

Bulgarian Puppet Theater - Past And Modernity

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Bulgarian professional puppet theater has deep roots in the history of ethnic groups who have lived and continue to live within the boundaries of the Bulgarian state.

Folk (folkloric) puppet theater arose out of **ritual**, eventually becoming separate from rites and rituals as an independent **craft** and taking on the form of home puppet theater (with puppets made out of plants and leaves, handkerchiefs, shadow puppets and hand shadows). In its later period during the 19th century it developed into traveling, street and village fair theater (theater behind a screen, in front of a rural apron, and on top of a trunk). It still exists in this form **to a certain extent** even today, at the beginning of the 21st century.

The first information about this type of theater in Bulgaria is found in the book *Danubian Bulgaria and the Balkans* published by the Austrian traveler Felix Kanitz in 1871. The Bulgarian public first saw professional puppet plays by Englishman Thomas Holden's troupe in 1892 during the First Agricultural Expo in Plovdiv and also in Sofia. In that same year Czech immigrants in Bulgaria founded the Czech Society, which included the family of the industrialist Prosek. Later other Czechs founded the Puppet Theater, which performed plays in Bulgarian and Czech in Sofia and which existed until the 1960s.

Professional puppet theater began in Bulgaria during 1924, led by the architect Atanas Donkov. He was a member of a group of artists belonging to the *Rodno Iskustvo*, or "Native Art" Society, which created the first Bulgarian modern puppet production for adults *Vikat ni v zhivota*, or "They're Calling Us to Life", staged on 7–8 March, 1924. These artists were famous among Sofia's educated society as the jolly "Kupchinka na Brambuzitsi" or "Heap of Little Bugs" and included Akademik Aleksandar Bozhinov, artist and caricaturist; sculptor Andrey Nikolov; painters Konstantin Shturkelov, Boris Denev, Nikola Tanev; as well as other artists, their loved ones and spouses, who included the well-known musicologist and folklorist Rayna Katsarova-Kukudova, who later researched Bulgarian folk puppet theater.

In the difficult 1920s, besides founding the puppet theater, the *Brambuzitsi* actively participated in the creation of Bulgarian feature and documentary cinema. They also took part in collection and preservation of Bulgarian folklore, and played in public for fun on instruments unusual for the time as one of the first jazz bands in Bulgaria. Their members designed buildings and the monument on Shipka Peak, which were very modern for their time, and authored inventions in aviation that were recognized by the European scientific community. Not least of all, they created paintings, sculptures, drawings and caricatures that reflected various achievements and movements within European visual arts, which were nevertheless filtered through the prism of Bulgarian modern art of the time. These qualities were recognized in their

exhibits abroad in Italy, Germany and elsewhere.

After the *Brambuzitsi's* first puppet performance, they organized a Puppet Theater for children in Sofia in 1924 as part of the Slavyanska Beseda Association. The founders of the theater (which was deservedly renamed the Artistic Puppet Theater during the 1930s and was then led by Russian actress and director Ekaterina Bazilevich) included not only the *Brambuzitsis*, but also the artist Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova, who in 1927 in the name of Bulgarian theater was one of the founders of UNIMA in Prague. They laid the foundations of the International Society of Puppeteers, which is now part of UNESCO. The puppet theater's children's productions were based on texts written especially for the troupe by the renowned Bulgarian comic playwright St. L. Kostov, including *Glavcho i tsarskata dushterya or Glavcho and the King's Daughter*, among others. The translator Yordan Cherkezov, an actor and director who later became a famous figure in Bulgarian theater, also wrote plays for the theater, again featuring the hero Glavcho. Glavcho became a standard theatrical character, modeled on the heroes of European folk puppet theater Punch, Polichinelle, Pulcinello, Petrushka, and so on. But Glavcho did not become as widely known as these others, remaining a theatrical hero only, who combined within himself the positive traits and hopes of the youth of the 1920s. The theater also performed Bulgarianized and adapted versions of plays from the German-language tradition, as well as Italian and Russian children's plays; texts were also based on well-known classical and folk fairytales. Its repertoire also included dramatized versions of texts such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Children of Captain Grant*, among others.

In the late 1930s and 1940s private puppet theater troupes appeared in Bulgaria, including those led by Stefan Penchev, Ivan Rusev, and Kiril Batembergski. These private troupes were not subsidized by the municipality or the state like the Artistic Puppet Theater, which also received a regular subsidy from the Slavyanska Beseda Association.

Since puppet theater, being performed with marionettes, had a structure entirely new and different from previous forms of Bulgarian theater, the Ministry of Enlightenment sent Mara Penkova, an actress from the National Theater to Germany in 1941-1942 to study puppet theater. Upon her return, she founded a puppet theater in 1945 with hand puppet (later called "petrushki"). In 1948, this theater formed the basis for the Central Puppet Theater (1959), now known as the Sofia Puppet Theater. Mara Penkova herself was among the participants and actors from the Slavyanska Beseda Puppet Theater. *Her new puppet theater* had a modern organizational structure for the troupe and actors, an atelier for making puppets, moving stages, specially made puppets

and approved dramatic texts. The first performances took place in April 1946 in Sofia and the Sofia region with hand puppets. Soon the theater began to use other puppet systems and to mix puppet types. From the 1960s until the present day, live actors and puppets, masks, shadow puppets, hand puppets and marionettes have all been used in various combinations in their productions.

In 1946 in Plovdiv, and later in Varna as well (1952), Georgi Saravanov established new municipal puppet theaters, which in 1948 became state theaters, along with Maria Penkova's theater in Sofia. Gradually municipal, community and amateur puppet theaters were established all around the country, some of which were also nationalized before 1989, bringing the number of state puppet theaters to 21.

From 1962 until the present day, the Krustyo Sarafov National Academy of Theater and Film Arts (NATFIZ) has had a puppet theater department, founded by Professor Nikolina Georgieva, Professor Atanas Ilkov and architect Ivan Tsonev. The puppet theater department, besides offering majors in acting for Puppet Theater, has also added specialized programs in puppet theater directing and set design for Puppet Theater. The struggle to establish professional education for puppet theater specialists began in Mara Penkova's time, but has only recently reached a high professional level and now continues the tradition of the Bulgarian puppet theater school. Many foreign students have studied in the program.

Currently Bulgaria hosts a number of prestigious international festivals such as Puppet Fest (organized by the Sofia Puppet Theater), The Golden Dolphin (SPT-Varna), Two's Company, Three's a Crowd (SPT-Plovdiv), and Piero (SPT-Stara Zagora), among others.

After changes in Bulgaria's social, economic, cultural and political life in 1989, Puppet Theater, like the whole society in general, underwent a transformation. Now the country has two municipal and 11 state puppet theaters, as well as seven state theaters that combine puppetry with dramatic theater. In the 1990s, many new private troupes, formations and ateliers were created, numbering

more than 45. Competition and the lack of sufficient subsidies has reduced and increased the number, depending on the circumstances. New niches have appeared, such as the one-man show, educational theater and a theater in the Albena resort complex, among others. Some of the private groups have their own spaces, others depend on community center space, while others only tour, having no permanent home. The Ministry of Culture's National Theater Center (now known as the Theater, Variety and Circus Arts Department) gives state subsidies through competitions held several times annually, and also finances individual productions by state, municipal, mixed and private troupes and formations. Besides these subsidies, all puppet theaters seek others avenues of financing in order to be able to mount quality productions. It is still extremely difficult to attain subsidies, and this does not guarantee the success of a production or theater.

The Sofia Puppet Theater has remained the basic model for development of puppet art in Bulgaria over the years. Since its founding and until today, the Sofia Puppet Theater continues the traditions of professional and folk puppet theaters, continually discovering new expressive techniques. The Bulgarian puppet school's most distinguished representatives among actors, directors, scenographers and composers include: Mara Penkova, Milka Nacheva, Lina Boyadzhieva, Atanas Boyadzhiev, Binka Miteva, Sergey Visonov, Lilyana Docheva, Professor Atanas Ilkov, Professor Nikolina Georgieva, architect Ivan Tsonev, Ivan Teofilov, Lyuben Groys, Encho Pironkov, Dimitrina Tsoneva, Slava Racheva, Anastasia Yankova, Iva Apostolova, Georgi Georgiev, Todor Dimitrov, Zdravko Dimitrov, Nella Hadzhieva, Elza Laleva, Elena Rusalieva, Georgi Penkov, Yana Tsankova, Stefka Kyuvlieva, Professor Maya Petrova, Kiryakos Argiropoulos, Professor Slavcho Malenov, Silva Buchvarova, Associate Professor Vasil Rokomanov, Petar Tsankov, Associate Professor Petar Pashov, Svila Velichkova, Associate Professor Zheni Pashova, Maya Bezhanska, Rumen Ugrinski, and many others. The Bulgarian puppet tradition is well-known not only in Bulgaria, but also abroad, having internationally acclaimed authors for its texts, including Nadia Trendafilova, Ivan Teofilov, Rada Moskova, Valeri Petrov, and others.

Professional Bulgarian puppet theater appeared in 1924 fully on par with the development of European modern and contemporary puppet theater. It came into being against a background of Bulgarian folk games with puppets and children's play performances, as well as the tradition of folk puppet theater in Europe. But Bulgarian puppet theater, when viewed in terms of the European tradition, has succeeded in creating its own style and school; through its performances at home and abroad, it has succeeded in influencing international puppet theater. Many Bulgarian productions have received recognition and awards at prestigious international puppet festivals and forums, and in this way have changed the general development of puppet art not only in Bulgaria, but throughout the world. Bulgarian puppet artists actively participate in the production of successful and prize-winning performances both at home and abroad.

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Translation by **Angela Rodel**

Сцена от "Крале Марко", Столичен куклен театър, режисьори Иван Теофилов и арх. Иван Цонеv, 1967 г.

"King Marko", Sofia Puppet Theatre, directed by Ivan Teofilov and Ivan Tzonev, 1967

