance.

One of the questions which appears in texts on theatre criticism is the (im)possibility of the critic’s objectivity. Due to various external factors influencing the writing of theatre reviews, it is not possible to write a completely objective review. Some of the reasons which contribute to the subjectivity of the genre are the ideology and political orientation of the media, space restrictions imposed by certain media, limited time of writing, the critic’s personal artistic taste, a pre-formed attitude about the performer, but also the critic’s mood. Although theatre criticism is a genre with established conventions and precisely prescribed rules of writing, differences between theatre critics exist. Croatian director Georgij Paro divides theatre critics into two groups according to the criterion of objectivity. Paro argues that “some judge, others evaluate; some patronize, others analyze; some start from themselves, others from the performance. *The former* act as possessors of the universal (not only theatrical) truth, *the latter* seek to find and express this presumed truth by the criterion of credibility and theatrical persuasiveness” (Paro, 2010: 4).

The scientific literature dealing with the analysis of theatre critics lists poor literacy and insufficient education as flaws of the profession, hence it is often seen that a theatre critic has not mastered theatrical terminology and is not familiar with the conventions of this genre. The reason for this is that there is still no appropriate formal education for theatre critics,

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\* In the context of this chapter, the term American theatre is used for commercial (for-profit) Broadway theatre, although American theatre is a broader term than Broadway and includes other types of theatre organizations.

especially when it comes to higher education. In most countries there is no study programme dedicated exclusively to theatre criticism, but this discipline is only briefly touched upon in study programmes in the field of theatrology or in elective courses in other study programmes in the humanities. Manuals on writing theatre criticism written by experienced critics help in further education, and this problem is also solved by seminars and workshops for the training of young theatre critics organized by theatres, academies, projects, etc.

### PUBLISHING THEATRE REVIEWS

The emergence of theatre criticism is closely linked to the development of media which sought to reach the audience. Since it was intended for the public as an informative guide to the theatre performance, this genre was dependent on a medium which would be available to the general public, and these were newspapers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Theatre reviews were first published in daily newspapers, weekly publications and journals, and digitalization led to the electronic media (radio, television, Internet) suppressing print media. Croatian theatrologist Alen Biskupović classifies theatre critics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century according to the type of media in which they publish and therefore distinguishes between critics who write for print media, digital critics and hybrid critics who publish in both print and electronic media (Biskupović, 2019: 587). We can add critics who publish their reviews in the form of audio or video recordings to his classification. Writing theatre reviews differs depending on the medium, since each medium is intended for different target audience and therefore has specific requirements.

Written theatre reviews are published in three types of print media: daily newspapers, weeklies and journals in the field of art, science and culture which cover the ongoing cultural events. Nowadays, newspaper theatre critics are most often part-time employees of the newspapers they write for, and their writing is determined by the editorial policy of the publication. Despite numerous advantages of writing newspaper theatre criticism, the scientific literature lists the spatial limitation of the medium

in which it is published as one of the biggest disadvantages of this type of criticism, which is why it is not uncommon for a newspaper theatre critic to focus on presenting the most important information about the performance. "Newspaper criticism is limited to a very small number of lines. Given the limited space, as well as the demand for informativeness which inevitably faces the newspaper theatre critic, the critic must focus on presenting the most important, but also the most interesting aspects of the performance to the viewer" (Petranović, 2008: 153). Theatre critics who publish in weeklies and professional journals also face the challenges of space limitation, although the quality of theatre reviews published in these publications often differs from newspaper reviews, as they are most often written by theatrologists. Theatre critics of weeklies and journals are fully acquainted with the conventions of the genre and have knowledge in the field of theatrology. Therefore, their target audience differs from the audience who reads newspaper criticism and these texts are most often intended for other members of the academic community and professional theatre critics.

Advances in technology have marked a turning point in the development of the genre by offering new opportunities of publishing theatre reviews in places such as web portals, websites dedicated to theatre arts, social networks, etc. Due to the large and often uncontrolled amount of theatre reviews published in this type of media, digital theatre criticism is characterized by diversity of authors and writing styles. A comparative analysis of theatre criticism in print and electronic media in the European context shows that electronic media have become important sources of theatre reviews. In addition to the fact that web portals provide a simpler and faster way to publish reviews and are accessible to a larger number of readers than print media, the availability of space for evaluating the performance also contributes to their popularity, since electronic media do not limit the length of reviews like print media. Finally, there are critics who have accepted the benefits of print and electronic media and have written theatre reviews for the needs of both.

Diagnosis of Puppet Theatre Criticism in Slovenia

## HOW TO REACH A UTOPIAN TOMORROW?

Benjamin Zajc

“The critic is a part of the whole. It does not matter whether he writes quickly or slowly, short or long; it is important whether he has a certain idea of what theatre in his community should be like and whether he is revisiting this idea at every theatrical event. However, how many critics view their work in such manner?”

Peter Brook (1971: 37)

Critical writing about the performing arts in Slovenia is in a stage of a certain “crisis” stemming from the general crisis of print media over the last decade. Criticism is not commercially interesting, and therefore it is not a prominent part of the strategy of retaining the remaining readers of print newspapers. In order to become one, it must be reduced to a level of banality and provocativeness, while trying to keep (or revive) its role so far on free online platforms, where it is not limited by the number of characters and public opinion but is financially under-supported.

If the lack of criticism is something that Slovenian drama theatre has encountered in this millennium, for puppet art it is a constant, a kind of *status quo* that turns into a real little celebration on the occasion of the publication of a few critiques in the print media. Puppet shows in Slovenia are generally not of interest to critics, which could be linked to the fact that puppets are still considered a part of children’s extracurricular program, which in general does not require critical evaluation in the cultural sections of newspapers. However, puppetry is an art and wants

to be viewed as such. And although, of course, quality productions are key to this, it is also important to be aware of the fact that critical and theoretical texts place the work in the context of art and culture. The same goes for artists and theatre companies since critical reviews earn them additional (extremely important) points when gaining the status of independent cultural workers and when applying for competitions. As puppet theatre in the world of theatrical criticism has long been pushed aside, puppet makers have also fallen to a hierarchical (perhaps financially) lower stairwell than their theatrical counterparts in drama. In addition to these practical reasons, questioning artistic condition adapted by criticism is also important. The eye of an independent authority is crucial in the further development of work; without it the artist can too quickly close himself in a comfort zone, in which he can no longer hear or see his own mistakes or achievements.

Equal representation of criticism of puppet production would be a good first step towards a more appropriate institutional recognition of puppetry, since it is also an academically relatively underexplored field. This is a vicious circle of so-called *gatekeeping*, which prevents this type of art from accumulating the corresponding symbolic capital. Puppetry is thus patronizingly pushed to the margin of research and critical interests, and the element of understatement is twofold: first, it reduces puppetry to “children’s”, and secondly, it reduces “children’s” to “trivial”. Therefore, it is not surprising that much of the post-production of puppet theatre work in Slovenia is dedicated to winning over media reactions, critics and reflections. Although in many ways it shares similar advantages and problems as criticism of other branches of performing arts, it can still be said that this subtype of Slovenian criticism is still relatively young. Furthermore, only modern Slovenian puppetry saw the importance of criticism and began to deal more intensively with its survival.

In recent years, therefore, in addition to the megalomaniacal development of adult puppetry, critical writing about contemporary puppet art has been developed. In the last ten years, critical texts about puppetry have appeared several times in key daily newspapers, such as “Dnevnik” and

“Delo”, and the plays have occasionally been written about in the weekly magazine “Mladina”, but still not nearly as much as about dramatic art. This is logical, though, given that Slovenia has more than a few institutional drama theatres (which is not bad) and only two puppet theatres: the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre (Lutkovno gledališče Ljubljana) and the Maribor Puppet Theatre (Lutkovno gledališče Maribor).<sup>\*</sup> Thus, puppet shows are often held with the audience (who do not attend puppetry but they do other theaters) not even knowing about them. The real promotion, and consequently the response to the performances, occurs only in the case of awards from various domestic and international festivals, which is an interesting statistical paradox: Slovenian puppet shows visit more cities and collect more awards than dramatic ones, but in the domestic public eye they are less well known and less (quantitatively) critically valued.

As a result, both puppet institutions have started intensively educating new generations of puppet theatre critics over the past decade.<sup>\*\*</sup> As part of the Biennale of Puppet Artists of Slovenia, the Maribor Puppet Theatre has begun performing a puppet theatre criticism seminar, where young participants write about festival performances. In 2016, the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre launched a seminar named *Primary School of Criticism*, where young critics gained knowledge of puppetry and wrote about Slovenian puppetry plays. In 2020, with the help of Creative Europe funds, the seminar has grown into an international *Critical Platform for Contemporary Puppetry*, giving Slovenian puppetry its first platform dedicated exclusively to this branch of art. Slovenian Theatre Institute launched the portal “Kritika” in 2021, which also regularly writes about puppetry production. The status of criticism of puppet plays has improved significantly in recent years, but at the same time it has almost completely disappeared from the

\* For Maribor’s puppet theatre, reviews are regularly published by Maribor’s newspaper “Večer”, so the theatre therefore receives at least one review of each of its plays. Ljubljana Puppet Theatre receives criticism in renowned Slovenian newspapers, but they are episodic in nature, and therefore it often happens that a play does not receive any reaction.

\*\* In this review, it is necessary to constantly be aware of the bizarreness of the fact that the autonomous profession of criticism is nurtured by the criticized institutions themselves, which perhaps exposes the extent of the crisis of criticism in Slovenia the most.



Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Darkroom* / photo: Jaka Varmuž ▲

print media (which is especially true for noninstitutional puppet groups, but also for the production of the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre). In desire for a broader reaction of the critics, Slovenian puppetry has somehow self-sufficiently created room for criticism, but in doing so, ironically, it isolated itself to an even greater extent from other types of theatre.

As online portals about theatre critique are a relatively new phenomenon in Slovenia, print media is still considered the most credible general informative media. Publishing a critique in a print medium (or its online version) provides the critic an automatic authority that arises from the very fact that the audience still trusts (and pays) a particular source of information. By contrast, online posting is managed by users who can post their personal opinion anywhere, anytime. Interactive online platforms, such as social networks, forums and other platforms, strongly encourage user interaction and provide an alternative source of information. In such manner, both the critic and his readers contribute to the formation of a kind of collaborative authority. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly difficult to assess the credibility of the critic's review.

But still... the goal has somehow been achieved. Puppetry is receiving increased internet criticism, reflection and analysis, many of which are of exceptional quality. However, the system of educating young critics of puppet plays is still in its infancy. This is a problem that affects the entire Slovenian culture of criticism. As it ceased to be an independent vocation, so did experts who would deal exclusively with criticism (of puppetry). That is why criticism is often a side vocation that represents only an additional income, a hobby... This is especially true for online media, which often cannot afford high fees, so fees remain at a symbolic level (so-called work for references).

Criticism and reviews therefore often (but not always) remain at the level of laudation or (too) harsh criticism, superficial interpretations and hasty conclusions. If we take criticism as an additional perspective of a work of art that increases its reach and understanding, then we could say that Slovenian criticism somehow avoids this and remains at the level of

analytical judgement. Which is not necessarily bad in itself. However, for criticism of puppetry it has shown to be an issue. Due to the mentioned lack of education in the field of criticism of puppetry, as well as puppetry in general, and due to the lack of professional critics of puppetry (who are basically non-existing), such criticisms is hardly to become a real measure of artistic success or failure, since their authors do not have knowledge about the medium they watch. What is noticeable in Slovenian criticism of puppetry is the general trend of writing the critique about puppetry production from a perspective of writing about drama, which often neglects the puppet itself, i.e., the form of expression. When it comes to (puppet) theatre for children and young adults, all this is furthermore affected by incomprehension, i.e., not taking the target audience into account.

Quality and relevant critiques about puppetry in Slovenia are written mainly by authors who have had any sort of contact with the puppet as a form of expression, and thus understand the manner in which it operates. These are critics who know how to look beyond the frame set by drama and have sovereignty over dramaturgy of the visual, the material and the subject. Their pool of references often encompasses different fields of art which then they know how to set in the field of puppetry (that in its modern development certainly represents one of the most interdisciplinary art fields). This outlines perhaps the best diagnosis of the state of puppet theatre criticism in Slovenia. Since this profession has not been nurtured, there is a large shortage of critics, therefore, the most important is the education of such personnel. Thus, we encounter another paradox, which is the paradox of motivation: why should anyone be willing to dedicate their career to criticism if this calling does not offer a particular professional perspective? Furthermore, even if someone does specialize in theatrical criticism, then why should they further specialize in writing puppet theatre criticism?

Even though the current state of (puppet theatre) criticism looks rather bleak, it seems to be heading in the right direction. Assuming that print media will be completely suppressed by online media in the near future,

Slovenian criticism will have a solid foundation on which it will be able to further build (this is an interesting phenomenon that will define contemporary theatrical media, but in doing so it will have to be closely monitored whether its (objective) expertise will suffer at the expense of “democratization” of criticism). If puppet institutions continue to educate young authors, soon they will become sovereign critics with a strong vision of theatre of their own, who will be able to place Slovenian productions in a broader context. These critics will then be able to be reference mentors to new generations, thus building a kind of “guild” of puppet theatre critics. But for this idea to work, it is necessary that as a society (or at least subculture that accompanies criticism) we remove print media from the pedestals of journalism and begin to devote ourselves intensively to online platforms. If criticism is to survive at all, the text on a credible internet portal will have to start carrying the same weight as criticism in the newspapers. The next phase would then be a utopian thought/wish for the writer of criticism to return to the Slovenian scene as an empowered profession that would allow financial and intellectual survival.

On Puppet Theatre Criticism in Serbia

## PAST, PRESENT, MAYBE FUTURE

Ljiljana Dinić

### PAST

One cannot say that puppetry in Serbia has an extremely long tradition. Traces of this art are present in the *vertep* – a play dedicated to the birth of Jesus Christ performed during the Christmas holidays – which appeared in Serbia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was also under the influence of guest street entertainers, who usually performed at fairs, that local performers adopted the puppet as a means of expression, accepting the form and the character of those performances.

The beginnings of the institutionalized puppet theatre in our country are therefore associated with the emergence of the Sokol Puppet Theatre. “Sokolska prosveta,” the newsletter of the Federal Education Board of the Sokol Movement of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, published a text entitled *Puppet Theatre and Its Organization in the Sokol Societies (Pozorište lutaka i njegova organizacija u Sokolskim društvima)* in the February 1932 issue by which it introduced a permanent column of the same name, which testifies to the more serious involvement of the Sokol Movement in introducing puppet theatre in their own educational activities. The March-April 1933 double issue of this newsletter states: “...the main concern of the SPO (Federal Education Board) in the last year was to develop interest and feeling for puppetry in our Sokol movement as much as possible and to promote the idea of founding a puppet theatre within Sokol units, especially Sokol societies in bigger towns” (Sokolska prosveta, 1933b).

The first federal course on puppetry was held in Ljubljana in July 1932 and it brought together talented individuals who upon returning from the course organized puppet theatre groups in their towns. One of the course participants was Lazar Dragić from Novi Sad who immediately started to work on the first puppet show with his colleagues.

Puppets for the play *Prince from the Underground* (*Kraljević iz podzemlja*) were made during the course in Ljubljana as evidenced by the sketches published in "Sokolska prosveta". This play was staged in the old Sokolana on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1933, which is marked as the first premiere of the Puppet Theatre of the Novi Sad Sokol Society.

On the occasion of the premiere a text was published in "Sokolska prosveta," which is also the first known review of a puppet theatre performance in Serbia. The author of the text, S. R., states, among other things, that the performance "succeeded well. Puppet animation, their costumes, lighting effects as well as the decorum (made by Professor Kostić) were impeccable, while the acting of diligent and wilful members (both male and female) could suffer some criticism – so inevitable whenever it comes to amateurs – especially regarding their somewhat clumsy diction. However, judging by the conscientiousness which was invested and shown in other elements of the performance, there is hope that this shortcoming will be also corrected" (Sokolska prosveta, 1933a).

After the end of the World War II the social-historical circumstances had changed. There was no room for Sokol Puppet Theatre in the new ruling ideology which treated the puppet theatre as an educational institution. The repertoire of puppet theatres and informative announcements of premieres appeared in daily newspapers. It is also possible to come across short-format reports in which authors usually visit one of the rehearsals, announce the premiere, praise the valuable work of the ensemble and point out children's commitment to this type of educational entertainment. Reviews of given performances are extremely rare. They deal in the first place, as a rule, with the message of the performance, with the idea that children should adopt after watching the show. Then they briefly retell the plot, they mention the animation and acting skills of the ensemble and some scenographic and technical solutions.

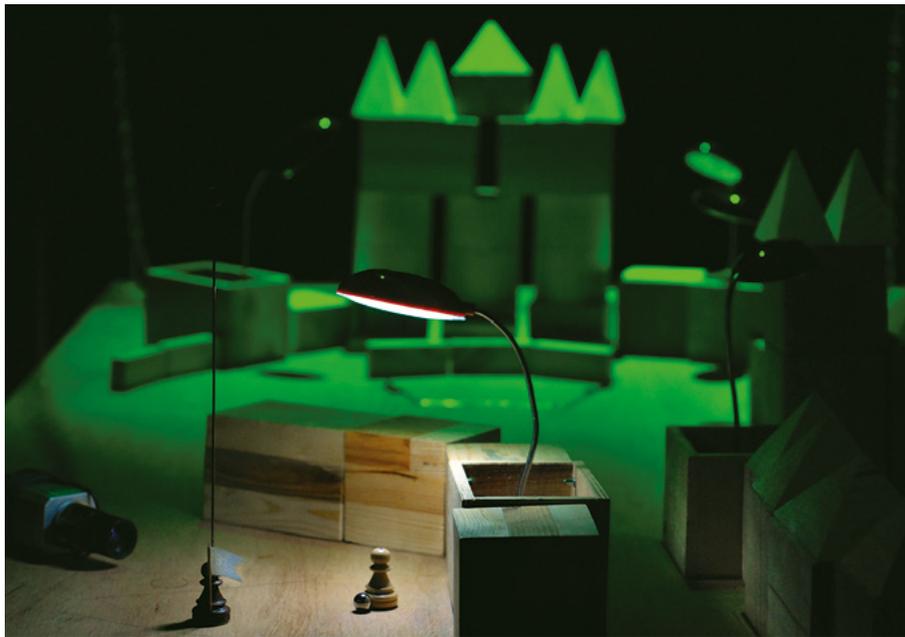
On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1960 "Dnevnik" from Novi Sad published one of such reviews together with a photograph from the performance within the section "Kulturna hronika". The review was about the performance *The Story of the Brave Rooster* (*Priča o hrabrom petliću*) by the Puppet Theatre in Novi Sad. After providing the basic information on the performance, the author M. K. writes that the message of the performance is "the victory of nobility over malice, the victory of bravery and courage over indecisiveness and pessimism." The author focuses further on the content of the text by the author Marija Kulundžić shaped by "easy and fluent verses, many of which are immediately memorised due to their simplicity" and which are "dramaturgically cleverly composed." The author mentions the performance at the very end of his review and he writes the following: "Under the direction of Zora Tanurdžić-Bokšan the acting ensemble of the Puppet Theatre was equally skilful in reciting verses as well as in puppet animation. The rooster – protagonist of this scenic story was especially skilfully animated. The decorum created by Mile Leskovac had two extraordinary features: it was done flawlessly in terms of colours and very picturesque" (Dnevnik, 1960).

The following decades did not bring many changes. Due to the fact that the status and treatment of puppet theatre on the country's cultural map did not change much, critical evaluation retained its form from earlier times. Occasional steps forward on the Serbian puppet theatre scene towards a pure artistic expression attracted the attention of "serious" critics, even major festivals, but those were only transient phenomena.

Since the late 1970s puppet theatre productions that could be characterized as inventive, exploratory and aesthetically pleasing artistic experiences have become somewhat more common. Critical texts on such performances were still very rare and not significantly different from the early ones. However, directors' new approaches occasionally managed to attract attention and gain equal treatment as dramatic theatre forms. Of course, if off-stage moments, such as the sympathy of critics for the institution or the director, were met as well. Thus, in 2009 one of the most distinguished Serbian contemporary theatre critics, Ivan Medenica, gave his impression of a puppet show for the weekly "Vreme" within the section entitled "Kultura" in which we regularly read reviews of important theatre events.

It is about the performance *The Paul Street Boys* (*Dečaci Pavlove ulice*) by Malo pozorište directed by Nikola Zavišić. We present here a part of this text:

“(...) Aside from not having a classical dramatization, the play does not have a classical approach to staging either: the texts are recorded, they are not spoken by professional actors, but by these kids from Vračar, and what unfolds in front of us as a ‘stage action’ is a video transmission of puppet animation from a table-stage which, in fact, represents a model of the city. In other words, characters and situations from the book are shown with chess pieces which, in the stylized model of the city, are animated by three puppeteers and this action is projected on the screen in front of us. As it has been already highlighted, this action is interrupted and duplicated by pre-recorded comments of our ‘street kids’ on the general themes of growing up, socialization or morality, which Molnar’s work raises (...)” (Medenica, 2009).



▲ Little Theatre Duško Radović: *The Paul Street Boys* / photo: Đorđe Tomić

## THE PRESENT WITH A VIEW OF THE FUTURE

In 1991, Dr. Božidar Kovaček began his presentation on the history of theatre criticism in Serbia with the words: “There are two prerequisites for the appearance of theatre criticism or news about theatre performances; that there are performances and that there are intermediaries who would convey the critical world to the audience, i.e. that there are news organs...” (Kovaček, 1992: 12).

Within at least seven theatres in Serbia that nurture exclusively or partially puppet theatre repertoire seven puppet theatre premieres take place per year, which fulfils the first prerequisite. With the founding of the magazine for puppetry art “Niti” in 2014, by the Theater Museum of Vojvodina, Serbian puppetry got its *news organ*.

Bearing in mind the fluid boundaries of genres within the framework of contemporary theater and a broad definition of what we call puppetry today, theatrical performances that experiment with different means and puppetry elements also find their place in “Niti”.

It turns out that, despite meeting the two mentioned prerequisites, something else is missing. It is obvious that there is a lack of those who would think critically about puppetry. It seems that the reasons for something like this should be sought in the absence of an educational institution in the area of puppet theatre that would better position the art itself, that would raise it to the academic level and create a *critical mass* interested and educated for critical viewing and evaluation.

In the absence of those who would be recognized as theatre critics related to puppet theatre, the editors of the magazine “Niti” reach out to lovers of this type of theatre who are also ready to write about it. Thus, the authors of texts are often actors, theatre directors, dramaturges, puppet makers and only rare theatre critics who are ready to write about puppets as well.

Apart from being the *news organ*, the magazine “Niti” also tries to animate theatre critics to dedicate themselves to puppets. It is not an easy task at all because theatre critics have a hard time engaging in such a thing

under the pretext of lack of competence. The success of this mission is also confirmed by the most prestigious Serbian award for theatre criticism in 2020 - Sterija Prize for Criticism "Miodrag Kujundžić", which went to theatre critic Slobodan Savić for the text *Personal Responsibility and Collective Ruin (Lična odgovornost i kolektivna propast)* published in "Niti," and written on the occasion of the play *Gustav is to Blame for Everything (Gustav je kriv za sve)* directed by Kokan Mladenović. This certainly seems to be an announcement of a better time for the critical evaluation of the puppet theatre in Serbia.

#### FROM A PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW

Among many reflections on what criticism of a theatrical work is, the one that seems closest to me is the one which says that it is the testimony that remains behind an ephemeral theatrical act for those who could not see the performance, that is, a conversation with those who saw it. If the conversation is exciting and tense, if it provokes mental and emotional action, it is successful criticism. The one that leaves you indifferent, which recounts and retells trying to avoid any judgment, guided by the principle of not holding grudges or adulation, should not have been written in the first place.

The basic information on the performance, authors, time and space in which it is performed is a dull but indispensable starting point for the text. It is also important to emphasize in this part of the text the extent to which the director adhered to the basic text, if, of course, it is a text-based performance, and how much he intervened in it. Did the audience watch the content of the play or was the play just an inspiration for stage action, that is, what is the template of the concrete performance? If they are exceptional in some way, the circumstances under which the performance was given are also important, as well as the socio-historical context.

It is necessary to present very precisely what happens on stage, what can be seen. This refers to the form of the stage action, type and style of puppets, the role of the animator and their relation to the puppet.



Theatre Kosztolányi Dezső: *Gustav is to Blame for Everything* / photo: Edvard Molnar ▲

The function and meaning of the puppet should find their place in the text as well, that is, the motives for choosing a specific type, as well as the visual solution of the basic means of the performance and the correlation of that choice with director's idea. It is this part that differentiates criticism of dramatic performance from the puppet theatre performance. *A priori* acceptance of the fact that the puppet is one of or the dominant means in the performance should not be a practice. The answer to the question "why the puppet?" is the starting point for the interpretation.

In dramatic theatre it is not necessary to deal with the treatment of the text in particular, except in those situations when it is used in a particular way. In puppet theatre it is extremely important: is there a little, enough or too much of it, why is it there why is it absent and what is its function.

A cold and detached review, even though accurate and precise, terminologically convincing and appealing, indicates that the critic is intelligent, that she or he understood what the stage director wanted to say, but not much more than that. Therefore, the reader who is familiar with the framework of the performance needs to be treated to poetry, to bring her or him closer that which cannot be seen. The inner reflection of events on the stage with an emphasis on the means by which it came to be is the essence of such a text. This is best achieved by dissecting the director's process in parallel with the effects she or he achieves. Of course, it goes without saying, it is by no means devoid of subjective experience, because it is a special discipline that, only when sufficiently substantiated, sincere and "juicy," awakens the reader's interest and makes the performance come alive.

Being a Theatre Critic in Lithuania – Social Criticism

## WOES OF A FOE

Kristina Steiblytė

It is a strange time to be professional theatre critic. At least in Lithuania. First, new generation of theatre makers changed performing arts unrecognisably, making a lot of theatre goers, as well as critics, less interested in new performances. Also, there are a lot of colleagues leaving the field and very few entering it. Work schedule during the pandemic became hectic, and the meaning of being an art critic in suffering world got questioned harshly. Especially, having in mind that online comments are now becoming more influential, and professional criticism – more useless.

Still, I proudly say I am a theatre critic, and am happy to do this strange, beautiful, albeit usually useless job. By taking you through a short history of professional theatre reflection in Lithuania and Lithuanian, discussing the problems me and my colleagues face now, I hope to reveal why I deem theatre criticism to be useless, but also worth the effort.

The beginning of theoretical thought about theatre in Lithuania is usually connected to the 17<sup>th</sup> century writings of Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus (Matthias Casimirus Sarbievius, 1595 - 1640). In his *Poetics* is a chapter "About the Perfect Poetry, or Virgil and Homer" ("De perfecta poesi, sive Vergilius et Homerus", 1626 m.) dedicated to theatre art: stage, set, lighting, costume, music, vocals, choreography. Here he writes what he learned in Rome to improve student theatre in Vilnius university.

After that it took till the 18<sup>th</sup> for theatre reflections to take a new form and become not just instructions and rules on how to create, but also a public opinion about seen performances. This turn is connected to establishing of public theatre in Vilnius. Though at least at the beginning, the texts

about the theatre were not yet reflections of what was seen on the stage, rather information that the events happened. But just before the turn of century paragraphs in newspapers started incorporating more evaluative function with attention usually turned to performing, and dramaturgy.

19<sup>th</sup> century brought a lot of change to the region. Divided Polish-Lithuanian state fell under different rulers. Lithuanians under tsarist Russia influenced by Romanticism and movements of European nations seeking independence, not only tried to organise armed resistance, but also created an underground network of creators and users of culture in national language. Thus 19<sup>th</sup> century brought to life theatre and theatre criticism in Lithuanian.

In the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century Lithuanians started organising secret events, where folk songs were sung, poetry read, and performances showed. All non-professional and quite naïve when looking with contemporary persons eyes. But these events played an important role in nation building process by establishing a community with similar values, the same goal, speaking the same language, and telling similar stories about past, present, and future. Alongside these events, underground press in Lithuanian was started and first papers in Lithuanian language printed (Aušra (1883 - 1886), Varpas (1889 - 1905)). Commenting on news and the situation of the nation, authors of these papers were influential force in nation building. And theatre was seen as an influential toll for bringing people together, thus it had to be reflected in the press.

In this period, we still cannot talk about professional theatre criticism, as well as professional theatre, but an interesting relation between critics and theatre makers was established, that is still relevant in today's Lithuanian theatre research field. People making theatre and writing about it saw each other as collaborators. They had the same goal in mind and were working together to reach it. Critics were critical, they saw problems, but also were generous in providing advice to make performances better.

Thus, after the prohibition to write and perform in Lithuanian was lifted, and more people educated abroad started writing in the second half of 1900s, the criticisms became more specific and less friendly to still non-

professional or barely professional theatre makers. This shift in tone shocked theatre makers who started writing about theatre themselves. This situation repeated itself after 40 years, when soviet Russia occupied Lithuania and enforced, among other things, socialist realism as the only acceptable style of art. But now theatre makers were taking pens to their hands not because criticism was too harsh and did not take in mind the state of theatre making. This time all the professional critics, and there were a few after the interwar period who graduated from successful school of Balys Sruoga, were either afraid to write, or away from Lithuania, having emigrated during the war.

The school of free, cosmopolitan thinkers was not useful in soviet Lithuania. Criticism had to be ideologically pure. As well as theatre itself. Thus, people making theatre seemed to be best equipped to conquer the ideological hurdles and navigate this dangerous territory, since they were doing it every day already. That did not mean, that they could freely express their opinions. A lot of texts about theatre in late 1940s and early 1950s had at least some regret for not being able to perfectly serve for the socialist state and present perfect art for a new socialist people.

This time undid all the hard work of interwar critics, who managed to make writing about theatre not just ideologic, but also aesthetic battlefield. Question of who created the most perfect embodiment of the nation's spirit on stage, was moved to the side by discussions about artistic skills, aesthetics, and development of performing arts in Lithuania in context of not just Russian, but also Western European theatre traditions. Theatre makers participated in the discussion as well as now professional theatre critics.

Some of this conversation returned to the public sphere – though transformed and muted – during the Khrushchev Thaw period. This period brought changes to theatre making, opening the way to more varied texts to be staged and sprouting the seeds of romantic nationalism. Which, in turned, helped opening theatre reflections to more varied field of problems and topics to be discussed besides the accordance to the dominant ideology. This was possible not just because of changing theatre culture, but also due to first professional critics educated in



▲ Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”: *Sandman* / photo: photo Dmitrijus Matvejevas

St. Petersburg, who were eager to share their knowledge of theatre history and contemporary theatre experiences. And there were some even in the Soviet Union: Bertolt Brecht's theatre (just after his death), Paul Scofield, Japanese kabuki, etc.

These young professionals initiated not only a more aesthetically oriented discussion about theatre, but also more personal, artistic writing, writing in a style corresponding to the performance. This, I believe, became the basis of Lithuanian theatre criticism school and is still strongly influencing how we think and write about theatre.

One of the reasons this style of writing is the most influential and practiced by several generations of theatre critics is that people, who created the style, became the first teachers of theatre researchers and critics in Lithuania after interwar period. Formal schools of theatre studies in Lithuania were established after regaining independence, in mid-1990s. The one in Vilnius, led by professionals who studied in Soviet Russia, was and still is oriented more towards theatre history and criticism. And the one in Kaunas, led by Lithuanian emigrant Bronius Vaškėlis and formed in the tradition of universities in USA, was and still is oriented towards theatre theory.

First decade of independence brought only positive changes to theatre criticism. The borders opened to explore theatre practices all around the world, 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre and literary theories became available, there were critics who had their columns in newspapers, more independent platforms were created to discuss arts, first international performing arts festivals were established in Lithuania. Though the money was scarce, newly discovered freedom, and enthusiasm to create independent Lithuanian theoretical thought was a huge driving force.

It also helped, that there was an exciting new generation of theatre makers emerging, who became popular fast not just in Lithuanian, but also abroad. And this time, contrary to their elder peers, popularity came not from the East, but rather from the West. Critics were delighted to participate in the conversation about performances and theatre makers significant beyond our national theatre community.

The rise of excitement could not be permanent though. On the one hand it was clouded by ever present tensions between theatre makers and critics, now intensified by the conflict of different generations of theatre makers and critics. This generational tension was always there, but this time it was strengthened by the different world experiences: the older ones were used to the soviet rule and only knew how to operate withing the realm of soviet peoples experience, write and think metaphorically, avoided to openly discuss social and political issues; and the younger ones rebelled even harder, not just against the old fashioned ways of the colleagues, but also against the system, that brought so many traumas to several generations of numerous nations. And on the other hand, theatre criticism was becoming less viable and in the end of the first decade of this century critics became open about writing as a hobby, but not work.

This historic context, though unknown to me at the beginning of my writing career, was influential to how I watch theatre, think of it, of theatre makers, and how I write. I myself also went through the same cycle of starting as an amateur with loads of enthusiasm, but not a lot of knowledge, becoming professional and then turning to theatre criticisms as a hobby. My personal relationship with theatre makers also changed with growing experience from wishing to teach them how to make a better performance (oh the arrogance of inexperienced author), to a commentator of theatre in broader social and art's context.

I began writing just after the economic crisis of 2008. That time budgets of cultural press were getting smaller and fees for writing as well. My most interesting, inspiring colleagues turned to teaching, management, or producing theatre. There still were some influential, interesting, inspiring texts being published, but the voices of unimpressed or even offended theatre makers were becoming louder. Thus, even though my teachers in university said that theatre criticism plays important part in forming a public opinion and historic narrative, I never felt that personally. Theatre, and theatre criticism, for me were always means of making sense of the world around me.

And though this admission, and my writing overall, is personal, I studied in Kaunas school, where methodologies and methodological thinking is superior to any other way of dealing with performing arts. Thus, it took me some time to find a method I can adapt and use in my thinking of theatre that would merge personal and social, aesthetic and political aspects of theatre making and viewing. For me social criticism was it. But the method for me personally and sometimes still in the public eye, was a challenge, because of the social stigma around everything "social" that is still somewhat present after the soviet times.

This method dictates not only how to view theatre, which parts of the performance are relevant, but also the function of criticism. Thought overall there are many functions of writing and several possible addressees, social criticism makes writing about theatre a public affair, discussing not just art, but also the world that gave birth to the art. And while my colleagues are now trying out to write for the audiences or theatre makers, to inform or advertise, to evaluate or praise, I feel confidently in my place with my desire to see theatre as a symptom of its surroundings.



▲ Vilnius Theatre "Lélé": *The Picture of Dorian Gray* / photo: photo Laur Vansevici

On the other hand, using a method while writing non-academic texts is not that common in Lithuanian theatre criticism. Most of our theatre critics studied in Vilnius and the school there encourages more personal writing. One of the graduates of the programme there, who is now an established critic and teacher, even once said that there is not a one or two schools of writing criticism in Lithuania, because every author's personality sooner or later becomes a school itself.

On one hand this plurality can be inspiring to see theatre criticism as an artistic practice. On the other, it can become confusing, especially for those who are trying to learn how to write: there are no obvious rules what a good or bad text is. Even the editors of cultural press have different standards of what they would or would not publish.

This confusion is not the only discouragement theatre critics in Lithuania face. One of the hardest challenges is always growing number of information and public platforms with loads of easily digestible, compelling information. Slow writing (that's the only type of criticism we have in Lithuania with some sporadic exceptions) and long(ish) texts get lost among the fast reactions of influencers and artists themselves. What Oscaras Koršunovas says about his or other director's performance is always much more influential than the voice of any theatre critic.

So, critics have to move to the margins of digital world or find new, more compelling ways to convey their opinions. In Lithuania most seem to quit writing overall. But me, and several other colleagues, are still trying to establish our little spaces where we can freely think and write about theatre. And since there are still a lot I do not understand about theatre, world, and people, I will continue to write and try and make sense of everything. Especially because I see writing about theatre not just as serving the artists, but as a separate artistic activity.

## Puppet Theatre Criticism in Croatia – Artistic Criticism

### FIRMLY GUIDED FREEDOM

Igor Tretinjak

#### A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF PUPPET THEATRE CRITICISM IN CROATIA

Puppet theatre in Croatia does not have a rich tradition and is a bit more than a hundred years old. The first recorded performances date from the second half of the 1910s, while in 1920 Teatar marioneta performed *Petrica Kerempub and the Clever Donkey* (*Petrica Kerempub i spametni osel*) which is considered the beginning of a continuous practice of puppetry in Croatia. The same performance can be seen as the beginning and guideline of puppetry criticism in Croatia. Its premiere aroused great interest by print media and was accompanied by a larger number of reviews, among others by the then influential writer and critic Branimir Livadić. Livadić is not the only prominent critic who has written critically about puppetry in Croatia in these hundred years. In fact, thanks to personal connections and interests, but also to the editorial policy of daily newspapers, Croatian puppet theater has been systematically written about by numerous important critics throughout history, among which Milan Čečuk, Borislav Mrkšić, Dalibor Foretić, Anatolij Kudrjavcev, Jakša Fiamengo and Igor Mrduljaš occupy a special place. With their work as critics, their influence as well as additional functions as artists, editors, academics and selectors, they have left a deep mark in the critical, historical and theoretical systematization of Croatian puppetry and in the steering of its development.



▲ Dalibor Foretić wrote, among other plays, about antological play *Judita*  
photo: Archive of Zadar Puppet Theatre

Milan Čečuk is not only the first critic who wrote systematic puppet theatre reviews, but he is also a historian and theoretician of Croatian puppetry, a puppeteer, playwright and a long-time selector of the most important puppet theatre festival in Croatia – the International Puppet Theatre Festival PIF. His writings on puppetry collected in the book *Puppeteers and Puppets (Lutkari i lutke)* represent one of the key sources for the history of Croatian puppetry. Čečuk's work coincided with major changes in puppetry, especially with the emergence of the visible puppeteer, whereby Čečuk defended puppets and puppetry in relation to the flood of unmotivated performers coming out of the shadows, often at the expense of their artificial female partners.

Borislav Mrkšić not only enriched Croatian puppetry with his reviews but also with the first and extremely valuable essays on the history and theory of puppetry collected in the book *Wooden Smiles (Drveni osmijesi)* as well as with numerous dramatic texts, dramatizations and staging performances which, among others, include the anthological performance such as *Shoemaker and the Devil (Postolar i vrag)* staged in the late 1970s at Children's Theater Branko Mihaljević in Osijek.

Dalibor Foretić is one of the most important and most influential theatre critics in Croatia who has also systematically written about puppet theatre for many years, expanding his role as a critic to the role of a selector and important "opinion maker." Foretić's authority helped established puppetry and puppet theatre performances in Croatia, and his reviews have remained a permanent trace of anthological and pivotal performances of Croatian puppetry and they represent important sources for shaping the history of Croatian puppetry.

With his distinctive critical style and sharp, often very witty writings, Anatolij Kudrjavcev judged harshly about Croatian puppetry, observing it primarily as a dramatic entity, which seems anachronistic today, but his fierce critical "dialogues" with puppet theaters placed attention on that too often a hidden and marginalized expression. Jakša Fiamengo wrote reviews mostly on puppet theatre productions in Zadar and Split and as an esteemed poet and writer he played an important role in puppet theatre in Split, whereas Igor Mrduljaš left his mark on Croatian, especially Zagreb

puppetry, as a critic, scholar and chronicler and as director of the Zagreb Puppet Theatre; he was also the initiator and editor of the magazine “Lutka” and one of the founders of the Puppet-erotic Cabaret MManipuli.

The above-mentioned critics as well as many others, such as Nasko Frndić, Marija Grgičević, Dubravka Vrgoč, Darko Gašparović and Želimir Ciglar ensured regular visibility of puppetry in mainstream media and daily newspapers with their mostly regular critical observations of the puppetry scene, both Croatian and foreign visiting performances given at the PIF festival in Zagreb and at the International Children’s Festival in Šibenik.

Not all of the mentioned critics were good connoisseurs of puppetry and they took different attitudes toward puppetry newspapers; this insufficient knowledge of puppetry is present even today when a good number of critics still look at this specific medium from a dramatic, acting or traditional puppetry perspective. This is the reason why it is necessary to encourage in young critics the desire to study the expression they deal with critically, its foundations and contemporary aspirations. At the same time, it is very important to adapt criticism itself and its expression to the time and primary readers they address. Especially since the role of criticism and readers have radically changed several times in these hundred years.

#### CRITICISM TODAY – ADAPTATION TO THE EXPRESSION AND TIME

During the “reign” of daily newspapers, in which culture held an important place, the critic often filled or emptied auditoriums with her or his texts. Newspapers were the main and easily accessible sources of information for everyone; critics were prominent people with a recognizable style and attitude, and their reviews served to shape public opinion. Today, there are almost no reviews in daily newspapers, which, after all, have lost their former importance. Information has moved to Internet portals and social networks, which, due to their openness and democracy, represent a jungle of information. In this abundance of media, the tasks of criticism have

changed significantly - instead of informativeness and analysis, the primary tasks of criticism today are to reach the potential reader and keep her or his attention until the end of the text. Therefore, the characteristics of the text and the external equipment are of crucial importance. Moreover, the focus of principal readers has narrowed to followers of cultural content, and this quantitative reduction influenced the growth of the qualitative, that is, motivational layer. The key readers of reviews have become authorial and performing teams with whom criticism potentially builds an open dialogue on social media, “updating” performances with their own critical and authorial ideas and in some aspects influence performances more deeply than before. The search for potential readers, their attention and the dialogue with (co)authors of performances are inscribed as the bearers of one of the possible models and approaches to contemporary puppetry criticism today, tentatively called artistic puppetry criticism.

#### IN THE MEETING AND INTERWEAVING OF ARTISTIC AND CRITICAL

Artistic puppet theatre criticism envelops the contemporary puppetry expression and penetrates it artistically and critically, thus expanding and analysing it.

As it is highlighted in several places in the first part of the book, contemporary puppetry has replaced the semantic concreteness and default of verbal communication of traditional puppetry with the abstraction of the visual and auditory layers. With such a fluid performing identity, contemporary puppetry does not consolidate the semantic layer, nor does it patronize, but expands spaces and raises questions, and is built out of content and performance openness.

Such a performance procedure relies on an active spectator who will look for her or his own ways of reading the performance, and independently remove redundancies and add what is lacking. Therefore, every active

spectator is also an intimate co-author of the performance act. If one looks at the process of creating a (contemporary puppet) show, after all, it consists of a series of co-authorships that are much closer to the spectator's position, however it may seem at first glance. Each member of the authorial and performing team reads the performance in process in their own spectatorial (and critical) way, and then changes and enriches it as an author, guided by the producer's and/or director's hand. In this process, there are two key differences between the mentioned co-authors and spectators as the final co-authors – while co-authors create a work for stage, thus taking responsibility for potential spectators, the latter assume responsibility only for themselves in their adding of meaning to the performance. Moreover, co-authors create in an authorial and performing dialogue, and spectators usually create in a manner of a monologue. Both differences are mainly nullified by the theater critic, who is in this text considered an expert spectator, that is, a spectator with a task who, with this nullification, creates a bridge between the spectator and the (co) authorial and performing team of the performance. The critic moves from the “accidental” spectator to the co-author with the awareness that she or he will make her or his own critical co-authorial attitude public, which increases her or his responsibility for authors and performers as well as spectators and readers. By publishing the text in public, she or he also opens up the possibility of a dialogue with (other) co-authors of the performance.

Thus, the theater critic becomes the ultimate and public co-author in the contemporary puppet expression. She or he does this by inscribing her or his own key of reading the performance in the review, updating its content and specifying the metaphorical and abstract layer, closing open questions with answers or creating space for further questions. In this way, they represent the final point, exclamation mark or question mark in the performance.

Along with the co-authorship in the performance act, the critic's primary task remains the analysis and critical judgment of the performance. As in classical theater criticism, it is necessary to critically observe and analyze



▲ Verrdi Theatre: *Desnica: The Games of Spring and Death* / photo: Ivana Jenjić

all elements of the performance and their mutual relations, with a special emphasis on the elements and relations that carry the performance as the whole or its individual aspect. As already pointed out earlier, the theater critic aspires to objectivity, but it remains an unrealized aspiration. Each critic approaches the performance from her or his own perspective, analyzing it with her or his own critical apparatus and evaluating it according to her or his own aesthetic perspective. This perspective is not one-dimensional; it is rather shaped by experience, watching and analysing of previous performances and forms a firm seal of the critic's personality and attitudes. As such, it does not represent an obstacle to criticism, as long as it is explained. Namely, every critical attitude is correct, if it is clearly justified. After all, the critic is still a public figure, as she or he was in the past. She or he creates their own critical identity with their expressed view, just like a director, actor or puppeteer shape their artistic identity through artistic activities. In the end, all participants in the world of (performing) arts grow and develop through their own personality, along with it and in spite of it.

Artistic puppetry criticism is built in the meeting and dialogue of the artistic, that is, co-author and critical layer. Balancing between these two approaches to the performance shapes a text that simultaneously creates and dissolves, builds and deconstructs, analyzes and criticizes. In this duality, it is crucial to keep both layers of the text, that is, to “control” the creative layer. The key to the control lies in the basis of theater criticism - the analysis of all elements of the performance, which provides artistic puppetry criticism with a “strict control of freedom.” Although the rigor of a critical analysis and the freedom of the creative layer seem opposed, in practice they are complementary and spring from and build on each other.

#### A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PERFORMANCE AND REVIEW

An important aspect of the artistic factor in artistic criticism is the critic’s awareness of potential readers. Just as the authorial team shapes the performance for a certain profile of spectators, so too does the critic address the target reader. This aspect is much more pronounced today than before the Internet, when the critic’s approach to the reader was clearly defined by the targeted space. On the one hand, the reader is nowadays closer to the author, and on the other, noticeably more distant. The Internet allows critics to post criticism on numerous portals, social networks, profiles and groups, but on the other hand, that criticism is only a needle in a haystack of media content. Therefore, it is not enough for the critic to publish her or his review and wait for the reader to find it, but she or he must approach them, impose her- or himself and try to keep them.

In a time when the reader’s attention is reduced to the length of one “tweet” and a description under a photo, it is important to gain the reader’s attention from the start, so the opening of a review becomes one of the key points of artistic criticism. It must create a connection between the author and the reader, therefore it should strive for an artistic, social or political topicality and provocation. Such an opening awakens the reader’s interest in the rest of the text, but also creates a bridge between the performance and review, thus becoming a kind of a guide through the creative-critical analysis of the performance. It depends on the introduction how the

critic will structure the review, that is, which direction the analysis of the elements of the performance will take - chronological, progressive or degrading, from the key element or towards it, by enveloping the focus or expanding it... The only thing that matters in this freedom is that all the elements and key relations are analyzed. In order for the review to gain integrity, that is, not to fall apart artistically, it is useful to round it off with a conclusion that also functions as an introductory summary of the text or *lead*.

#### CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF TODAY’S READERS

With this concept and approach to the text, the critic addresses a wide range of readers - from superficial ones who will be satisfied with the key attitude of the critic towards the performance presented in the *lead*, through readers who strive for actualization and provocation to those who seek analysis of the performance or emphasize the creative layer of the text. Within such a framework, there is a space of strictly controlled freedom in which the critic directs her or his creative-critical attention to all elements and relationships in the performance, and at the same time subjectively appropriates it with her or his own insights and objectively analyzes it with critical tools adapted to the expression. In this connection, encounter, and sometimes conflict between subjective and objective, creative and critical, a text is created that opens up and offers communication with today’s readers aware that criticism is not a cold, distant and neutral act, but a seductive dance between subjective and objective.

Pieces of Advice to a Future (Puppet Theatre) Critic  
in Scotland and Beyond

NOTHING IS TRUE,  
EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

Gareth K Vile

Every year, for many years, there is a debate that ranges across the bars, venues and fields of the Edinburgh Festivals. The many magazines, websites, blogs, independent critics, newspapers and rhetoricians on the Meadow claim their importance, question the meaning of the opposition's star rating systems and wonder whether there might be one publication that can bind them all together: the paper of record. Audiences read the headlines, plastered onto walls or glued to the windows, glimpse discarded flyers as they flutter in the breeze, say that everyone gets five stars anyway and turn away in disgust. Beneath the celebration of the world's greatest market for the arts, behind the eyes of the plucky young director who has merged the dramaturgies of Europe and the mighty scripts of Elizabethan England, implied in the punchline of the comedians who are only teasing and not really reviving an ugly cultural arrogance that has been deemed old-fashioned in 1974, there is a war and its first casualty is, as Aeschylus might have said (the attribution is contested, of course), is truth.

Nothing less than eternal fame, reputation, wealth and an escape from an annual run of thirty shows in a reconditioned public toilet are at stake. The artist arrives in Edinburgh in order to gain as many of those precious stars, handed out by critics and reviewers, as possible. And ask any of the artists which critic is the most reliable, the answer will always be: the one who just awarded my show five stars.

The critics and reviewers have their own skirmish within this war: each time they write, they aim to speak the truth. Ask any critic who is the most reliable and they will tell you that they alone possess the sacred insight, the capacity to see the truth, to accurately judge the objective value of a production, to know how can act and who is pretending. They see the vision of the artist and see how far the artist has risen or fallen. Plato is just a joker compared to the august certainty of the critic.

Introducing Mad Cyril, formerly a gangland enforcer and now the custodian of meaning. "Simple, innit. The job of the reviewer is to observe what is seen, surmise what the artists wanted to do, and assess their capacity to achieve it – given their budget, at a push. The critic knows what is supposed to be on the stage, makes the call, condemns or celebrates. The aim is truth and accuracy, with neither favour nor prejudice. The review is the first draft of history. The best review makes all other reviews unnecessary."

Unsurprisingly, for a man whose previous work involved chucking dustbins through the windows of the bookies who weren't paid up on their protection fees, Mad Cyril sees the world in two dimensions. Good and Bad, and he knows the Good.

Truth may or may not exist, but Mad Cyril is wrong. All reviews are opinion, the bursting forth of experience, the struggle to contain emotions, personality and history in words. They are subjective and personal: and all the better for it. The quest for truth is dishonest – a falsehood, even. Those reviewers who claim that they are objective have already failed.

Art is a mirror, and the critic sees themselves grinning on the surface. A review is an act of self-analysis, and the performance is the tool with which the critic examines their self. It comes from a subjective position, all of those moments that make up personality. It can be a forceful expression of the critic's hopes and fears, it may identify how the dramaturgy speaks to their soul, it may be aware of certain historical and aesthetic contexts. But it can never be the absolute truth.



▲ Tortoise in a Nutshell Theatre Company: *The Last Miner* / photo: Amy Downes

Abandon the fantasy that a review is able to capture a final meaning. Remember that the hermeneutical spiral is a series of explosions, responses to the moment of revelation that can never be exhausted but becomes a conversation through time and space. Each comment, each critique, each answer folds back and enriches the revelation, becoming part of the performance. What was once a specific event of fixed duration in a specific location is now stretched across eternity in a dialogue that never ends.

#### THE PARADOS: FIND THE MONSTER!

“There is a pestilence upon Fair Caledonia, and the Oracle demands that we find the critic responsible. They have turned star ratings into symbols of worth, peppering the sacred hermeneutics with numbers, now discourse is still-born, corrupted into the turf wars of companies who only seek to demonstrate their superiority to other companies by boasting of the litany of positive reviews. What was once a humble reflection on actors and audiences has become a branch of marketing. Reviews are written for the telling phrase that can appear on a poster.”

“Their language is riddled with diseased phrases, unwarranted assumptions and poisonous arrogance. This critic can be sought out and placed carefully to one side, ignored and perhaps vilified. A careful analysis will reveal the contagion, with sentences as symptoms.”

“Sometimes, they will say: ‘one might think...’ and, of course, these are weasel words. As my old French teacher used to say, ‘only the queen says ‘one’ and it is just a way of pretending that the opinion that follows is, in some way, universal. ‘One might think that puppetry is only for children.’ ‘One might think that Shakespeare is the greatest playwright.’ ‘One might think that this is a play about the relationship between the living and the dead.’ Add here ‘we’ or references to the audience’s response. It’s all false authority, a free ride on assumed assumptions.”

“Elsewhere they argue with reference to other times, other plays (that no-one else has seen). Cast this out, it is a net to catch meaning that is full of holes, full of holes.”

“Another trick: they explain the plot, and name the actors (perhaps adding, in parenthesis, the reason why that actor ought to be known). Then they give a qualitative opinion at the end, that is neither developed nor justified. If it reads as if it is paid by the word, it is likely to have ‘will this do?’ somewhere in the submission process.”

“And watch out for companies that ‘are ones to watch’, sentences with multiple clever clauses that lose their meaning by the third subjunctive, or writers who deliberately imitate the ascending tricolon that they learnt from Cicero. The unnecessary reference to a classical author is always a symptom of sickness.”

#### FIND YOUR VOICE

“If nothing is true and the best review is the one that embraces that truth,” said the old teacher, setting aside a battered copy of Aristotle, “then the only path is to find a personal position. It may be unsteady, it may not know how the seventeenth century adapted Athenian tragic structures,” (and here he pats the cover of his book). “But it is all the more honest for refusing to be anything other than itself.”

The class are always restless by this stage, and the old teacher knows it is time to throw it back to them. “I want you to work in pairs, and tell each other the three things that you want to experience in a performance.”

He turns back to Aristotle while the class room slowly mumbles. At first, the students try to second guess each other. “Catharsis? A revelation? Not seeing the bunraku puppeteers behind the marionette?”

These days, the old teacher knows, there is no such thing as a “theatre critic” in Scotland. That is not to say that they don’t exist. There is still a rump of working critics who have been working for the most popular media outlets for the past twenty to thirty years. But there are no young critics, not really. During August, everyone can find an outlet to publish their writing, but little enough is paid. He doesn’t like to give advice but the old teacher says that it is better to be a journalist who can write a review than imagine that “theatre critic” is a meaningful career.

He looks around the classroom and tells the students what he is getting at. They often complain that he is not clear in his instructions.

“I have an equation that tells me how much you are going to like a certain work. But what is it that you think a performance ought to do? For example, does it have to have a political or social message? Do you delight in recognise the formal elements of tragic structure? How much pleasure do you feel at virtuosic display? Are you looking for something new?”

Taste is where it is at, for the old teacher. Whatever the critic takes into the performance is what they are going to take away. “Finding a voice is little more than finding out what you like. And yes, the review is just your opinion.” He takes himself and Mad Cyril as examples.

“Mad Cyril is only ever concerned with sensation. He goes to the theatre in the hope of accidental nudity, or shock, or surprise. This is why he is now banned from attending cabaret and burlesque across the central belt. There is such a thing as too much enthusiasm.”



Tortoise in a Nutshell Theatre Company, Figurteatret and Nordland ▲  
with MacRobert Arts Centre: *Ragnarok* / photo: Mihaela Bodlovic

“As for myself, I want a performance to change my opinion. Whether that is my perspective – Neville Tranter made me feel that the horror of Nazism was in its human insecurity rather than demonic possession – or what theatre can do and be.” And here he wistfully remembers Forced Entertainment’s *Bloody Mess* which did away with plot and climax for something like looked as disordered and fragmented as life itself. “If you attend *The Chosen Haram* expecting to hear poetry, the visual elegance of the Chinese pole is only going to provide disappointment.”

He sets the class a final task: to mark various performances through various elements. Those who longed for politics, predictably, find Brecht magisterial. Beckett scores high when it comes to word-play. And Scotland’s physical theatre supergroup LARDS energise anyone who requested spectacular performances.

A student asks whether this will be in the examination. The old teacher smiles as the class shuffles away to their next lesson and remembers a time when he looked up at the sign across the portal at the entrance to Apollo’s temple in Delphi. He had been a student then and spent a summer of optimism travelling by bus to the ruins of the ancient world. There was someone he was supposed to know, and if it is good enough for Socrates, it would do for him.

### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

There are pitfalls to avoid, and there are steps that can be taken. Remember never to speak on behalf of the audience, and ask what is it that gives authority to a critic. There are many ways to convince a readership...

The Academic weaves a web of reference. Begin with a citation from a respectable and acknowledged source. In the case of puppetry, it never hurts to mention Henrich von Kleist’s seminal essay *On the Marionette Theatre* (1812). Although this is actually a meditation on free will, it suggests

that the subsequent discussion is part of a rich intellectual tradition. GE Lessing works well for contemporary theatre. Brecht has plenty to say.

Then move on to another, and another, and another, creep in a petty pace from reference to reference, and make that web tight and taut, enough to hold the tiny truth that remains the purpose of the dissertation. Academic critique proves itself by its situation, by precedent and recognition, reaching a little further along a road that has already been built.

The Popular Critic – that is to say, the critic who writes in a public forum whether that is a newspaper or on the internet – will not get the same respect through name-dropping. Too gauche, prefer instead the confident statement, or a point supported by reference to the production. Take this from a recent review of *After Metamorphoses* (*manipulate* 2022): “Ali Maloney takes Kafka and filters his insect nightmares through the lurid imagination of Lovecraft: he chases Gregor Samsa underground through a dense juxtaposition of adjectives and extravagant descriptions of a body in transformation.” Begin with an evaluation, and this justify it. At least prove that you were paying attention in the dark, and not falling asleep.

There is a whispered rumour that to find out the quality of a Scottish performance (if it has been reviewed by a Scottish critic) is to remove a star. The odds are that the critic knows at least one person in the production, and no-one wants to upset their mates. But the readers know this, and while it might be hard to be consistent, it’s not impossible to be honest.

Because academic or popular, the readers are going to remember next time. It might be easier to give that favourable review if you are going to end up at a dinner party with the director in a fortnight, but the duty of the critic is always to the reader. They don’t care about your social life, but they have to pay for their tickets and recommend one too many lazy issue-play and you have lost their trust. Authority is in the gift of the reader, and don’t find yourself accused of being on the side of the artist.

## THE MESSENGER SPEECH

“He brings me on when he has run out of steam, and I say the things that he dares not mention. The world knows my fame: I am Mad Cyril. Let’s see what we have had so far.”

“Beneath the verbiage, I can detect a few details. There is no such thing as objective truth, and the critic must embrace their subjectivity. The best way to find a voice is to realise what it is that the critic enjoys, and admit the consequences. I know that there are plenty of barbs aimed at the state of contemporary criticism, hidden in vague condemnations. And there is the warning against being too sympathetic to performers. All predictable enough.”

“Now, the real question is this: can you see the strings or, since bunraku is all the rage in the UK, the puppeteer himself? What would I know? I’m just a puppet on a table. But the author, he wants to be provocative, he wants to say something else but he has been watching *The Matrix* and believes that nothing can be explained, only experienced. What is the experience of reading all of this? Why are there so many cross-references? Keep Google open while you are reading this: most of it is second-hand. the author lurks in the background, not wanting to commit. The game is ‘find the enemy’ and the enemy’s game is to convince you that he doesn’t exist.”

“I was first used during the Edinburgh Fringe as a mask, a way of reviewing when it didn’t feel safe. I am rolled out to speak a truth that no-one wants to hear. I am the critic as thug, unreconstructed, parochial and savage. I am the fantasy of the young writer who thinks that a damning review is better, more fun to read. I am just a ploy. I bring to light that which cannot be shown.”

“Clinical cruelty. Every so often there is a right row on Twitter, when some critic decides to comment on the physical attractiveness of an actor. That’s dumb, but there is a general point. There is no reason to get personal. Kindness to the person on stage, and criticism for the performance. Don’t say that an actor is talentless, but suggest that their interpretation falls short. It’s not that the puppet maker can’t sew, the puppet is just inaccurate. And so on...”

“Let’s assume that something has been learnt, and move to the climax. A slice of the sacred wisdom, let the curtain rise once again and the puppeteer stands alone on stage, their swollen ankles guiding them towards their inevitable final.”

## WORDS OF ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Once upon a time, I believed that criticism could be an art. Not just a response to another work of art, or the documentation of an event that was once alive but is now a dissected selection of sweetmeats for discerning palates. There was, I said, no difference between a review and a poem, except in matters of shape and form. A sonnet has a set number of lines, a review has a word count and a number of stars at the top. The critic is an artist. But it turns out that I don’t like poetry much, either.

But follow this: if criticism is an art form, then all it requires is to move and provoke. It doesn’t have to answer any questions, it doesn’t have to enshrine the performance in history. It can have very little worth... little enough that it at least can show the shadow of the shapes that move across the screen, down from the stage and into the hearts and minds of the audience.

Perhaps it would be easier to write a manifesto, ten points to consider when writing a review. Unfortunately, without letters cut from a newspaper to give it that authentic revolutionary font, it all comes down to truisms (A play is more than a script! There are props! Drama is just pretending! Critics don’t get paid enough or often!)

I considered trying to describe how I approach reviewing, but after three sentences, I had said everything (I sit at a computer. I make myself coffee. I worry about what people will think).

I wanted this to be a hero’s journey with a beginning, a middle and an end. There would be a descent into despair (perhaps to ask what the point might be), a shamanic moment in which a hard-won gift is returned to the earth). And the critic would be the hero, of course: the only tragedy the weariness of their demeanour.

But time is up.

**EXAMPLES OF REVIEWS OF  
CONTEMPORARY PUPPETRY**

created within the workshops of the project  
“EU Contemporary Puppetry Critical Platform”

12<sup>th</sup> Lutokaz, Osijek  
Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, *Sand Pit*  
d. Miha Golob

## STAGE BLINK

Petar Sekelez

The language of the performance *Sand Pit* is non-verbal and universal, just like a story, like the sand that is ubiquitous

In its final, third block, the 11<sup>th</sup> International Puppetry Revue Lutkokaz honored its faithful viewers with a film adaptation of the beautiful theatre show *Sand Pit* by Ljubljana Puppet Theatre. The show, which lasted about half an hour, was like a blink to me. It simply took me back to my childhood, where I indulged in the images that were being created in front of me.

“In the beginning was the Word,” says the Holy Scripture, and here at the beginning is... the Bucket. The stage is stripped of everything and in the middle, there is only sand that flows freely, not caring about anyone. Dimly lit, it represents a time to me personally. A time that has no dimensions that we assign to it, such as the past, the present, the future, a constant that melts involved in all life processes on earth. Actors Miha Arh, Barbara Kanc, Gašper Malnar and Filip Šebšajević walk along the sand, unaware of its presence. They go in groups or separate. At times they act together, then one separates as a revolutionary and then they go back and forth, depending on which side of the sand we look at, giving the movements various meanings.

After the first people, the bucket starts moving and the creation begins. And where are the people? The performers are disappearing into the darkness as something very impressive is now being prepared.



▲ Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Sand Pit* / photo: Jaka Varmuz

A magnificent, distant, and vast universe emerges from the darkness. Galaxies, stars, dwarf planets, and the star that guided the wise men and everything we imagined when we were little astronauts when we dreamed of something elusive, a star at our fingertips, a star to reach out to, enchanted by what is above us. Something bigger than us, which we respect. Darkness. Light.

Skilled animators are now turning stars into the first organisms on the planet. We are all made of stardust, and that transition was intelligently made by the play's author, director Miha Golub. We come to the ice age, dusk descends on a civilization inscribed in the sand, and ruthless leeches trample all organisms in front of them, creating fossils out of them. The way in which that image is obtained is actually interesting. The performers walk around the stage, holding boxes from which sand falls out in their hands. Moving with them across the stage, guided by a skilled camera, the viewer forgets that they are active creators of everything.

After the storms on the continent have calmed down and the bucket has stopped with its stormy circulation, people are returning. They play with a bucket, throw it and avoid it, at times treating it like children, and sometimes like adults. From these movements, Golub tried to bring us closer to a man's relationship with himself and others. We arrive at the first sandcastles or the first great civilizations in which harmony creates beautiful mosaics in the sand. By adding and subtracting sand, the animators go beyond the medium itself and I have the feeling that I am traveling through time, watching the first larger communities grow next to me. The circle is in the middle and the wheel on which the people will be taken is ready to go, and the bucket is slowly swaying and being drawn. As it sways gently like a child in a cradle, so the first images of great nations are born before us. Putting us to sleep, the bucket takes us to ancient China and their dualism, then goes to Africa and the Star of David, Babylon, ending with a beautiful floor mosaic in a Roman villa on the slopes of the Eternal City. In addition to cities, the sand does not forget the small villages. Sand remembers everything. First, we have large meadows that become small arable lands, and then they become bigger and bigger until society begins to divide into those who live in cities and those in the countryside. As the village shrinks more and more, and the city conquers green areas, pushing

the little man to the edge, we can't help but get the impression that the author had a lesson for the viewer. Cities of sand swallow everything in front of them, turning into large skyscrapers that man himself replaces with even bigger and taller ones, neglecting nature. As is usually the case, when man exaggerates, Mother Nature sets the balance. This time she does so by letting her river that clears the city of rubbish and debris tear down all the skyscrapers in front of it. There is a gap between nature on one side and man in the city on the other. It all ends with a big clean-up after the flood, where the animators lead the spectators like pigeons that led Noah ashore. To the bucket and the sand. In the end, there is only a bucket over the sand and the author leaves it to the viewer to ask whether he is playing in the sand or the sand is playing with him, keeping in mind everything that has passed before his eyes.

Miha Golob, who arranged it all beautifully, is also responsible for the beautiful visual design of the play. The dramaturgy that flows in front of us like a river is attributed to Mojca Redjko, and I commend the light designers Maša Avscec and Gregor Kuhar, as well as the animators. It is said that the play is suitable for all ages, which it really is, and the language is non-verbal, therefore universal. Like a story. Like the sand that is ubiquitous.

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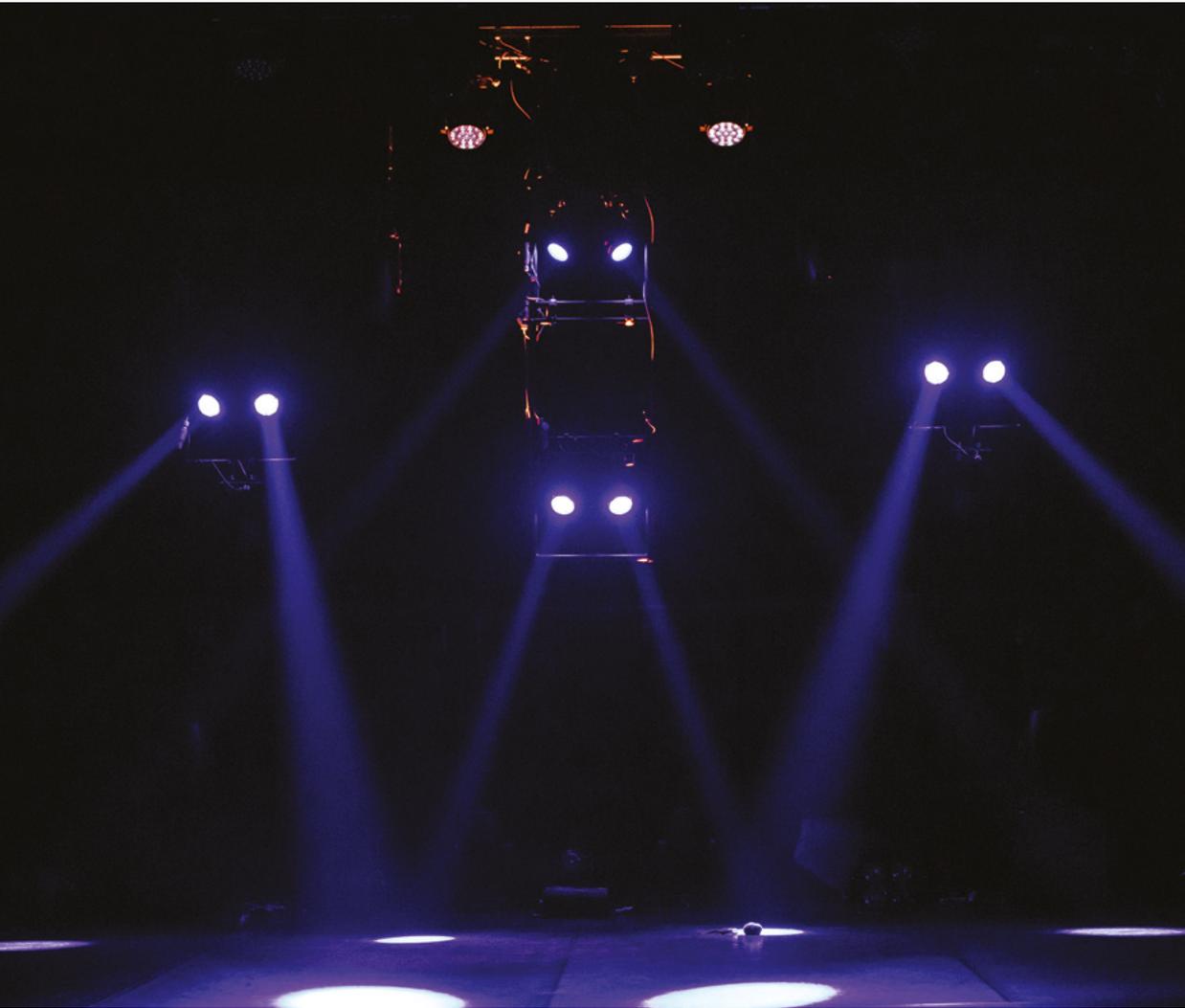
11<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Puppetry Artists of Slovenia  
GVR Zavod, Kino Šiška, *The Last Temptation*  
d. Vlado R. Gotvan

## THE UNBEARABLE FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATIVE THINKING

Maša Radi Buh

The project *The Last Temptation* foregrounds the dilemma of what is human and what is puppetry or, better yet, of the human element in puppetry

The last three biennial editions have indicated two strong artistic currents in puppet theatre. One is on the traditional trajectory of conventional puppetry, with the puppet still the leading protagonist of the production and the key agent of the plot, while the other is contemporary puppetry, a current questioning the puppet and juxtaposing it with other equivalent elements of the show. Any biennial selection made by an arts festival curator can go different ways, depending on how the specific curator perceives their role. In its official competition, the 11<sup>th</sup> Biennial in Maribor replaced the paradigm of selecting the best productions of the past two years, for one that categorises the multitude of the existing practices (not necessarily very well executed but with a good concept) and brings puppetry in Slovenia in touch with deliberations concerning the contemporary puppetry trends seen at international festivals. The most daring choice for the festival may have been Vlado R. Gotvan's *The Last Temptation*. Although by no means developed with the intention of exploring puppetry, the production immediately avoided any potential conceptual assumptions and premises that inevitably arise with one's idea of what a puppet is. In the end, it put this question to the loyal puppetry audience.



▲ GVR Zavod, Kino Šiška: *The Last Temptation* / photo: Urška Boljkovac

*The Last Temptation* is a feature-length collage of light and sound focusing primarily on the audience's phenomenological experience. The introductory video is followed by daily life videos in random order, from animals to an excavator, with an acoustic landscape underlying the images. The carefully processed sound of the excavator pushing through a pile of dirt, nature and animals; all this produces a clean, clear sound effect in the excellent acoustics of Kino Šiška's Katedrala Hall. As the performance progresses, the human voice is added to this acoustic element, with folk songs sung live into the microphone by Manca Trampuš and Zvezdana Novaković. The way they are positioned in the space lit up when singing and otherwise concealed, creates the only diversion of the spectator's attention from the stage, where the light show takes place throughout the rest of the performance. Therefore, their remote position at a breakneck angle shapes the dramaturgy of the gaze, the leading protagonist of *The Last Temptation*, shaking it up. As Gotvan builds his show primarily by directing the elements of stage lighting – thereby following on from Luftbalett, his previous work that used the same concept – the pivotal information conveyed to the audience is visual. The atmospheric lighting not only keeps changing in terms of the colour or intensity of light but also combines with moving elements of stage lighting. Programmed by the director and lighting designer, their moving pointed beams skim, scour and scan the space.

The hour-long light show explores human presence and absence in theatre. Now a very popular topic in academia and art internationally, it creates space for reflection on the hierarchies arising from human perception of oneself as a unique and most highly developed (living) being on the planet. *The Last Temptation* is in no way genuinely free from human presence. On the one hand, both singers are there, even if to emphasise the absence of the human body on stage. On the other hand, even when it is an object that takes centre stage and when it is the objectness of stage lighting elements that we are looking at, they are still controlled by humans and their decisions.

Nevertheless, Vlado R. Gotvan blazes a unique trail in Slovenia's performing arts, consciously resisting the historical pressure of the dramatic narrative arc, an old convention, and the still prevalent dramatic types of theatre in the region. The production refuses to succumb to the need for a meaning, idea, or common thread. The only elements one can resort to for any subject matter include the introductory video collage and song lyrics, although the production clarifies that it is undesirable, hence pointless, to interpret them in connection to lighting.

The lack of such tangible, interpretatively powerful elements, still ubiquitous in Slovenian theatre but increasingly rejected in some contemporary dance practices, frees the audience of a fixed gaze. The production's dramaturgy is the dramaturgy of one's associative thinking, which leaves the spectator alone with their own thoughts, imagination, and commitment. The show maneuvers between meditation, experience, and dread, for too much freedom without restrictions is universally known to cause more anxiety than clear instructions and boundaries. This is both its advantage and potentially its weakness: as such, the production is made and intended for a small target audience that feel no need or desire for meaning, narrative, or idea. Instead, they are happy to have a meditative experience featuring visual and audio elements where reason can take a break from weaving semantic networks. However, such a production requires a second type of freedom: not only from humans but also from the deeply rooted conventions of what theatre is supposed to be.

Against the backdrop of the Biennial of Puppetry Artists and the discussions in contemporary puppetry about the types of objects that may transform into puppets, *The Last Temptation* foregrounds the dilemma of what is human and what is puppetry or, better yet, of the human element in puppetry. The pre-programmed animation of the light extravaganza raises the question of whether we perceive the moving spotlights as animated objects that go beyond the sheer relationship between the programmer and the object. In any production, lighting elements are animated by humans, even if through pre-set algorithms that ultimately execute the action autonomously. Any programme is invariably informed by human decisions. That said, lighting elements may be perceived as puppets or animated objects. This happens when they come alive before our eyes

when we detect attributes of life or a soul in them. The questions that remain revolve around under what circumstance we habitually recognise such objects as alive and what properties of movement and behaviour they must possess for this to happen. Based on *The Last Temptation* as one of the productions selected for the biennial, I would argue that an object is perceived as a puppet when we detect in it a quality of movement that fits with our idea of living beings similar to humans. Just as the movement of a box has to mirror familiar gestures from the vocabulary of human or animal body movement in order to "come to life," the same is true for other animated objects such as robots, lights, etc. Even if we, humans, are capable of pulling away from exclusively human images, what we truly search for in a puppet and animation are even the faintest traces of our own reflections. As an audience, we are (still) incapable of recognising "life" when it comes with no identifiable human properties. At the end of *The Last Temptation*, we are left with an existential question: What or whom do we refer to as being alive? Or, more importantly, what or whom don't we?

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Hidden Door, Edinburgh  
 Tortoise in a Nutshell, *Feral*  
 d. Ross MacKay

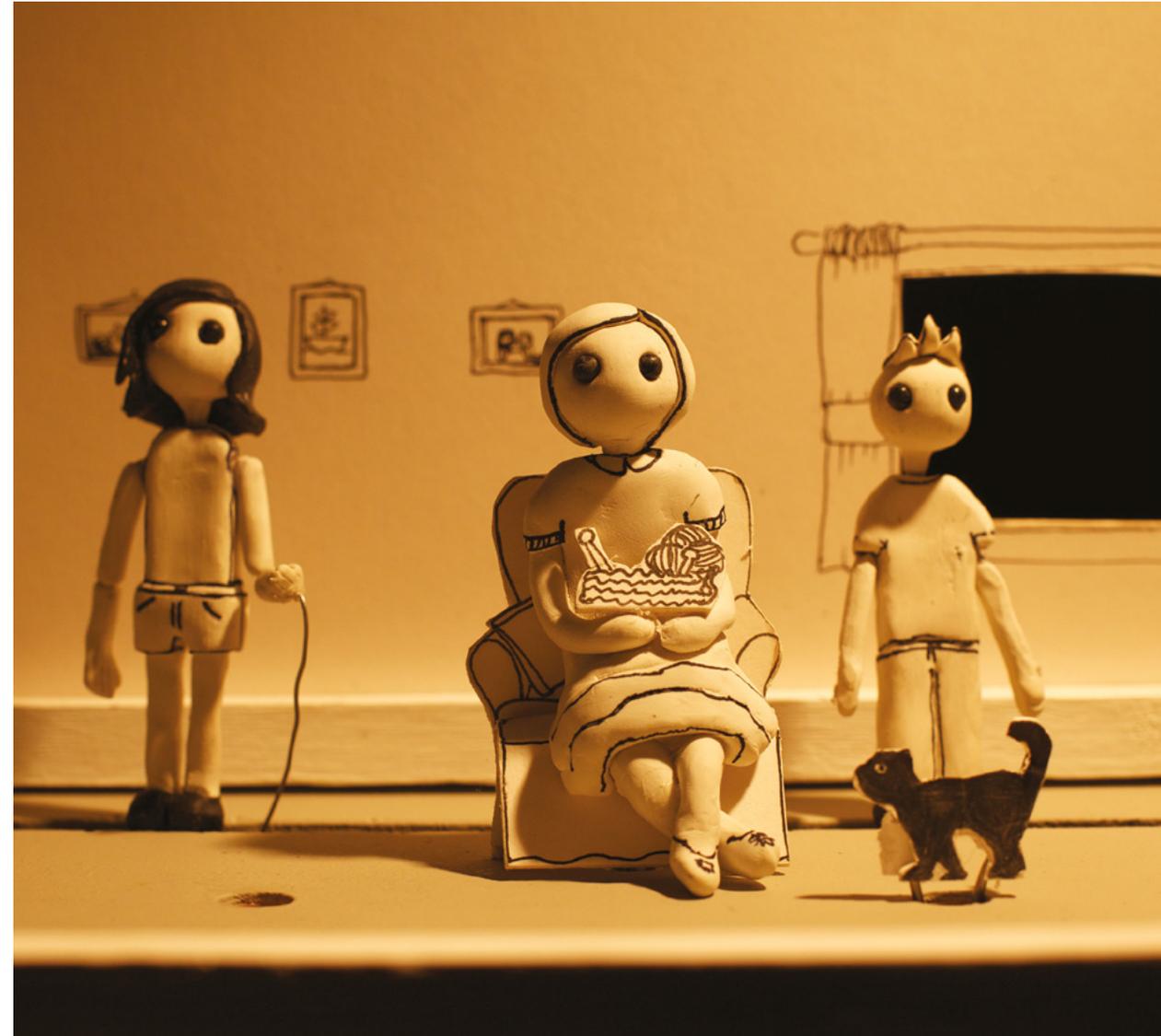
## A JOURNEY INTO A FERAL FUTURE

Inesa Vėlaviciūtė

The performance shapes a story about the decline of local businesses and the resulting social and moral turbulence in a subtle, sophisticated and deceptively simple way, urging the audience to be socially engaged and question the controversial

“Everything passes. Nobody gets anything for keeps. And that’s how we’ve got to live,” says author Haruki Murakami. There is no such place where time stands still. The future belongs to progress, innovation and grand designs: a dominant and insistent force enhancing the lives for more than two industrialised centuries. But is this something to be always held in such high esteem?

From a playful introduction to a thought-provoking finale, *Feral* follows the experiences of a young boy named Joe as he makes his way through memories of his childhood town and the ripple effect the urban restructuring had on it. Created in 2012 by Ross MacKay and showcased at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2013 and 2014, *Feral* is an innovative cross-artwork piece that portrays these changes in time and place through a blend of puppetry, film and live performance. The show has received international acclaim and has been revived by Tortoise in a Nutshell for the Hidden Door Festival at Granton Gasworks, marking the company’s return to on-stage performance.



Tortoise in a Nutshell Theatre Company: *Feral* / photo: Amy Downes ▲

Artfully laying the groundwork of a small world and every day interactions, the performers manipulate lights, smell, sounds, installations and puppets to create a sensory experience fizzing with energy and transporting the audience to an idyllic seaside town and its comfortable, domestic community life. The spectacular design work and different forms of expression merge and tumble over each other allowing the story to immediately capture, involve and stimulate through this sensory overload, bending the line between a film and real-life performance.

However, this is just the beginning of a bewildering journey as the intimate interactions and connection between the characters also explore compelling social issues the community faces. The storytelling itself is deceptively simple but executed with sophistication through a candid account of the gradual decline of local businesses and the consequent social and moral turbulence; the scenes have deep emotional impact. The audience witnesses an honest portrayal of a chaotic modern world through visuals more powerful than any revelations in words, especially when these aspects reach an ecstatic high point within the performance – picturing vandalism and violence. The director shares a vision which, as a human experience, is visceral and accessible, resonating powerfully in our contemporary life, urging the audience to be socially engaged and question the controversial.

Joe's experience in the parallel reality echoes the real world: a feeling of being out of place in one's own home. When life changes at top speed, the feeling of connectedness to other people and to one's own life can become lost. Although the little town's challenges portrayed in this multimedia performance offer no easy answers, they leave the viewer contemplating what is possible and what is sustainable in terms of a regenerative future.

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<https://www.contempuppetry.eu/information/a-journey-into-a-feral-future/>

Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, *Still Life*

d. Tin Grabnar

## WHO IS SITTING ON THE THRONE: RABBIT OR MAN?

Gabrielė Pelakauskaitė

What is an animal's life worth? Is the desire to demonstrate the beauty of an animal a sufficient reason to take away its life? Maybe the beauty of an animal is not in its fur or the shape of its ears, but rather in its movements, decisions, freedom... So, after all, who is sitting on the throne – and should it be occupied at all?

17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher René Descartes turned back to the anthropocentric approach to nature, believing that scientific knowledge allows man to control nature, while the increase in the latter's possibilities makes him happy. Descartes claimed that man is the lord and owner of nature. This exaltation of man's powers and the self-appointment to lordship continues to this day but it is becoming obvious that we have reached the limit. Endangered animal species, deforestation, ocean pollution and melting glaciers make it clear that the ruler's throne is starting to wobble.

In the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre's performance *Still Life* (premiered in September 2020), the throne is replaced with a table onto which one stuffed rabbit after another is brought. The actors talk about where they got the stuffed animals for the performance, and to a person who is not familiar with taxidermy they tell about different ways of making stuffed animals, thus right from the beginning allowing the viewers to decide on their own point of view and the side they support.

Some do not see anything wrong with this process, while others find taxidermy an unjustifiable practice that violates animal rights. Still others maybe find only certain methods of taxidermy acceptable, such as when animals are not killed for this purpose. The actors reveal that some stuffed animals are made from animals that died by accident or roadkill, while others are made from animals that were killed specifically for this purpose, though none of them are endangered species. We are used to seeing stuffed animals in museums or hunting lodges, but it is quite an unusual thing to see on the stage. From the very beginning, the question arises: why are rabbits the main symbol of this performance? What would happen if they were replaced by another animal species or if the stuffed animals were more diverse? We all know what a rabbit looks like, what its body shape is; many of us have even met this animal face to face. This experience allows to better recognize the characteristics of the rabbit on the stage and to appreciate the work of the actors controlling the animal.

The scene in which the action takes place is reminiscent of a work environment. Stuffed animals and objects from which reliefs for the rabbits are created are openly visible, while lights and cables are moved by the actors themselves. In front of the stage, in the center, there is a table that becomes a stage for the rabbits, a throne for several minutes.

Each rabbit acts on a relief specially designed for it. The actors create them using moss, pebbles, drops of water, soil and other naturally occurring structures. It is hard to imagine how that would look like when watching a live performance, but close-up filming takes the viewers even closer to realistic episodes of rabbit life. Each rabbit is at the same time moved by three actors, so every little flinch, movement, or breath is precisely fulfilled. When watching the rabbit, viewers can presume the direction from which the sound is coming, as the rabbit's ears move towards it, while the nose begins to move and sniff.

Different emotions of the rabbit can be observed: satisfaction when feeding its offspring, timidity, fear over the slightest thing, e.g., when something tickles its fur or whiskers. Different episodes do not have any plot, the



Ljubljana Puppet Theatre: *Still Life* / photo: Jaka Varmuž ▲

rabbits are living their normal life in nature and performing actions at their usual speed. Their lives are not adapted to the stories of struggles, survival, and love that viewers like.

We can see a rabbit sniffing the ground, feeding its offspring, eating. By observing a rabbit living an episode from its life, its characteristics as an animal also become apparent. These three components – realistic relief, very accurate and precise movements, and episodes from the life of rabbits – allow the viewers to dive into fiction, to believe in their vitality, to forget for a moment that the movements are controlled by the actors.

At the end of each scene, the stuffed animal is laid down on the table, while around it the actors silently wait, their eyes on the dead rabbit. The first rabbits take their breath away – it seems that their vitality has just become very believable, but then they turn back into stuffed animals that fall down like a soft toy. However, after several very similar episodes everything becomes predictable, the repetitive form does not provide any additional information, thus diminishing the initial impression and effect of the first episodes. Later the rabbit and the whole relief are put into the rack, together with the whole relief, where it becomes just another ordinary dead thing.

The same happens in museums: animals are turned into expositions which allows to view them without any fear and to come closer than it would be possible in nature. But isn't it just elevating your own powers above those of nature and animals? If we saw a wolf in nature, we would probably run away as fast as we could; but what about a stuffed wolf? Isn't it an unfair fight? The pause accompanying each rabbit is amplified by using sounds. While the rabbit is being controlled and is living its life, recorded sounds of nature can be heard: wind, branches rustling, birds chirping, the sound of grass being munched.

When the rabbit loses its life, instrumental man-created music is played. It amplifies and signifies the intervention of man, wordlessly introduces a consideration of what would happen if a man hadn't interfered in this creature's life. Rabbits dwell in diverse environments, they adapt to sun-

scorched fields, to sandy locations where it is difficult to find edible plants, but against humans and their guns rabbits are helpless.

In the end, all the rabbit actors are stacked on top of each other. They are not moved – there is no life. It is only a pile of dead stiff animals that do not play any role – their performance is over. During the performance, the rabbits played the role of animals that wanted to live, however, this they did not do on their own, but because they were controlled by the actors using special mechanisms installed in the rabbits' bodies.

This answers the question I had at the very beginning of the performance: will the rabbit's life be preserved on stage? But no one, not even the hands of three people can revive a dead animal. Life is temporary and fragile, no matter whether that of a bear's, a pig's or a man's. At the end of the performance the phrase is uttered: Nine attempts to preserve life – however, when life ends or is ended, preserving it is no longer possible.

We are the first generation to grasp the fragility of nature and the intervention of our powers into its cycles. We think we have the right to decide which living being should end up on a display in a museum, or maybe hanged on a wall in somebody's home. But then the question arises: what is an animal's life worth? Is the desire to demonstrate the beauty of an animal a sufficient reason to take away its life? Maybe the beauty of an animal is not in its fur or the shape of its ears, but rather in its life, movements, decisions, freedom... So, after all, who is sitting on the throne, and should it be occupied at all?

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- Bertoncej, Tjaša (2021). Interview with Martina Maurič Lazar. Non-published. (a)
- Bertoncej, Tjaša (2021), Interview with Nika Arhar. Non-published. (b)
- Bertoncej, Tjaša (2021), Interview with Zala Dobovšek. Non-published (c)

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The “EU Contemporary Puppetry Critical Platform” is an international project between four European countries led by the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre in Slovenia, with other partners in Croatia (The Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek), Lithuania (Vilnius Theatre “Lėlė”) and Scotland (Puppet Animation Scotland/Manipulate Festival).

The project aims to reposition puppet theatre criticism as an element in the public discourse, as well as to make contemporary puppet theatre relevant to a wider public by building an audience with an integrated approach and contemporary technology. An equally important objective is to alter prejudiced public perceptions of puppetry being “only for children” and an “elitist” form of art.

The project is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

Contemporary puppetry in Lithuania, Scotland, Slovenia and Croatia, on its way to the experiment, questions the relationship between the stage and the audience, omits puppet dramaturgy, breaks the ramp and redefines the performance space, often enriching it with film or video games. The focus has been shifting through the history of puppetry, and the final result is the total theatre. In a contemporary puppet performance, the active spectator becomes an intimate co-author of the performance, the critic represents a bridge between the performers and the spectator, and the review itself is a form of self-analysis and subjective judgment which is never an absolute truth.

— from the review by Teodora Vigato, PhD

The book *Contemporary Puppetry and Criticism* is an important step towards satisfying the dire need to write about new forms of puppetry art and particularities of puppetry criticism. It brings together a variety of authors, from world-famous names, through critics who have established themselves in their own countries, to the emerging young forces. It is a collection of extremely valuable texts that will contribute to a better insight into contemporary puppetry and its understanding, as well as indicate the importance of criticism for this artistic expression.

— from the review by Livija Kroflin, PhD

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