

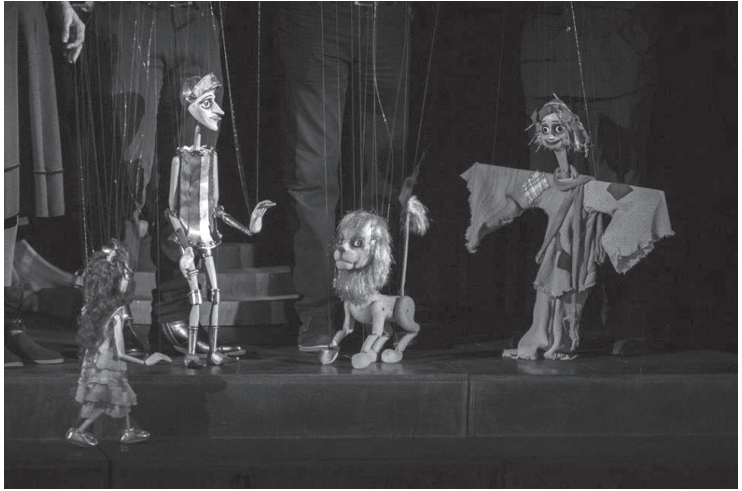
ADAPTATION IN PUPPET THEATRE

Zornitsa Kamenova

A play is a fictional dramatic text intended for staging and it has the potential for multiple directorial interpretations. Historically, the functioning of the text in the stage show was described by Patrice Pavis as follows: "The text was long considered a closed-off place for a single possible interpretation that had to be tracked down – as, for instance, in LEDOUX's formula recommending that a director faced with a text should "serve it rather than serving himself" (*servir et non se servir*). Today, however, the text is an invitation to seek out its many meanings, even its contradictions; it lends itself to new interpretations."¹

In a wider sense, this also applies to any theatrical texts, in their dramaturgical existence and capacity for transformation driving their coming to life on the stage.

Even though modern times and historical avant-garde experimentations are in large part based on the rift between literature (the text, the Word) and theatricality (the performance), literary works en-



The Wizard of Oz after L. F. Baum, directed by Slavcho Malenov, State Puppet Theatre – Burgas, 2017.

Photographer Alexander Stoyanov

sure as sources of theatrical texts in the performing arts, including puppetry. Currently, plays as original dramatic literature are rarely chosen as material for puppetry. Even so, the diversity of texts for the stage is enormous. The reason is that "towards the end of Modernism and in today's postmodern age any text can be adapted for the stage. This expands the field of adaptation infinitely, in so far as adaptation, in its modern definition, is the genre transforming any other genre, type, or form of text into a performance text."²

¹ Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*. University of Toronto Press, 1998, p. 366.

² Божидарова, И. *Драматургичната адаптация*. София, 2009, с. 25. [Bojidarova, I. *Dramatic Adaptation*. Sofia, 2009, p. 25.]

Nowadays, the repertoires of puppet theatres consist mostly of adaptations. These are identified with notes such as 'based on', 'stage version', 'adaptation', 'dramatization of', 'inspired by', simply 'after' or 'adapted from', and the title always bears a recognisable element of the original work. While distinctly designated, they bear no fundamental differences. It can be said that in a way they define and summarise the essence of adaptation, as adaptation means both the finished product – the text, and the process – “a practice generating new texts.”³

One of the most commonly used adaptation practices is implemented when accommodating an original text to the reception context.⁴ This aspect is especially significant in puppetry, because the type of audience the show is staged for plays an important part in it. The adaptation strategy varies depending on whether the puppet show is intended for children, adults, or families. A rather distant in time, but pertinent example are the folk tale plots of the Brothers Grimm, as they were originally created for adults and teem with politically incorrect elements: incest, evil mothers, bloodshed, violence, murder, no happy endings. In order to adapt them for children, the original grim and rough stories are toned down, a pursuit of justice is introduced, the good and the bad characters are clearly distinguished and there is always a moral to the

³ Николова, И. Текстове в движение. Проблеми на превода и адаптацията. София: Изд. “Петко Венедиков”, 2005, с. 157. [Nikolova, I. *Texts in Motion. On Translation and Adaptation*. Sofia: Petko Venedikov Publishing House, 2005, p. 157.]

⁴ Ibid.

story.⁵ The Grimm brothers' fairy tales are often used as stories for puppet shows precisely in those versions intended for children.⁶

On the other hand, adaptation is also used when a text needs to be *updated*. We know that a theatre performance is supposed to live and take place in the present tense before the spectators, unless otherwise intended. That is why even texts that have undergone adaptation, but a while ago, need to be adapted again for the new context – with markers for time and place. At the extreme end of this practice there are productions based on revisions of already adapted texts, i.e. the result is an adaptation squared. One such example is the dramatization of Atanas Ilkov's play *A Story of a Good Little Red Riding Hood* (“За една обикновена шапчица червена”) which underwent yet another update by a director relatively recently.

In modern-day puppet theatre in Bulgaria, *dramatization* is the most common type of adaptation. One of the most accurate definitions of adaptation in terms of dramatization is as follows: adaptation is also known as 'dramatization' or 'screen version' and refers to the transfer of a literary text from page to stage or from page

⁵ The real reason Otto von Bismarck ordered the tales to be collected was a political one – the collection was supposed to back the idea of the German people as one community with shared roots, fairy tales, myths and legends. The Brothers Grimm themselves made their first adaptations in order to make the stories suitable for children.

⁶ Whether and to what extent puppetry for children is justified in turning to subconscious, shadowy images and touching on taboos, as opposed to invariably and consistently affirming objective social values such as justice, order, and morality, is a matter of debate.

to screen.⁷ In Bulgarian puppetry, the most common practice is the dramatization of tales, whether folk, fairy or original. Even though this entails a genre transformation, since a narrative is rewritten as a drama, they are meant to introduce children to the story, to remain true to the source and to represent it faithfully, with the secondary text following the original. Thus, it is important to consider that dramatization sticks to the source and sets much store by faithfulness – such a transformation may be seen as a ‘translation between semiotic systems’⁸ in an attempt to recreate old parallels and meanings.

In the Bulgarian puppet theatre tradition, the most popular stage adaptations are those based on fairy tales (authors of choice include the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Wilhelm Hauff, E. T. A. Hoffmann, etc.) or household tales (folk tales or original stories by Angel Karaliychev, Margarit Minkov, Alexander Pushkin). Under a tradition established together with the link between children’s theatre and puppetry, the objective of dramatization when adapting folk tales for children’s theatre is “above all to faithfully convey the tale’s story, while also preserving its moral and philosophical context and stylistic characteristics”⁹ This is easily achieved with folk tales: on the one hand, even back then children’s puppet theatre was saddled with moral, ethical and hygiene topics, mostly

⁷ After Iskra Nikolova’s definition in *Texts in Motion*. Op. cit.

⁸ See also Николова, И. Проблеми на адаптацията. – *Homo Ludens*, 2003/6–7. [Nikolova, I. *On Adaptation*. – *Homo Ludens*, 2003/ No. 6–7.]

⁹ Узунова, Е. Драматизация на народната приказка за куклен театър. – *Театър*, 1971/3, с. 47. [Uzunova, E. *Dramatization of Folk Tales for Puppet Theatre*. – *Theatre*, No. 3/1971, p. 47.]

with a practical purpose, and this is exactly what the moral in folk tales is intended for, too. Adaptations of fairy tales account for a great share of productions in modern puppetry for children. Whereas with folk tales puppetry relies on a moral and cautionary line as a main semantic element, adaptations of fairy tales allow for the development of its purely entertainment and ludic function. Adaptations of a number of classic and modern children’s novels are also in regular rotation on the puppet theatre stages today, such as the popular books named after their protagonists – Karlsson, Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan, Gelsomino, Mowgli, the Wizard of Oz, Yan Bibiyan, Pinocchio, Alice. Each adaptation carries the artistic and aesthetic explorations and ethical messages of the respective director (Elitsa Petkova, Todor Valov, Petar Pashov Jr.). What they have in common is the reliance on the characters’ popularity to engagingly introduce the children’s audience to the original work’s fascinating story and themes. In recent years Bulgarian puppet theatre stages have also seen adaptations of much lesser known texts, for example the adaptation of the Latin American tale *Juan Darién* based on the story by Horacio Quiroga which tackles the topics of death, being different and loneliness; or Luis Sepúlveda’s *The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly*, with an underlying environmental theme – both staged by director Katya Petrova.

It is common for directors to make their own adaptations. This is the case with Slavcho Malenov who published a book of his adaptations of fairy tales.¹⁰ He calls this

¹⁰ Маленов, Славчо. Адаптации на приказки за куклен театър. Стара Загора, 2011. [Malenov, Slavcho. *Adaptations of Fairy Tales for Puppet Theatre*. Stara Zagora, 2011.]

most common approach in contemporary puppetry creating 'applied literature for the theatre'. It defines the kind of 'adaptation serving only a single staging and differs from a play which serves multiple stagings.'¹¹

What is interesting here is that on a conceptual level, puppet theatre challenges playwrights and directors to seek and extract from the primary text those exact elements, plotlines, characters and development that serve its art-educational and character-building function, which is termed 'audience adaptation'. Within it, the target group – children and adolescents – define the adaptation strategy and is an important factor in the artistic, aesthetic and discursive transformation of the text.

The adaptation strategy in puppet theatre for adults is different. Here we can assume that "adaptation is a commentary on the original text, and mostly by offering a different perspective, a sort of reassessment of the material, the addition of a hypothetical motive, voicing silence, marginalisation, but it can also be a transition between genres."¹² Puppet theatre productions intended for adults have been dominated for years by adaptations heav-



A Boy and Wind after Bulgarian folk tale, stage version and director Petar Pashov, Puppet Theatre – Sofia, 2016.

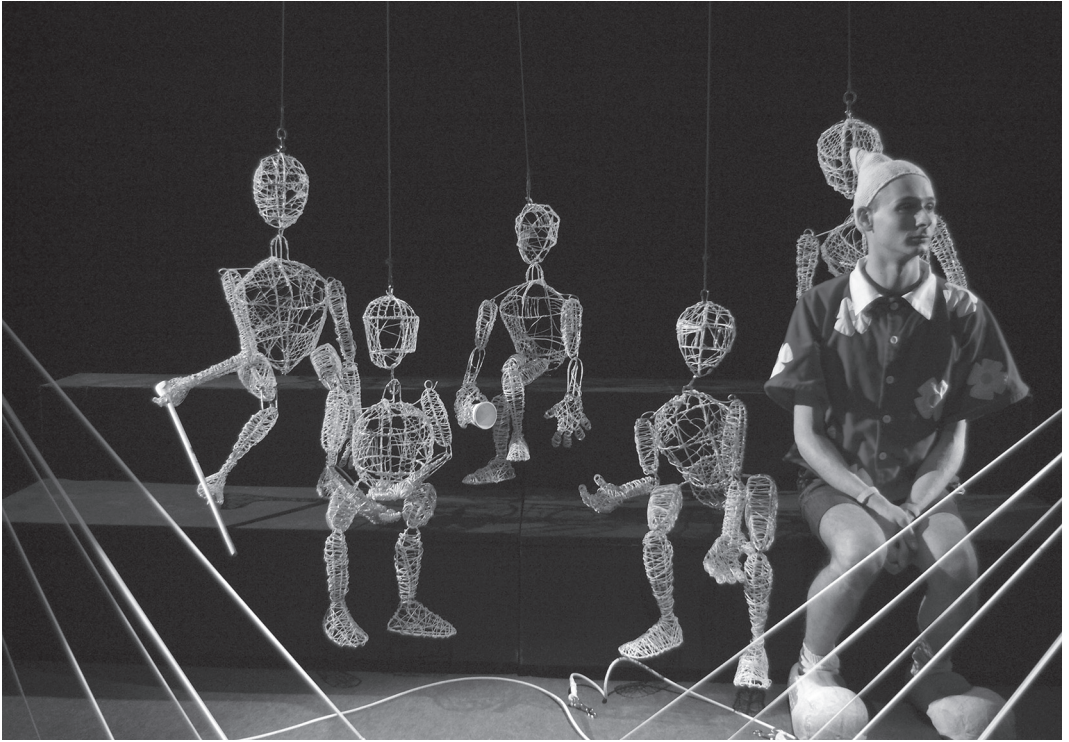
Photographer Gergana Damyanova

ily leaning towards classic and Modernist works: plays, novels, novellas, short stories. Bulgarian puppetry indented for adults is populated by classic European writers' and playwrights' plays that were not specifically intended for puppet shows (Molière and Shakespeare), adaptations of Russian classics (Gogol, Bulgakov) and Modernist writers (Čapek, Kafka). For this age group, in addition to the inter-genre transfer, theatrical adaptation requires also the establishment of another kind of convention (required by theatre as a medium).

The most popular adaptations in Bulgarian puppet theatre for adults include: *Alceste's Love, or the Misanthrope* after Molière, directed by Lyuben Groys; *Based on The Decameron*, directed by Ivan Teofilov; *Don Quixote* after Cervantes and *The Tempest* after Shakespeare, by Petar Pashov; *The Master and Margarita* after Bulgakov, by Slavcho Malenov, *The Overcoat* after Gogol, staged by the *Credo Theatre*, *The Trial* after Kafka, by Yulia Ognyanova. Here we can also add almost all of Tedi Moskov's shows; *The Samsas* after Kafka, by Katya Petrova; Veselka Kuncheva's productions based on the works of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Orwell, etc. They "allow for all kinds of tex-

¹¹ Маленов, Славчо. Интервю на Богдана Костуркова. – *Homo Ludens*, 2006/12, с. 28. [Malenov, S. Interviewed by Bogdana Kosturkova. – *Homo Ludens*, 2006/No. 12, p. 28.]

¹² Божидарова, И. Цит. съч., с. 15. [Bojidarova, I., Op. cit., p. 15.]



Pinocchio, Forbidden for Children after *Pinocchio* by Carlo Goldoni, adaptation by Ina Bojidarova, directed by Veselka Kuncheva, Puppet Theatre – Sofia, 2006.

tual manipulations: abridgement, rearranging the story, stylistic ‘softening’, leaving out characters or settings, focusing the drama on a few intense moments, adding texts, montage, collage of external elements, changing the conclusion, amending the plot depending on the director’s discourse.”¹³.

As we have seen, the main role in the implementation of the text in modern Bulgarian puppetry belongs to the so called ‘director’s adaptation’ which involves

mainly updating the text and bringing it closer to its target audience, as well as genre transformation. We must also mention one of its most important characteristics: namely, that the adaptation project is inextricably linked to the director’s personal creative idea of the theatre performance while transforming the text into dialogues and stage directions.

Published in Homo Ludens 2020/No. 23.

*Translated by
Yoana Stoyanova*

¹³ Pavis, P. Op. cit. p. 14.