

# ON THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PUPPETICAL<sup>1</sup>

Slavcho Malenov, puppet theatre director

When we say Puppet Theatre in Bulgaria, we are usually referring to a wide field of activities also containing the “puppet” phenomenon. Playing with puppets, playing with dolls, faith and naivety are basic elements of this art intended supposedly for children, which, however, is more often aimed at adults. The very meaning of ‘puppet’ has evolved over time and today we accept that a puppet can be anything (figure, object, silhouette, shadow, sign, or symbol). The diverse manifestations of the puppet, the variety of shapes and the blend of understandings of puppetry and the puppetical have accompanied the puppet theatre throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only if we can trace the differences and contrasts in the aesthetic attitudes of those who have made and make puppet theatre today, will we be able to trace the movement in its development.

I am not a historian and my goal is not to point out or prove historical facts, but to try to analyze and reflect on them. This is just an attempt to provide an overview of some important events that influenced the movement of aesthetics in the puppet theatre in our country.

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<sup>1</sup> *Puppetical*. Obsolete term (in some old dictionaries) meaning ‘pertaining to a puppet’. Philpott, A. R. *Dictionary of Puppetry*. Boston: Plays, 1969, p. 215.

## **Beginnings of professional puppet theatre in Bulgaria**

We can assume that the first organized show with marionettes (string puppets), by several artists involved with the *Brambazatsite* (*The Kazoos*) orchestra<sup>2</sup> in 1924, was how it all started. Yes, but they only did it to provoke jokes and fun. It was not their day job. Besides, where shall we place travelling puppeteers, like Neno Kukladzhiata (Neno the Puppeteer)<sup>3</sup> from the village of Nova Mahala and the others like him? If they made a living with puppet shows, then they were professionals. And that’s how we get to 1893.

The late-19<sup>th</sup> century characters in Ivan Vazov’s novel *Under the Yoke* who performed the play *Genevieve of Brabant*<sup>4</sup> (1876) did not just make theatre. They

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<sup>2</sup> Architect Atanas Donkov, with group of artists, *Brambazatsite*, staged in Sofia the first puppet show (March 8, 1924). The marionettes were caricatures of the performers themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Neno Milchev Cholakov (1861–1916). He was a blacksmith, who in 1893 began to give shows with two puppets on a small box, Racho and Dshka, and perform with them around the country.

<sup>4</sup> *Geneviève de Brabant* is the original title of this play, known in Bulgaria as *Mnogostradalna Geneveva* (literally, *The Long-suffering Genevieve*).



*Cinderella* by T. Gabbe, directed by M. Penkova, stage design M. Nacheva, music P. Hadjiev, Puppet Theater – Sofia, 1951.

wanted to contrast European cultural values to the existing Oriental forms of spectacle.

The travelling puppeteers in Bulgaria, as described by Austro-Hungarian author Felix Kanitz<sup>5</sup>, were a product of the Turkish theatrical tradition *Ortaoyunu*, which showed rough farces and play of imitations.

*Ortaoyunu performances (as well as the shadows theatre Karagöz) have no connection with the theatre in the Aristotelian sense. They are episodic structures which do not*

<sup>5</sup> Kanitz, F. *P. Donau-Bulgarien Und Der Balkan: Historisch-geographisch-ethnographische Reisestudien aus den Jahren 1860–1879, Volume 3.* Leipzig: Hermann Fries, 1879.

*require the compulsive attention of the audiences. Each episode is independent; consequently, in different performances, the episodes can be interchanged, added to or subtracted from, according to the audience's reactions or the puppeteer's or actor's decision.*<sup>6</sup>

In the idea of creating a Bulgarian puppet theatre, Bulgarian intellectuals' aspirations to assign themselves to European cultural values play a significant role. The members of the Native Art club at the Slavyanska Beseda (*Slavic Conference society*)<sup>7</sup> accepted as their mission *the achievements of puppet theatre in Europe, to be developed in the spirit of our national character.*<sup>8</sup> This model underlies the future development of aesthetics in Bulgarian theatre as a whole, although the marks of *Ortaoyunu* would stay with it throughout its existence.

Going through the information offered by historians, we cannot fail to realize that in its development Bulgarian puppet theatre has often leaned on foreign models. This of course is not confined to our country; and Professor Elena Vladova very aptly called this process a *transfer of ideas and structures as a part of European modernity.*<sup>9</sup> Personally, I can see one particularly strong and important influence on the formation and development of puppet theatre in Bulgaria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely:

<sup>6</sup> And, Metin. *Drama at the Crossroads: Turkish Performing Arts Link past and Present, East and West.* Istanbul: Isis Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Cultural center for people of Slavic origin in Sofia, established in 1880. It is still active today, doing cultural and educational work.

<sup>8</sup> Vladova, Elena. *The Bulgarian Puppet Play from Modernity to the 1990s. Texts for Puppet Theatre in Bulgaria until the 1990s.* Sofia, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Czech connection

The Czechs were actively present in the cultural life of Bulgaria, before and after the Liberation. It is enough to mention the names of Konstantin Jireček, Jan Mrkvička and Yaroslav Věšín to see that to a large extent, European culture came here through them. We would be justified in adding the Prošek family here.<sup>10</sup>

In reality, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the so-called European type of the puppet theatre in Bulgaria could be seen only in the Prošek's



*The Nightingale* by P. Manchev, design L. Saev and M. Nacheva, music At. Boyadzhiev, Puppet Theater – Sofia, 1954.

<sup>10</sup> The brothers Jiří and Bogdan Prošek, who founded a brewery in 1884, were the conductors of many other manifestations of European culture in Bulgaria: they worked on the construction of railway tracks; the construction of the port of Varna; they contributed to the development of the first urban plan of Sofia; in 1879 they founded the first printing house and later a ceramic factory. It is a curious fact that the Eagle Bridge and the Lion Bridge were built not only with their support, but were also designed by their cousin Vaclav Prošek. They were also among the founders of the Slavyanska Beseda society and the Bulgarian Engineering and Architectural Society.

family theatre and in the puppet theatre of the Czech association.<sup>11</sup>

This was also where the funnymen from the *Brambazatsite* orchestra got their jolly ideas. The first puppet show they organized (March 8, 1924) led to the creation of an amateur puppet theatre at Slavyanska Beseda.<sup>12</sup>

In May 1929, the Czechs were the initiators and hosts of the establishment of UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette), the first international theatrical organization in the world. Mrs. Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova, co-founder of the puppet theatre at Slavyanska Beseda, also took part in the first congress in Prague.

It is interesting to note that the only puppets that were used in Bulgaria until 1946 were marionettes. The onset of marionettes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was seen in many European countries. In an article on the occasion of the Second UNIMA Congress in Paris (September 1929), published in the *New York Times Magazine*, we read that:

*It is an amazing fact that puppetry is popular in a country like Czechoslovakia, where there are 2,700 puppet theatres.*

<sup>11</sup> A Czech educational and entertainment club founded in Sofia in 1892.

<sup>12</sup> The first performance was held on June 26, 1924. The main figures in it were: arch. Atanas Donkov, the artist Alexander Bozhinov and the artist Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova. (E. Vladova, *The Bulgarian Puppet Play from Modernity to the 1990s.*)

Not everyone can see the sophisticated comedies of the reference theatre at the Municipal Library in Prague, where the puppets are real artists with qualities characteristic of themselves ... the invisible singers and speakers are under the podium and skillfully direct the sound waves to the stage, so you have the real feeling that you hear the puppets really talking. The illusion is complete...<sup>13</sup>



*The Misanthrope* after Molière, directed by Lyuben Groys, stage design Iv. Tsonev, statuary L. Tsakev, Puppet Theater – Sofia, 1968.

Achieving a “complete illusion” was the goal of the puppeteers of that period. The actor leaning over the puppet patronizes it and directs it from a distance, through the strings. He is like a god and the puppet follows his impulses.

### **The 40s. The German connection**

During World War II, Czechoslovakia was wiped off the map of Europe and German culture became dominant. In 1942, one actress from the Bulgarian National Theatre – Mara Penkova (1894–1959) – went to the Third Reich to specialize in puppetry. Penkova managed to use the knowledge gained there, although after the end of the war attitudes towards the defeated Germany changed dramatically in Bulgaria. In 1946 she founded a new Children’s Puppet Theatre in Sofia

whose successor today is the Sofia Puppet Theatre.

It only makes sense to ask why she, as a member of the Puppet Theatre at Slavyanska Beseda that existed until 1940, did not continue its traditions, but created a new one instead. The reasons could be many, but one is the most obvious – re-thinking the existing puppetry aesthetic. Penkova brought something new to Bulgaria at the time – the glove puppet.<sup>14</sup> Using the plasticity of the human hand, this puppet proved to be much more dynamic, more grotesque and more alive than the smooth human-like marionette. The times were new, and so was the role of the theatre in socio-political life. It is generally accepted that the glove puppet is a rebel puppet – a proclaimer of new ideas. The actor’s approach to it is also different. There is no patronizing here, on the contrary – raising it above her, the actor

<sup>13</sup> Middleton, W. I. *Even the puppets meet in convention.* – *The New York Times Magazine*, September 22, 1929.

<sup>14</sup> In Bulgaria the glove puppet is called ‘petrushka’, after the Russian national hero Petrushka.

turns it into an idol. She obeys it completely. It is the deity, and she gives her all her energy, so it can live.

Undoubtedly this new aesthetic approach enriched the expressiveness of the Bulgarian puppet theatre. The space behind the puppet screen allowed the *mise-en-scène* compositions to unfold in depth on the stage.

At the same time (1946), in the city of Plovdiv, Georgi Saravanov (1920–2000), a circus marionettist, founded a new puppet theatre – today’s State Puppet Theatre in Plovdiv. Saravanov built a professional puppet stage with four marionette bridges on which the puppeteers led puppets on long, over 2 m strings. This created a complete illusion of autonomous puppet life and a sense of depth on stage. In addition to shows aimed entirely at children, he put on classical operas, accompanied by an orchestra.

It is interesting that Saravanov did everything himself: he designed and constructed the puppets, trained the actors and directed. In 1946–1952 he produced 24 titles, using a director in only four of them and a set designer in only two.

### *The 50s. The Russian connection*

In the 1950s, the role of leading puppetry power in Europe was ceded to the Soviet Union. Sergey Obraztsov was the permanent Chief Artistic Director of the Central Puppet Theatre in Moscow after 1931. He and his theatre toured extensively around the world. This brought him incredible international popularity and made him the undisputed leader in world puppet theatre.

Obraztsov’s view of the “miracle of matter that becomes alive” was a leading formula for many years, defining the essence of pup-

pet theatre. He himself had a preference for puppet shows where the puppets appear from behind a puppet screen. His experience and his definitions of the puppet as a “metaphor” and an “instrument for creativity” proved extremely valuable for Mara Penkova’s theatre. However, the marionette was accused of being literal, human-like and inconsistent with the new metaphorical understanding of the puppet theatre.

The performances of Obraztsov with the so-called *Yavayka* puppets were a real sensation. They amazed with their scale. An entirely new aesthetic stood out in them – that of the director-artist. His modification of the Javanese *Vayag Golek* rod puppet, colloquially called *Yavayka*, spread throughout Eastern Europe and dominated its stages for over 20 years.<sup>15</sup> Large-scale performances with puppets, based on Obraztsov’s model, became an example of superiority over the West. The *Yavayka* showed off a lavish costume, a flourish, and bright movements. The idea of **artist-ry** entered the discourse, even though it had been a priority as far back as in the amateur Art Puppet Theatre (1929–1940) at Slavyanska Beseda led by Ekaterina Bazilevich.<sup>16</sup> However, now that the country was politically committed to Soviet culture, it had a new context.

In 1952, Georgi Saravanov moved from Plovdiv to the city of Varna, where he laid the foundations of the Varna Puppet Theatre in the same year. A difficult man, he obeyed the “new Soviet cliché” and accepted the puppet screen, but competed

<sup>15</sup> Tománek, Alois. *PODOBY LOUTKY*. Prague: Faculty of Theatre Arts, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Ekaterina Bazilevich, a Russian dramatic actress, artistic director of the theatre from 1929. She called it “Art Puppet Theatre” and directed its activities until her death in 1940.

with Obraztsov, creating his new unique system of puppets borrowed from the Japanese *karakuri* theatre<sup>17</sup> which he called 'lower marionettes,' i.e. puppets operated by strings, but from below. He claimed that they were superior to the actor because they had two more options than him.

### **The 60s. The French connection, Yves Joly**

In the late 1950s, following the example of Obraztsov's world tours, Bulgarian puppet theatres also appeared on the international stage. Bucharest hosted several world festivals organized by UNIMA.

Going abroad literally opened the eyes of the puppet artists for the modern developments in their art. A unique show staged by the troupe of French puppeteer Yves Joly had an especially powerful impact on them.

*Human hands, objects, flat figures made of cardboard and paper were used on the stage. What was valuable in the performance was not the plot, but the metaphorically associative language used to convey the events. It is this new language that turned out to be the main theme in the performance. Short pieces such as Paper Tragedy, Hands Only and The Living Umbrellas show a new way of thinking and expressing through symbol, sign and metaphor.*<sup>18</sup>

Inspired retellings of this show made the word of mouth rounds. This new aesthetic attitude radically changed the un-

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<sup>17</sup> Karakuri-ningyo, Japanese mechanical puppets of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki>.

<sup>18</sup> Jurkowski, Henrik. *Metamorphoses of the puppet theatre of the twentieth century*. St. Zagora, 2007.

derstanding of the puppetical and the puppet theatre in our country. Later, generations of students would be inspired and educated in the spirit of Yves Joly's inventions. The mimetic and symbolic nature of puppet theatre became a topic of serious discussion. This was the beginning of the demystification of the puppet in Bulgaria and the development of the puppet master's self-awareness as an artist.

### **Illusion or Metaphor?**

The innovative ideas of a stylized theatre of signs, received with enthusiasm, seriously collided with the inherited views of an **illusory** children's puppet theatre. A loud echo of this opposition in the Sofia Central Puppet Theatre was the appearance at the Second UNIMA Festival in Bucharest (1960) of two completely different performances: *Rabbit School*, directed by Lilyana Docheva<sup>19</sup>, and *Peter and the Wolf*, based on the music of Sergey Prokofiev and directed by Atanas Ilkov<sup>20</sup> and Nikolina Georgieva<sup>21</sup>. Especially for the festival, abridged versions of both shows were included in one performance. This collective show was a great success.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Docheva, Lilyana, one of the first actresses and puppet theatre directors in the Central Puppet Theatre.

<sup>20</sup> Ilkov, Atanas (1924–2013), puppet theatre director and pedagogue, full-time professor at NATFA.

<sup>21</sup> Georgieva, Nikolina (1931–2016), puppet theatre director and pedagogue, full-time professor at NATFA.

<sup>22</sup> It won First Prize and Gold Medal, as well as the Festival Prize for Originality and Imagination. This was the first international recognition for the Bulgarian puppet theatre.

The success of *Peter and the Wolf* seemed to overshadow that of *Rabbit School*. Working on a musical story without text was something completely new. Another novelty was the original aesthetics of signs in the presentation of the characters and the story. The puppets of architect Ivan Tsonev<sup>23</sup> were **absolutely stylized** – without facial features, complemented only by the human hand. Surprisingly, the cat and the wolf were made of tight steel spirals. The viewer was captivated not by following the plot, but by the joy of reading the inventive symbolic messages in the musical story. Despite the censors accusing the show of “formalism,” its success abroad managed to quell critics’ passions.

To speak about modernity and modernism in Bulgaria was taboo in the 60s. All manifestations of modernity were declared an “ideological diversion” of the West. There were repressions against the fashion of tight skirts and tight trousers. Ponytails and Western music were banned. Modern things could only be spoken of quietly. Fortunately, the child focus of puppet theatre left it just out of sight of the fierce censorship and in its midst a quiet sort of modernism began to develop.

In 1962, three “silent modernists” – Tsonev, Ilkov and Georgieva – established a new specialty: Puppet Theatre, at the Higher Institute for Theatre and Film Art (VITIZ; now NATFA) that marked the beginning of higher education in this field. That was where a new and different aesthetics grew – that of the puppeteer-artist. A unique performance, *The Carnival of*

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<sup>23</sup> Tzonev, Ivan (1928–2017), architect, constructor, designer, artist, theatre manager. The greatest stage designer in the Bulgarian Puppet Theatre.

*Animals* (directed by N. Georgieva), was born in the modest puppetry auditorium. In it, students “painted” pictures on the white canvas of the puppet screen using only their bare hands. There were no puppets in the show. It was built only on lights and shadows, against the background of music by Saint-Saëns. This show had such magnetic impact that its TV recording won the Silver Rose Award at the Montreux Television Festival. This show traveled almost all over the world and received universal recognition for its unfading modernity, becoming a kind of symbol of the Bulgarian puppet theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***On the creative laboratories***

In the 60s, the Central Puppet Theatre in Sofia was a real theatre laboratory. Over 10 years, it became the centre of unprecedented artistic competition. Eight directors, seven set designers, three playwrights, two composers and all the best puppeteers in the country were gathered there.

Despite the theatre’s focus on shows for children, the adult spectators continued to be targeted as well. In 1962 came the most successful attempt in that direction, *Sylvester’s Treasure*, directed by At. Ilkov and with stage design by arch. Ivan Tsonev. It was a parody play about piracy, with characters from the Orient and the “rotten” West, which satirized topical issues. Ostensibly as a joke, “decadent jazz music” played on stage, as well as the pop hit *Let’s Twist Again*, banned at the time. It was a roaring success. Tickets were sold out. This was the strongest period in the history of that theatre, remembered for its unprecedented organization, many international tours and large box office proceeds.

To be an author. To say something new in the theatre. The artist and her means of expression. These came to be the principles guiding in the construction of each performance. The figures of the director, the set designer and the playwright stood out. Narrative thinking and puppetry technique gave way to the play of means and form. The main artistic directions were:

**Puppetry pantomime** – a tried and true aesthetic: wordless performances, built on musical works by modern authors such as S. Prokofiev, I. Stravinsky, etc., suited to tours abroad.

**Theatre of the poetic word** – a point of view with which the poet, playwright and director Ivan Teofilov<sup>24</sup> made his mark. He wanted to elevate the aesthetics of the theatre by introducing “highbrow literature” into it. He created a number of (unique for his time) poetic adaptations and brought them to the stage to high acclaim.

**Theatre of the Artist.** One of the brightest figures of the reformer artist in our country is architect Ivan Tsonev. To this day, he remains an unsurpassed master in puppet stage design. In his stage decisions, the visual impact was so strong that directing often came down to serving the picture. New phrases were coined, such as “puppet theatre is a living picture”, “dynamic scenography”, etc.

*Krali Marko* (1967) was his largest work. In it, he used huge two-meter puppets with grotesquely carved faces dressed in coarse hemp material. He drew on iconography, which was very bold in the times of militant atheism. It was a large-scale “living picture” complemented by Teofilov’s poetic lines.

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<sup>24</sup> Teofilov, Ivan (1931), playwright, director, poet.

*The Misanthrope* by Molière, directed by Lyuben Groys,<sup>25</sup> is another pinnacle of his work, with its memorable unusual puppets that suggest a society of porcelain people.

These puppet performances were staged with great success at the Edinburgh Arts Festival, UK (1969). Excellent reviews were published in the press, there were discussions: “Modern puppet theatre – theatrical or fine art?”; “Theatre of the director, the playwright or the artist?”

### **The 70s. Modernity by habit**

In the early 1970s, the first VITIZ graduates made their appearance on the puppet stages. Some of them focused on directing. After the boom of the 60s, great momentum was gained. But the glory of past successes was attractive. Much of the energy in the 70s was invested in keeping up with the level of the 60s.

Architect Ivan Tsonev left the Central Puppet Theatre and returned to Varna where he created his new laboratory in tandem with Zlati Zlatev.<sup>26</sup>

Teofilov, following the tried and tested principle that the theatre is a dynamic scenography, replaced him with the muralist Encho Pironkov and continued to create large-scale heroic epics, such as *The Scarlet Queen* (1974), *Indzhe Voyvoda* (1978).

More shows in a similar style followed, such as: *Angel Voyvoda* (1975) in Stara Zagora, directed by Vasil Apostolov,<sup>27</sup> with

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<sup>25</sup> Groys, Lyuben (1934–1982), famous drama and puppet theatre director.

<sup>26</sup> Zlatev, Zlati (1939), puppet director and theatre manager, first-generation graduate of VITIZ.

<sup>27</sup> Apostolov, Vasil (1936–2003), puppet director and theatre manager, first-generation graduate of VITIZ.

stage design by Lyubomir Tsakev,<sup>28</sup> and *Horo* (1975) in Plovdiv, directed by Yulia Ognyanova,<sup>29</sup> with stage design by Lyubomir Tsakev, *The Happiest Man* (1978) in Varna, and *The Winged Master* (1979) in Shumen, directed by Zlati Zlatev, with stage design by arch. Ivan Tsonev.

### **On actor's creativity**

Although present in the theatrical cultural space, puppet actors were insufficiently liberated. The puppet screen hid them and the figures of the author, the director and the set designer came to the fore. The theory that "puppet theatre is a collective art" was promoted and the role of the group process in the creative work was emphasized. Gordon Craig's dream of "... actor, plus fire, minus selfishness..." was achieved in reality. The actor's selfishness he references was suppressed, but this was not the case with the selfishness of the directors. Famous dramatic actors were invited for live roles. The puppeteers behind the puppet screen gradually became puppet-porters. The huge heavy puppets were often controlled by three people. The puppet control was inserted into a special belt strapped over the shoulders of the main performer so that the whole body could take the weight. The pre-recorded phonogram (and not always by the performer himself) directed the tempo and actions of their characters. This puppet **radio theatre**, relying on the successes of the 60s, was now spinning its



*The Princess with the Echo* by V. Pospishilova, directed by Y. Tsankova, stage design M. Petrova, music P. Tsankov, Puppet Theater – Sofia, 1982.

wheels. Most depressing of all, however, was the feeling during curtain call, when people dressed in black would come out of the dark, tired-faced and defeated, bow with awkward smiles and hide again behind the puppet screen under the dictates of the ruthless phonogram. I swore not to do theatre this way. The actors had to leave this Ghetto.

### **The Czech connection again**

The Pilsen's Festival "Josef Skupa" (1976) was an extremely important event for two generations in the puppet theatre. It showed that in Czechoslovakia, it was not the Central theatre, but small theatres that could be spiritual oases in the art world. Apart from Alfa Theatre in Pilsen and the Naive Theatre in Liberec, which showed brilliant and unusual, modern shows, the

<sup>28</sup> Tsakev, Lyubomir (1940–2012), important puppet set designer and theatre manager.

<sup>29</sup> Ognyanova, Yulia (1923–2016), drama and puppet theatre director and pedagogue in NATFA.

DRAK Theatre from Hradec Králové performed strikingly strongly with productions by the young director Josef Krofta. These puppeteers had a cause. They had spoken out against the conservative aesthetic of their capital's puppet theatres and were following their own new path – the development of puppet theatre as an art, not as a serving ideological institution. The young Krofta, who had not even graduated (for political reasons), staged six incredible shows there. It was an unforgettable experience of inspired and full of life actors playing freely and passionately, using **all means** of the performing arts. They sang, danced, played various instruments, they played masterfully with puppets of all kinds and with all sorts of objects. These people fought and defended the freedom of their art. It was a celebration – a demonstration of scenography, acting and music solutions. Teams of like-minded people united by outstanding creative leaders. They were guided not by dictatorship, but by the freedom of common creativity, in which everyone is a person with their own presence. The name of the DRAK theatre, which many associate with a dragon, actually stands for Divadlo Rozmanitosti, Atrakcí a Komédie.<sup>30</sup> This was also the program of that creative laboratory. It poured out from their shows, and Krofta did not even think to “get himself a spot” in the capital. On the contrary, because of him and his troupe, people from Prague went to the theatre in Hradec Králové.

For the first time, we, the Bulgarian puppetry acting and directing students, saw shows that celebrated the puppet and the actor. On stage, they were not in a rivalry but helped each other and comple-

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<sup>30</sup> Theatre of Variety, Attractions and Comedy.

mented each other organically. There we all saw what it meant to work in art with a purpose and realized that was the kind of theatre we wanted to make.

**Homogeneous specificity** as a principle of development in puppet theatre had disintegrated in Czechoslovakia even before the Prague Spring, but it had to happen in Bulgaria, although much later.

**The diverse means of expression** completely changed the aesthetics of puppet theatre as an art form. Heterogeneity suggested an outright puppet theatre of artists present at their work at the time of its creation. The actor was both a creator and a participant.

In the autumn of 1976, the stage of the Central Puppet Theatre saw the explosion of a completely different and modern show – *A Story of a Good Little Red Riding Hood*. Instead of the boring black puppet screen, Atanas Ilkov brought to the fore the color of the puppets and the decor, the actors and the joy of their work. They had fun in their play and everything on stage served them in it.

The following year, his student Kiryakos Argiropoulos<sup>31</sup> did his graduation performance in Burgas, *The Little Sunflower*. It illuminated the puppetry skies with the charm of a new aesthetic. The young actors playing live enhanced it by having fun with the new system tested at VITIZ at the time – “mimic” puppets, which had a particularly attractive effect. The actor would release the puppet in front of her, giving it the opportunity to defend its character's position.

**Each premiere by VITIZ graduates** was eagerly awaited and turned into a celebration. New horizons opened up. Fairy tales

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<sup>31</sup> Argiropoulos, Kiryakos (1950) – a puppet theatre director and theatre manager, 6<sup>th</sup> generation of VITIZ.

went beyond the purely narrative. The address of children's puppet shows expanded. The parents also had fun.

**Varna's State Puppet Theatre** was the first to dare to compete with the capital. Tsonev worked there in tandem with Zlatev, which brought prestige and success. Varna also had the established Golden Dolphin International Festival. In the late 1970s the Tsonev brand proved itself again. At the Golden Dolphin '78 the Grand Prize was awarded for the first time, to *Rumi and the Old Lion*, directed by Zlati Zlatev and designed by architect Ivan Tsonev. At the 1979 National Review of Puppet Theatres, out of the six awarded shows, three were set by Tsonev.

The puppet theatre of Stara Zagora was also recognized for *To Put it Mildly*, with director V. Apostolov and set designer L. Tsakev, which showed growth and maturity. Apostolov and Tsakev, filled with great physical and spiritual energy, embracing the idea of Great Puppet Art, built a professional puppet theatre with a modern stage, studios and equipment, a children's confectionery and many other attractions for the kids.

### ***The 80s and Plovdiv. Advent of the new wave of directors and the live actor***

In the 1980s I found the Plovdiv Puppet Theatre stripped down to the bone. After the "mass retirement," it had a single title in the repertoire left and literally no audience. The team we built with the set designer Silva Bachvarova<sup>32</sup> and the director

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<sup>32</sup> Bachvarova, Silva (1953), scenographer, artist, illustrator, designer and pedagogue in the Academy of Art.

Petar Pashov<sup>33</sup> started working on several priorities: updating the repertoire; bringing the audience back in the theatre; active participation in the cultural life of the city and development of the troupe. Although they were good, the actors needed all-round improvement through interesting creative tasks. Authors such as Urban Gyula, Valeri Petrov, Boris Aprilov, Exupéry also found their way in the repertoire. These texts offered a lot to work with and opportunities for individuals to shine. The use of various puppet systems, combined with live acting, playing music and singing, turned the performances into theatrical events.

In the 80s, the puppet screens were gradually left behind. Saravanov's marionette bridges in Plovdiv were also demolished. The puppetical took on a different look. The actor was taking over the stage more and more freely. With her attitude she complemented the expressiveness of the puppet, emphasizing the details. Actors now had to answer questions like why the puppeteers were visible, who were these people on stage. An initial situation justifying the presence of the puppeteer emerged as a necessity, it was supposed to help the spectator accept her presence. The principle of "theatre within the theatre" became almost mandatory. Actors appeared on the stage and declared that they belonged to different professions: porters, vagrants, medical staff, officials, police officers, waiters and what not, and after a short period of pretend hesitation, agreed to play with puppets and do puppet theatre, telling one story or another. Although not always

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<sup>33</sup> Pashov, Petar (1955–2017), puppet theatre director and pedagogue, assoc. professor at NATFA.



*In the Moon Room* by V. Petrov, directed by P. Pashov, stage design S. Bachvarova, music P. Tsankov, State Puppet Theatre – Plovdiv, 1985.

very convincing, it was fun. It gave the opportunity to develop the acting in different aspects. The attitude of the actor-puppeteer constantly complemented, commented on or criticized the position of the actor-hero, his play with the puppet, as well as the actions of the puppet character. This experience of living the part, empathy and removal from the character, woven into the stage situation, produced unique results and became a sign of quality.

### ***Rehabilitation of the marionette***

The removal of the puppet screen pushed the glove puppets and the *yavayka* out of the stage. Priority was given to the *variety show* and *mimic* puppets (controlled in front of the actor), puppets made by objects and materials, and to some extent the *manyayka* (the puppet with a living human hand). In this new space, the marionette timidly peered on the puppet stage. This system was not studied at the

academy and only those who worked at the Plovdiv Puppet Theatre had the courage to experiment with it. The “queen of puppets” returned from exile with due dignity. Without bragging, she proved her worth once again. The illusion of this puppet coming to life turned out to be mesmerizing for the viewer. Much of the forgotten technological knowledge was restored. The marionette proved patient and tolerantly let the actor get close to it, unlike the impudent glove puppet or the proud *yavayka*, which did not allow themselves to be discredited. Dozens of performances in the 1980s reconfirmed her presence in theatres. All of them proved one thing: in order to live, the marionette needs attention and love. It must feel its centre of gravity, relying on the artist’s hand. “The marionette’s soul is at the centre of balance.” The actor must constantly feel its trust and the two encourage each other. It sounds almost like a love story, but it is true!

### The 90s

In the early 90s, the presence of the puppet actor on stage was already an inevitable fact. Whether he would consciously isolate himself or consciously advertise his presence in the stage action was a matter of perspective in the decision. In both cases, however, the actor began to clearly realize his presence on stage and use it. Despite his obvious presence, the puppet actor still managed to hide. This was necessary for him to free himself. Now he was hiding not behind the puppet screen, but behind the puppet, behind the mask, behind any object – he even managed to squeeze behind the small clown’s nose.

We all still remember the wave of clowns that flooded puppet theatre in the 1990s. Although it was too big a wave, it helped us poke our noses, so to speak, in new spaces and understand new processes in acting. This developed **the puppetical in the living presence**. The actor motivated his behavior clearly: I am not doing this, the one with the nose is. This position temporarily relieved him of responsibility and allowed him to laugh at the situation, at the shortcomings, even at himself. Using this principle, the actor entered into a multifaceted relationship with objects and the stage environment. The spectator witnessed acting and directing in which the symbiosis between the actor and the puppet reached unknown heights of figurative suggestions and associations.

In Sunny Suninski’s<sup>34</sup> show *The Proposal* by A. P. Chekhov, only several wooden frames served as a living environment for the characters. Putting his face in the frame, the actor suddenly changed her nature. These frames served both to expose the portrait of each character, and to emphasize its limitations, or became an obstacle to real human contact. Their effective reassignment at any given moment gave rise to ever new comic situations.

And while that show was dominated by an almost farcical dynamic, then in *Don Quixote*, Plovdiv Puppet Theatre, directed by Petar Pashov, with stage design by Silva Bachvarova and Vasil Rokomanov,<sup>35</sup> the mystification and demystification of the material carried serious and shocking sug-

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<sup>34</sup> Sunny Suninski (1970) is a pseudonym of Alexander Ivanov Ivanov, theatre director.

<sup>35</sup> Rokomanov, Vasil (1954), scenographer and pedagogue, full-time professor at the Academy of Art.

gestions, in line with the times of great political change.

The action takes place in prison. Living there, in misery and filth, repulsive and spiritless “creatures” create their characters on the stage from the crumpled papers scattered on the floor. This symbol, the paper, carries with it the idea of litter and of something hastily done, but it also was pierced with a sense of letters, and of something fragile and ephemeral. The curious thing in this case was that the active party is not Don Quixote, but the circle of nobodies. It embodies a society of frightened little souls who ally themselves, in their resentment, against the “different one” and transform into a human windmill. They are amused by their own vulgarity, and as if in jest trample, violate, and crucify the spirit of Don Quixote – an incredible solution by which the self-immolation of the paper puppet is a kind of apotheosis.

The destruction of the hero, in the spirit of his creator, the breaking of his resistance, seem to change his shabby executioners. They wipe the dirt off their faces and their eyes cleared. It is as if they have purified themselves through the sacrifice and start singing: *To dream the impossible dream*. This show was a musical. It involved singing, brilliant and moving. This required great energy and strong preliminary musical-singing preparation of the puppet actors.

The development of singing skills and plasticity was especially characteristic of the performances of director Bonyo Lungov,<sup>36</sup> who developed his interests in variety theatre and music shows with puppets and puppet elements. In the per-

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<sup>36</sup> Loungov, Bonyo (1953), actor and director, pedagogue and full-time professor in NATFA.

formance *Folklore Magic*, while beautifully performing folk songs and dances, the actors momentarily created spectacular grotesque characters from all sorts of everyday folk objects. These cheerful characters entered into vivid relationships and built short miniatures that ended with the respective song and the characters became objects again to be recomposed into other, even more interesting characters. This form of puppetry fascinated, both with the tireless rhythm and dynamics of the performers, and with the momentary animation of the objects, which, after completing their task, become things again.

This performance was conceived in Theatre 13, one of the first private theatre-laboratories that emerged during the so-called democratic transition. Only in Sofia, there were about 50 of those. The impulse for **auteur theatre** was the result of the discrepancy between the high creative potential accumulated in professionally educated creators and the ever-narrowing space for interesting creative shows in the State Puppet Theatres.

Atelier 313 Theatre was one of the first vents for this disagreement. The belief that puppet theatre was still alive, in spite of everything, brought together artists with restless spirits. Although financially strapped, they gave their energy to the cause.

In *The Master and Margarita*, directed by Slavcho Malenov<sup>37</sup> and stage design by Vasil Rokomanov, the puppetry revealed the intimate world of the hero. The Master, who finds himself in the “house of sorrow” (Mad House), carries with him two puppets – Hers and His. They are the result of

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<sup>37</sup> Malenov, Slavcho (1950), puppet theatre director and pedagogue, full-time professor in NATFA.

his idealized image of himself and her, by which he resurrects the memory of his great lost love. The puppets are the other She and the other He from the world of his psyche. The presence of these characters on stage allows the actor to compose an intertwined story – a mixture of a fantasy and an actual reality. The lack of love prevents the hero from perceiving reality, and he only really lives in his memories – with his puppets.

In the show *Musketeers' Honor*, directed by Petar Pashov and Slavcho Malenov, with set design by Vasil Rokomanov, the puppets of the musketeers were made of swords, as a sign of the spiritual nature of the heroes. They follow their mission to fight in the name of their ideals – they are men-swords.

### ***The new millennium – an inward development***

The new millennium has also brought new challenges. Multimedia and digital technologies came on the stage. It was now possible to project 3D characters on the puppet screen, controlled by a computer joystick. The illusory effect was there, but in many cases it looked like a techno-



*Insomnia: Water*, directed by J. Pashova, NATFA Puppet Theater, 2004

logical demonstration and did not achieve the artistic effect of theatrical magic. However, these were attempts to bring to light a new world, inherent in computer games and the Internet. The montage approach borrowed from TV ads also tried to push out the narrative structure of the productions.

New dimensions in the use of the puppet theatre and the puppetical opened up. The efforts were focused not so much on mastering the possibilities of puppetry, as on expanding the possibilities of the puppetical as such, to make the non-puppetical, puppetical.

I have enjoyed a long-term creative collaboration with the set designers Silva Bachvarova and Vasil Rokomanov that gave life to almost all my shows. This has allowed us to penetrate quite deeply into some manifestations of puppet-theatrical expression. In his book *Scenography for Oxymorons and Fairy Tales* (“Сценография за оксиморони и вълшебна приказка”) Dr. Vasil Rokomanov discusses scenography discoveries from our recent joint works, such as creating a conceptual machine for manipulating the stage space. These are kinetic installations related to the conceptual grain of the spectacle, combining the three – **ations: rotation, denivelation and transformation**. These complex functional constructions are extremely simple to control, as the actor has the opportunity to play and restructure the stage space in an instant. Thanks to the flexible construction, the conceptual grain of this spatial solution is an oxymoron. It contains the eternal duality – idea and reality, truth and untruth, lie and dream... These constructions are constantly changing, like human ideas and desires, they destabilize and self-regulate, suggesting

the association that in order to find inner harmony, one has to look at things from the other side – then one achieves balance. Like a huge puppet, the set becomes an independent personage who reacts to situations, places emphases and has its own suggestions.

### ***The Theatre Academy remained the only creative puppet laboratory***

Among the interesting developments in recent years is the work of Prof. Jenny Pashova<sup>38</sup>, which she calls an **ascetic puppet theatre**. There are no puppets, either in the classical or the alternative sense of the term. However, there is a lot of the puppetical in it. Objects acquire qualities and semantic weight depending on the attitude of the participants towards them. They do not become subjects with which the action is conducted and are not even subjected to animation. This is **puppet theatre without puppets**. It sounds paradoxical, but it is still a puppet theatre due to the abundance of purely puppetical means and elements.

By rediscovering and rethinking, an object or material becomes a mediator in revealing the essence and relationships of the characters. Thus, they are not direct, but indirect participants in the action, and being manipulated, practically manipulate the stage life of the characters.

The suggestive effect in the short piece *The Water* is especially strong: the thin stream of running water is an independent, third actor in the relationship between the Boy and the Girl. Water is

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<sup>38</sup> Pashova, Jenny (1953), extraordinary puppet actress and pedagogue, full-time professor in NATFA.

used at times as an occasion to play (spraying each other), sometimes as a sacred natural element that washes and purifies, and other times as a symbol of their thirst. Each gently offers it to the other in his or her hands to slake her or his thirst. Suddenly the water stops flowing and they both eagerly start to catch the last drops in the air. The water, a momentary representation of their love, has run out. Realizing the “drought” in the relationship, they leave silently. The characteristic sound of the water gushing again brings them back, and the two set about filling a glass container together to have water forever. It is here that the water ceases to be an actor. Unexpectedly, it became a thing – a commodity, and each wants to have it for themselves. Amidst this unexpected conflict, the sound of the shattered glass vessel echoes ominously. Their fragile fleeting happiness is shattered, and they no longer have a place to store the life-giving fluid. In just a few minutes, the parable of human happiness is told to us through water, without words, but with a shockingly strong message.

### ***Is puppet theatre of today puppetical?***

After the political transition and the so-called theatrical reforms of the 1990s in Bulgaria, most of the theatres were castrated. They gradually got rid of their playwrights, set designers, composers and directors and lost their laboratory nature. The “guest direction”, understood as a cheaper alternative, can bring awards to a theatre, but cannot build its artistic platform. Theatres lost their identity.



*The Little Fairy*, directed by Sl. Malenov, puppets and costumes S. Bachvarova, stage design V. Rokomanov, music Vl. Djambazov, State Puppet Theater – Stara Zagora, 2009

The lament for the puppet in the puppet theatre grew very intense. There was a shortage of fairy tales, of magic and illusion. Showing how the theatre sausage is made, the confusion in fairy tales, their deconstruction and their narration in the form of various misunderstandings, which was original in the 80 s, is now universally seen as boring. The action through a puppet was replaced by playing at theatre and excitement disappeared from the stage.

The performance *The Big Quixoteing*, directed by Veselka Kuncheva,<sup>39</sup> with stage design by Marieta Golomehova<sup>40</sup>, seemed to showcase this situation. By in-

<sup>39</sup> Kuncheva, Veselka (1976), contemporary modern Bulgarian puppet theatre director.

<sup>40</sup> Golomehova, Marieta (1969), outstanding contemporary puppet theatre set designer.

roducing us to the huge puppet of the corpulent and whining Dulcinea, who keeps gorging on her former glory, the authors tell us: ***we ate everything, even Don Quixote himself...***

We need to have a clear idea of what has happened in these 100 or 120 years to see how far we have come and where we are going!

Collecting festival awards has become the primary stimulus! Yes, we have many awards, but what do they reflect today, since the bar is set so low?

Today **mockery** dominates the theatre, the media and politics. It is an element of the **buffoonery** typical of some of the old forms of puppet theatre. One can find it in Punch, Petrushka, Kašpárek and many other similar mocking characters. Through clownery, buffoonery en-

tered the dramatic theatre, too. However, unlike in the 90 s, when actors put on a nose and acted on the principle: I am not doing this, the clown is, today they directly state: there is no clown, it is all me. Thus the **mock**er rises above things and dares to be a judge of everything. This **non-il-lusory** principle, so characteristic of the Oriental theatrical tradition *Ortaoyunu*, conquered the media, gradually entered politics and today we are surrounded by mocking *Karagöz* players. This makes me

think that we are back where we started, as after the Liberation.

**Is it time to turn to the Czech connection again?...**

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