

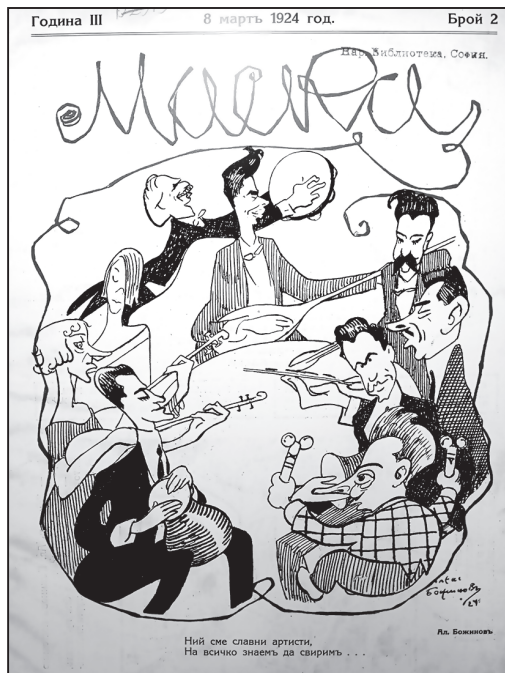
# WE'VE BEEN CALLED BACK INTO LIFE

Mihail Baykov

**Anatomy of the Puppet. Designers in the Puppet Theatre** – an exhibition of the *Scenography* section of the Union of Bulgarian Artists. December 2015 – January 2016, Rayko Alexiev Gallery, Sofia. Curators **Petar Mitev, Hanna Schwartz, Marieta Golomehova, Galina Dekova**

In our modern artistic practice there are cultural events that often go beyond their intended framework in order to open up far wider horizons. They occur relatively rarely, as their habitat does not allow for quick and small talk meetings with their audience. Only when a meeting takes place does the realisation of the creative vacuum, in which our artistic existence has fallen due to the long-term absences of similar events, happen. Of course, there is the real danger that the event will not be recognized as such, either because of the dynamics of the amniotic rut in which we swim every day, or because of the narrow profiling, which often does not allow us to absorb someone's work as part of a wider field of mutual, common interests. But in any case, it is quite possible that the exhibition, which is the centre of attention in this text, simply did not happen for someone. For the record, however, *Anatomy of the Puppet. Designers in the Puppet Theatre* is a fact whose occurrence is permanently entered in the annals of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, the organizers of the exhibition. And this is probably not so much

because of the purely historiographical worth of the event – an indisputable phenomenon in the artistic and stage practice in our country. But because of the extremely successful meeting between the



*Orchestra of the Kazoos* a caricature by Alexander Bozhinov, published in Mask Magazine.

Photographer Gergana Damyanova

spectator, whether he was an expert in theatre or not, and the works of art/stage displayed. I must say that despite the short display period (only a month), the exhibition managed to attract a huge number of visitors, not necessarily a common occurrence for every event in this gallery, and at the same time to resonate mostly with the professional guild.

But here, too, the inevitable modality of the visible seems to divide the exhibition into two parts. The first, under whose "hat" the event takes place – *The Kazoos (Brambazatsite) and the First Puppet Show*, and the second – *Aesthetic Manifestations in Contemporary Puppetry Stage Design*, which happens to be the "head" that gathered the power and talent of 27 authors and their works. There is a certain kindly feeling in the efforts of the organizers and curators of the exhibition to direct the main focus to this first, documentary part, but this deviation from the objective reality is practically noticeable by every visitor. And it could not be otherwise. The emphasis should and is placed on the stage design in dozens of puppet productions realized in the country and abroad, and the area set aside for them is physically and semantically many times larger than the phototype replicas dedicated to the first puppet show organized by the *Orchestra of the Kazoos (Orkestara na Brambazatsite)*. The curator of this first part is Galina Dekova, and the ideologues of the event and curators of the scenographic exposition are the set designers Petar Mitev, Hanna Schwartz and Marieta Golomehova.

So, it all begins with an exhibition of photographs and caricatures accompanying an emblematic event at the birth of the Bulgarian puppet theatre. On March 8, 1924, the first puppet show in Bulgaria was

presented in the capital's Military Club as part of the Spring Ball of Arts and the Press. It was born as an idea in the head of arch. Atanas Donkov, impressed by the Teatro dei Piccoli during his studies in Italy, and the performance was left in the hands of some of the greatest artists of that time, representatives of the Native Art Society (*Rodno Izkustvo Drujestvo*). These were: Sirak Skitnik – poet, artist and theorist, art and theatre critic, playwright and set designer; Atanas Donkov – architect, author of the monument on Shipka Peak, artist, sculptor, decorator, director and singer; Boris Denev – artist, theorist, inventor, amateur musician and aviator, researcher of gliding; Andrey Nikolov – sculptor and public figure; Alexander Bozhinov – world-famous artist and cartoonist, recognized master of drawing, critic and public figure; Nikola Tanev – artist with exhibitions in all European capitals, later a film actor; Konstantin Shtarkelov – landscape artist, founder of Bulgarian organized tourism, author of song and play lyrics. Along with them on the stage were other prominent intellectuals and theatre professional such as Alexander Balabanov, Stefan L. Kostov, Olga Sirak Skitnik, Stefan Kirov and others. In short – *The Kazoos (Brambazatsite)*. On the evening of the ball, the "entertaining music bunch", as *The Kazoos* were called, undertook the preparation of the programme for the evening in an extended line-up. It included a *Fair* with a *fortune-telling booth*, a *Welcome*, *Shooters* shooting range and the newly established *Puppet Theatre*. The success of the latter was great since the rehearsal on March 7, when a group of curious audiences came to see the preparations. The next day, to the sounds of Boris Denev's mandolin, the artists began pulling the strings of the



*I, Sisyphus* stage version and directing by Veselka Kuncheva, set design and puppets Marieta Golomehova, Puppets Lab, 2013.

puppets, which they had designed themselves, although arch. At. Donkov took the lead in constructing them. A curious fact is that each artist controlled a puppet, which was his prototype. With a lot of improvisations and jokes, the artists had a dialogue with each other, not forgetting to make fun of themselves. The show had such an effect that according to some sources it was performed three times that evening, and according to others – ten. In any case, it won the Ball Award, and *Mask (Maska)* magazine, which was published the same evening with works by Elin Pelin, Alexander Bozhinov and Iliya Beshkov, went almost unnoticed with its jokes against the background of what was happening in the puppet show. The fact that its authors laughed at themselves aroused

great empathy in the audience, which overcrowded the hall to such an extent that the curators had to close the doors an hour after midnight. Long after that night, the Sofia audience did not stop talking about the new theatre and this new kind of entertainment – a parody of the fair folk games with puppets and a parody of the authors of the show, who were famous Sofia intellectuals. Some theatre historians choose this date as a kind of beginning of the modern Bulgarian professional puppet theatre. The show, which was entitled *We've Been Called Back Into Life*, does not have the characteristic features of expressionism, but the act of its occurrence was beyond the norms of the ordinary. Or, as Heinrich von Kleist puts it, "the force that lifts puppets into the air is stronger than

the force that holds them to the ground." Although full of laughter, *The Kazoos* chose this serious title, which challenged both themselves and their surroundings. *We've Been Called Back Into Life* and here they came with their fair puppet theatre to make people laugh, but also to tear public opinions apart. The explosion (according to J. Lotman) of modern puppet theatre and puppetry acting was probably insignificant, but definite enough to create a new, unknown till then field among the arts. In this form and composition, the first puppet show did not find its continuation. In 1924/25, again on the initiative of arch. Donkov, the *Slavyanska Beseda* Organisation decided to establish a puppet theatre to benefit the "development of children's character", similar to such theatres abroad that enjoyed great success in society. However, the big moving force for its existence was Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova, who, in addition to being an artist and public figure, was engaged in translations, and later in publishing a magazine. It is her, through the new theatre, who emphasized the need for spiritual elevation and education of the community in general and children in particular.

After this "vestibule" part, which marks a semantically important historical event in the development of the Bulgarian puppet theatre, follows the real exposition, provisionally called by me "aesthetic manifestations in contemporary puppetry stage design" It includes 27 authors – Adriana Dobрева, Blagovesta Vasileva, Vasil Rokomanov, Venelin Shurelov, Virginia Petkova, Dimitar Dimitrov, Emeliana Andonova-Toteva, Zlatka Vacheva, Iva Gikova, Ivaylo Nikolov, Katina Peeva, Claudia Oros, Krum Krumov, Maya Petrova Golomehova, Natalia Gocheva, Nedko

Zhechev, Petya Karadzhova, Rada Petrova, Rin Yamamura, Silva Bachvarova, Svila Velichkova, Stanislava Krasteva, Stefanka Kyuvlieva, Hanna Schwartz, Hristina Nedeva, Hristina Stoilova and their works realized in the period between 2000–2015. This is practically the whole class of artists in puppet theatre who still work today. In the 80s and 90s some of them participated in the changes that accompanied the traditional puppet theatre performance in the country and its attempt to have the actor and the scenography meet on stage as equal participants in the action. The so-called group of young artists is represented by the other half of the participants in the exhibition and includes a huge palette of means of expression in the stage design that the graduates of NATFA and the Scenography for Puppet Theatre discipline – all students of Prof. Maya Petrova, offer to the attention of the visitors.

It is difficult and practically impossible to make a general analysis of one whole exhibition. This would mean generalizing and consolidating too much of what is initially more powerful for its details; validating the value of one work, which would not be possible for another, whose characteristics have a different aesthetic and cultural passport. Therefore, the bird's eye view of the exhibition would be valid only after a reasonable dive into each project and its construction and establishment in the context of the overall curatorial idea.

In the first part of the actual exhibition hall of the gallery we are greeted by the works of Emilyana Andonova-Toteva, whose puppets from *Boom-boom Trojan War* by Kolyo Karageorgiev, directed by Todor Valov in the Targovishte Puppet Theatre, arouse real respect. I was missing two of the central puppets in perhaps the

most conceptual work of the set designer – those in *Hamlet* by W. Shakespeare and Tom Stoppard, directed by Sabi Sabev, which was played in the Plovdiv Puppet Theatre. In it the images of Claudius and Gertrude are designed as puppet-thrones, fused with power, and the puppets of Hamlet and Ophelia are among the finest works of puppetry. The artist herself shares that for her “puppet scenography is a game of imagination in applying the anthropomorphic in a different material, bearing its imperfections, significance and emotionality” and this can be traced in her artistic choices.

On the opposite side is the large-scale work of Iva Gikova and Ivaylo Nikolov from *The Sold Laughter* by J. Crews, directed by Elitsa Petkova at the Sofia Puppet Theatre. These young colleagues are perhaps one of the few rare examples of a set designers duo who work together almost always, whether in drama or puppetry, as the two are equally sought after and increasingly preferred by some contemporary directors in both genres. Another of their very strong works, awarded and included in many festivals, is *Escorial* by Michel de Gelderode, directed by Veselin Boydev at the Hand Theatre – Plovdiv. The expression of the puppets and the black and white touch in which the whole show is decided, definitely ranks it among the most influential puppet shows for adults.

At the entrance part of the large exhibition space of the *Rayko Alexiev* Gallery are the well-known *Phantoms* and *Orthomans* of Venelin Shurelov. Venelin, who in recent years has made the stage design for some of the outstanding performances in the contemporary Bulgarian theatre, is perhaps the most famous person among the theatre professionals. An

artist whose talent flourishes in both the field of performance, digital technologies, video and art theory at home and abroad. Here, too, “abroad” is not just a supplement to the biography, but a very real topos. Shurelov’s works often have a much longer stage life outside the country’s borders than here in Bulgaria. Virtually every international digital art festival includes a work of his, and there’s nothing strange about that.

The right wing of the exhibition hall introduces us boldly to the works of Marieta Golomehova – a huge talent who, in tandem with the director Veselka Kuncheva, is able to climb every peak in art. Proof of this are not only the annual awards of the Union of Bulgarian Actors and the Union of Bulgarian Artists, but also the great efforts made to make the puppets of *I, Sisyphus*, a production of Puppets Lab, or those of *Fear* by Veselka Kuncheva and Ina Bojidarova, directed by Veselka Kuncheva at the State Puppet Theatre – Stara Zagora, which was the most commented puppet theatre show in 2015. Marieta herself may be the best answer to why *Anatomy of the Puppet* is the title of this exhibition. “Puppet stage design is to wander in different spaces, irresponsibly. To go down a slide like a child, in the spiral of the universe, to climb it again and again. To meet strange creatures with a cellular structure different from yours. To rearrange puzzles of atoms until you find the exact configuration of this puppet in this show ... All this is the “anatomy” of the puppet. You can’t always get the light movement of white ink on the deep black cardboard, but you can at least try.”

For Prof. Vasil Rokomanov, “the puppet defines the actor, the theatrical space and its physicality in a special way; interacting

with each other, they acquire a high degree of theatrical conventionality and everything becomes alive and possible – like in a fairy tale”. And it’s as if his puppets came out of a fairy tale in *The Tale of the Elves*, directed by Slavcho Malenov, at the Stara Zagora Puppet Theatre. One of the most ethereal puppets ever made in puppetry.

Stefanka Kyuvlieva and her work on *The Vampire’s Bride* based on Nikolay Raynov, directed by Todor Valov at the Sofia Puppet Theatre, also finds a place in the exhibition. Apart from the dignified puppet of Prince Narinan, there are also his horses – no less impressive, especially when you see them “exposed” on stage; this performance is also an emblematic one in the repertoire of the Puppet Theatre in Sofia.

Prof. Maya Petrova is present with probably one of her most beautiful and original works – the accordion-shaped puppets from *The Story Of A Seagull And The Gang Of Tomcats* by L. Sepulveda, directed by Katya Petrova at the Sofia Puppet Theatre. This is one of the last, most memorable works of Prof. Petrova, which takes an honourable place in the exhibition.

Here are two of the great stage designs of Svila Velichkova too – that of *Love for the Three Oranges* by C. Gozzi, directed by Biserka Kolevska at the Sliven Puppet Theatre, and *Puk* by Valery Petrov, directed by Biserka Kolevska at the State Puppet Theatre – Burgas. Svila’s style is among the most interesting and, most of all, among

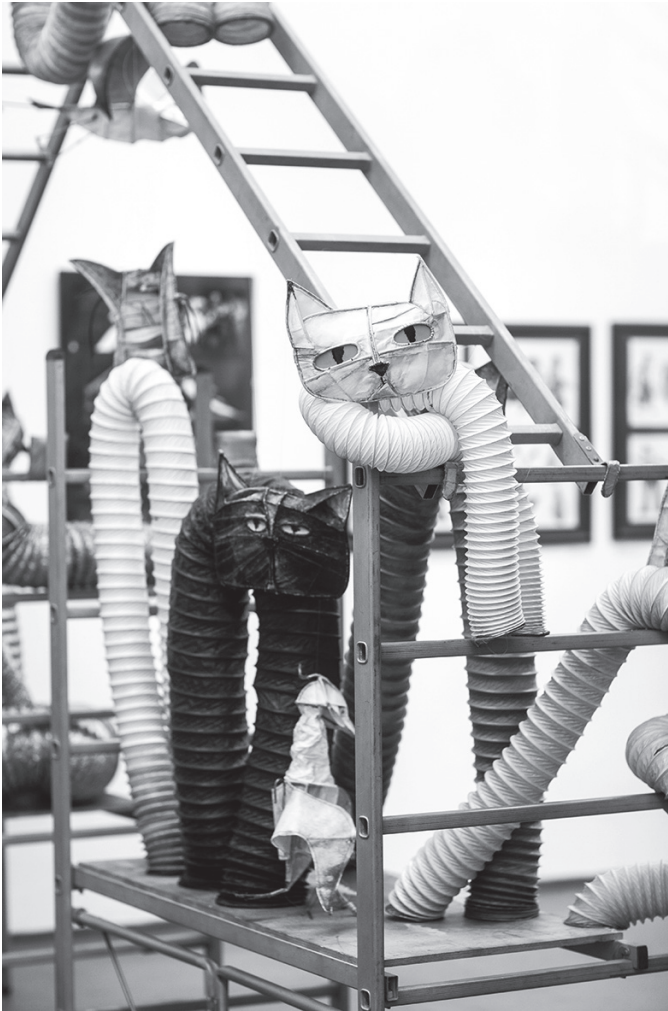
the most recognizable ones, and it has become her trademark in recent years.

In the centre of the exhibition hall, hidden behind high black curtains, are the scenographic works of a group of artists for performances, which are meant to belong to the genre of *puppet performances for adults*. There is Petya Karadzova with *The Samsas* after Franz Kafka, directed by Katya Petrova at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts; Zlatka Vacheva with *The Blind* by Maurice Maeterlinck in the La



Photographer Gergana Damyanova

*The Tale of the Elves* stage version and directing by Slavcho Malenov, set design Vasil Rokomanov, Puppet Theatre – Stara Zagora, 2000.



*The Story Of A Seagull And The Gang Of Tomcats* by L. Sepulveda, directed by Katya Petrova, Puppet Theatre – Sofia, 2008.

Soffitta Theatre, DAMSLab, and Rin Yamamura with *The Mousy King* by K. Iliev, directed by Katya Petrova, at the Drama and Puppet Theatre – Pazardzhik.

In addition to the exhibition of stage design and puppets, the visitors of *Anatomy of the Puppet* have the opportunity to watch 11 videos about puppetry. *Puppets Lab* directed by Christian Thomas, dedicated to the creation of the show *I, Sisyphus; Fear*, which follows the process

of making the show of the same name during the creative laboratory in Stara Zagora, directed by Maria Stoyanova; the film *A Tale without End* by Katya Petrova, dedicated to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sofia Puppet Theatre. It is sad how many of the people in it are no longer alive.

What brings a static exhibition to life are the live workshops that happen in the month when it takes place. Among the most valuable are *Movements, Deformation, Space – Sculptures in Puppet Theatre* by Dimitar Dimitrov, as well as *The Imprint of the Self* with Marieta Golomehova, which she defines as “a dangerous and fun process of removing our own fingerprints from our hands, and for some people, even from their face.”

What is important to say about *Anatomy of the Puppet* is that it is not a retrospective exhibition. It does not show only the best or only the most interesting. And these are categories in art in which it is difficult

to put something sufficiently firmly and undoubtedly. The period of 15 years, which it covers historically, turns out to be too narrow to accommodate most of the key set designs of each of these artists. Here they are presented with one-two, up to three works, some of which, in my opinion, do not reflect the full scope they are capable of or do not mark a specific professional peak in their careers, but are rather a good way station.

Another present shortcoming is the imbalance in the theatres houses presented at the exhibition. It covers two categories – one goes along the capital-province axis and the other – along the state-private cultural institutes and organizations. A future exhibition could rethink and bridge this gap.

Without being thoroughly familiar with the concept of the curators, I dare to say that there is a lack of harmony in terms of exhibits. For example, large and heavy projects, such as those of Stefanka Kyuvlieva and Maya Petrova, are exhibited (and practically hidden) at the back of the hall, where other large sets and puppets are placed, which not only oversaturates this part of the exhibition, but it also “weighs it down” too much against the background of its far scarcer entrance. I also consider the decision to close several scenographic works, which bear the mark of “puppetry for adults”, behind the big black curtains in the centre of the hall to be inadequate. The wooden puppets caught in a so called *horo dance* (a folk dance performed in a circle) in Rin Yamamura’s *The Mousy King* would look much better if displayed outside this space, simply because of their length and volume. The same goes for Marieta Golomehova’s *Fear dolls*. But that’s not where the issue is. This *black box* could

have been used to display other puppet systems that are missing from the exhibits anyway. I believe and know there are performances from this period that are in the style of shadow theatre, and besides, this space isolated from light is ideal for neon light, for which puppet theatre has a special love. If this space had been used in this direction, I think that the exhibition, purely stylistically, would have gained more.

Besides all this, the fact that this exhibition took place cannot be ignored. There could be many conclusions drawn from it – from the fact that it is necessary to organize such events regularly at shorter intervals, to the need to create a stationary *Museum of Puppet Theatre* in Sofia, which will house a permanent exhibition of puppets and sets of emblematic Bulgarian performances from all over the country. The most important act, however, remains the very act of its occurrence. It may not be an easy task to tame the puppet in order to display its anatomy. And maybe there is much more in it...

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