

# Getting to Know Oneself

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During the first week of October, in the autumn of 1969, the Varna Puppet Theater organized puppet theatre days to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the beginning of Communist rule in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944. Later, this initiative was also supported by the Commission for Art and Culture, the Association of Artists in Bulgaria, the Varna Regional Council of Art and Culture, and the Peoples' City Council of Varna.

The two things that stand out about these seemingly very official "festivities" are that it all began in the actual theater and that all the state theaters took part. Almost all these theaters put on Bulgarian plays. The Varna Puppet Theater, as the host, put on three. This marked the beginning of a semi-official review of the state of the Bulgarian puppet theatres at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Students from the Krustyo Sarafov National Academy of the Theatre and Film Arts (now NATFIZ, earlier known by the acronym VITIZ) took part in the initiative; this very same institution already had a degree program in acting for puppet theater. The unique children's puppet theatre *Shturche*, or "Little Cricket," an organization officially affiliated with the Center of Culture for Varna Transport Workers, also played an active role.

Led by the new and enthusiastic director Yordan Todorov, the new management of the Varna Puppet Theater with the support of the entire troupe challenged all participants to creation a new centre outside the capital that will serve to inspire creative energy and to encourage progress, and which will help in the search for a new way forward for Bulgarian puppet theater, using a fresh and original approach – not just onstage but also within the whole sphere of modern Bulgarian puppet theater.

This challenge was a major factor in the later development of one of the most prestigious international puppet festivals at home and abroad, The Golden Dolphin, in Varna in 1970. The founding statutes clearly stated that the festival would be held every other year and that foreign puppet theaters were welcome to participate. However, these theaters were bound by the very specific requirement to perform a Bulgarian play. As a result of the the statute and its very specific conditions, this 1970 event was recognized and described by critics as "the first national review of the state of Bulgarian puppet theater" (Veselina Atanasova-Stefanova).

Having the courage to "take a look at itself" made possible the following steps towards international recognition and organization of the festival in 1972:

During the last days of the festival in 1969, the Bulgaria Actors' Union (SAB) organized a creative discussion of all the shows performed. The director of the Stara Zagora puppet theatre, Vasil Apostolov, who was also a producer and actor, presented a report focusing on the problems facing Bulgarian puppet theater. Some of the other participants in the discussion were: Nedyalko Mesechkov, a writer, co-author and actor from the Kiril Batembegski Puppet Theater, funded by the Sofia Teachers' Fund during the 1940s; Veselina Stefanova – producer; Atanas Ilkov – producer and teacher (at the time an associate professor) at VITIZ; Ruska Tsekova – director and producer of the Dobrich (then Tolbuhin)

Puppet Theatre; Sergey Visonov – an honored artist, producer and actor in the Sofia Puppet theatre (SKT, then TSKT); Kolyo Michev – director of the Ruse Puppet Theatre; Evgeni Fabiani – a Sofia Puppet Theater actor and one of the organizers of the Bulgarian UNIMA Center 1963 (International Puppet Union, formed in 1924 with Bulgarian participation); Yordan Todorov – director of the Varna Puppet Theater and author of recent Bulgarian puppet plays: Rayko Raykov – producer and manager of the children's puppet theater *Shturche*; Rayna Dzhurova – drama specialist and member responsible for puppet theaters on the Commission for Art and Culture; and Iliyana Drumeva – president of the Department for Puppet Theatre Art of SAB. Drumeva led the discussion and delivered the concluding statement, most probably to add a more official feel to what was in fact an informal discussion between some of the leading experts in the Bulgarian puppet theater world.

Over the course of four days eleven pieces were performed. The students from VITIZ, together with the *Shturche* children's puppet theatre, performed their own production. The Ruse Puppet Theater put on *The Hero and the Golden Apple* (screenplay by Nikolina Georgieva and text by Ivan Teofilov). The producer and director of the theater was Peter Alexandrov, the scenographer was the painter Tsvyatko Tsvetkov and the composer Georgi Genkov was in charge of the music. The folk epic *The Hero and the Golden Apple*, which preceded *King Marko* (a classic Bulgarian play), was written and presented (Sofia Puppet Theater 1967) by the poet, dramatist, translator and puppet theater producer Ivan Teofilov (the film version was made by Veselin Hanchev). However, as a play it then went on to be performed at both the Sofia and Ruse Puppet Theaters. The production team employed bright imagery which at times was reminiscent of *King Marko*, while the visual effects and overall imagery were remarkably powerful, thanks to the artist and producer's efforts. The paintings and expressive touches by the scenographer Tsvyatko Tsvetkov were boosted by his distinctive and original natural flair as an artist and painter. This flair was particularly evident in the scene with the sunflowers, which is calm, poetic and measured, following the hero's fight with the dragon.

The critics took issue with Peter Aleksandrov's production, put off by his off-the-wall visual imagery. However, the critics also pointed to his colorful contribution as a pivotal figure in the Ruse Puppet Theater, which was then successfully seeking out not only subtle and effective new ideas, but also managing to delve into the real essence of the topics, expressed through original production methods. Even though the play was criticized to a certain extent because of the story line, the production team's ability to use both static and dynamic styles in contrast for certain puppets and in certain episodes did not go unnoticed. The production team succeeded in creating a very striking spectacle, which managed to compensate for some obvious minuses. The style and essence of the characters (played by Bulgarians) and of the show itself, as well as the stage decor, which managed to go beyond the ordinary, every-day decor we see in theaters, allowed the visual effect to have much more impact than usual. This elevated the play to the same standing as some

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leading pieces such as *King Marko* by the Sofia Puppet Theater. The guest composer Georgi Genkov made a vital contribution to the whole impression of grandeur and to the striking sound of the production. The strong dramatic foundations of the play, centered on Nikolina Georgieva's screenplay, and Ivan Teofilov's scripts of, gave it an unusually powerful boost and marked Ruse's *The Hero and the Golden Apple* as an achievement in the upward historical development of Bulgarian puppet theater.

The Dobrich Puppet Theater with N. Georgieva and Ivan Teofilov also performed a version of *The Hero and the Golden Apple*. This was seen as a brave step by an otherwise very traditional Dobrich Theater. Unfortunately, the production team didn't quite succeed in finding its own style and interpretation of the play that would have made it an original sounding production. The producer Nikolay Genov and the artist Nikola Bogdanov strove to make their production different from the Ruse and Sofia productions, but their approach still mirrored the first two productions. The choice of stage decor (an elaborate woodcarving) made a striking impression but the puppets were unable to match its effect. The puppets had real hair and shiny eyes – this hyper-realism, far from being an advantage, made the effect much earthier and served only to cancel out the epic scale of the decor, and ended up working against it instead of in harmony with it. This clash of grandeur and earthiness took something away from the production. The end result was that the spectacle carried with it an every-day family feel which went against the ideas of the main themes of the script and the very aims of the production team. Certain interesting additions like the basement with the wrought-iron door or the stone tap served not to smooth over these contradictions but to exaggerate them even further.

The Stara Zagora Puppet Theater performed *Light Blue Peter* by the Hungarian author, producer and actor Urban Gyula. This, as one of the most powerful dramatic productions for children's puppet theater, later went on to be recognized as a classic. The show represented a step forward in the development of the local theater, but failed to achieve the potential of the original material. The production team (producer Vasil Apostolov, artist Lyubomir Tsakev and guest composer Zhul Levi) and the actors involved (Iva Apostolova, Dobrinka Vasileva, Margarita Mincheva, Zdravko Kalpakchiev, Kosta Valkov and others) didn't manage to accurately portray the poetic/metaphoric meaning of the script fully. Nor did it place the show amongst some of the avant-garde achievements of the Bulgarian puppet theater.

The still-vivid memory of Atanas Ilkov's production of the work at VITIZ (his first production was during the 1965-1966 season and the second in 1967-1968; the author himself regarded the latter as the best interpretation of the work) didn't prevent the company from ultimately adding their own nuances to the interpretation. The actress Iva Apostolova, amongst the second group of graduates to emerge from the puppet school, made an important contribution with her talent and array of professional skills. Her version of *Peter* was convincing, although not wholly unique.

The Burgas Puppet Theater's production of *City of Fools* by guest director Sergey Visonov (starring Liliyana Angelova) didn't portray the actors in a positive light. The actors' efforts and the producer's enthusiasm never managed to disguise the irresponsible and unacceptable behavior of two of the participants, who turned up on stage after knocking back a few drinks. In the other performances, the production proved a success for both

the Burgas Theater and for the production team.

*Little Red Devils* by the Sofia Puppet Theater is one of the few successful productions to have emerged using a Socialist theme. The development of the plot in this play by Hristo Iliev (a famous script writer and later a producer of successful and award-winning animations and documentaries, also well known also for his caricatures) closely follows that of the short story of the same name by the Soviet writer, Pavel Blyakhin. The portrayal of the child protagonists as living, active and brave children who rebel against the "counter-revolutionaries" through their intelligent and adventurous actions succeeds in attracting children to the show with its original and novel thinking. The producer Sergey Visonov and the guest artist Stoyan Dukov (famous at the time as a caricaturist, amateur artist and producer of animated films) do not turn primarily to the use of illustrations. The composer Atanas Boyadzhiev also does not illustrate the action with music but uses it as a tool to complement it. The production team together with the talented group of actors who make a huge contribution to the cheerful and turbulent sound of the spectacle transform the production into a contemporary play with a "revolutionary theme." It is worth remembering at this point the very popular children's game "Cops and Robbers," which so excited the children on the streets (the streets that at that time were very quiet) even before 1944. The artist Stoyan Dukov styled the characters in a way that some of them adopt almost caricature-like characteristics, but others are more along the lines of puppet animation. The producer Sergey Visonov succeeds in interpreting the play in such a way that the characters do not appear artificial. The presence of a real historical figure such as Semyon Budyonny is avoided through his appearance as a silhouette and the lack of historical details. At times the script is very heavy, yet the fluidity of the action guards against boredom and prevents an artificial feel.

The Varna Theater put on three of productions.

Zlati Zlatev (amongst the first group of graduates from VITIZ's acting for puppet theater program) by this time was already directing his attention away from the acting profession and more towards directing. However, he found it difficult to cope with its more modern demands, the whole aesthetic aspect of the puppet arts, and struggled to master the then ever-increasing technical nature of directing. In Edi Shvarts's *Expedition Zhozho*, Zlatev pursued a more adventurous style with a poetic spirit, employing devices gleaned from worldwide puppet theater. The appearance of "The Reader" as a link between the stage and the public only served to bog down the action. Unfortunately, in spite of some successful scenes, the absence of a clear approach towards the material drew the focus more intensely to the script rather on what was actually happening on stage.

The critics questioned the very genre that the production was portraying, saying it lacked clear definition, a problem evident in other puppet theater productions. In this case, the contradicting messages emerging from the production was not some sort of postmodern attempt at portraying variety in the presented forms all combined together, but just demonstrated a lack of mastery in directing and over the demands of the period.

This criticism was also leveled at the production *The Island of Cannibals* (written and directed by R. Raykov based on the short story by the same name by the writer and humorist Vasil Tsonev; scenography and puppets by D. Raykov) produced by the Raykovi brothers (Raiko Raykov as



producer and Daniel Raykov as the professional artist and scenographer). Although critics emphasized the charm of the play, they continued to express doubts about the completeness of the brothers' plays as a whole, without taking into account the brothers' particular worlds of fantasy and reality which continuously intertwine and go hand-in-hand in their works.

The appearance of the Raykovi brothers on the professional puppet theater scene during the 1970s introduced a new sense of artistic primitivism and rich childlike imagination. The talent of their creative partnership was always based on high quality literature and drama on top of which they added their own stage interpretations. In their own original way, through the mixing of different skills and systems they managed to bring about a degree of reality to the viewer using a childlike imagination.

When they were not on the professional scene, the Raykovi brothers ran the children's amateur puppet theater *Shturche*, a phenomenon that alone deserves another entire chapter, and not a small one at that.

*Miniatures* was the third show by the Varna Puppet Theatre by the director Nikolina Georgieva and the scenographer Nikolay Izvarin, a painter and new theater artist. The show is made up of three short parts – "Honest Hands," "Fish" from the then-famous humorist Miron Ivanov, and "Birds" by the poet Konstantin Pavlov. In the second part, Nikolina Georgieva based the screenplay on P. Slaveykov's "Crazy Daredevil." The critics define the second part as being based around caricatures, but the third, using Georgieva's material, is in fact closer to satirical miniatures, based on laconic means of expression. In the second and third parts, improvised puppets predominate. They come to life through bare human hands, or with gloves, using different materials and small details to create a various impression. The critics see the second part as an animation, but they don't mention the active development of the music, which acts as the main dramatic indicator (in this case the director created the soundtrack by mixing folklore and classic melodies). Zlati Zlatev's acting was particularly notable, especially his improvised "Rabbit" puppet. The "Rabbit" was made up of two surfaces that interact and change their form through different combinations and rhythms. The *Miniatures* show had a long stage run at the Varna Puppet Theater and toured successfully abroad.

From the very founding of the acting for puppet theater program at VITIZ in 1962, Nikolina Georgieva (now a professor) insisted that the students learn to improvise with the puppets, either using just their bare hands or with various materials such as paper, cloth, different natural and synthetic materials, or even using some kind of object. This "innovation" can also be found regularly in Bulgarian folkloric puppet theater. Georgieva was able to impart the knowledge that she had gleaned (private archives – E.V.) through her experience with puppet theater arts in Prague where, before the introduction of puppet arts as an official subject in Bulgaria, she had studied for six months. This infusion of "foreign" experience proved to be very successful and helped the students to understand the dividing line between puppet theater and dramatic theater – i.e. the separate art of "puppeteering." The combination of "live" hands and "lifeless" props served to stimulate the puppeteers' imaginations. They found themselves liberated by these new improvisations. They become bolder and braver with different combinations and began finding new ways to present the action. Even every-

day situations like a drunk man for example - represented by a bare hand carrying a bottle – can now carry new and different symbolic meanings. This piques not only the students and actors' curiosity, but also that of the audience. This way of nurturing and developing creative boldness to this day remains one of the students, actors and directors' preferred methods. *Many people claim to have pioneered the use of the bare hand as a puppet, or of the hand combined with certain props, and even of the hands interacting with each other. However, this innovation was first seen in the Bulgarian puppet school and subsequently, as an innovation by Nikolina Georgieva, opened the way for the possible adaptation of other pieces, both new and old.*

Professor Nikolina Georgieva quickly mastered and further developed the methodology for the students' education and for the creation of original performances combining folkloric subjects, hands and music presented in unexpected combinations. This provided a fresher feel to the imagery and remained popular even until the end of the 20th and into the 21st century, as a result of the work of various directors and actors: N.Georgieva (since the 1960s until today), Professor Bonyo Lungov (from the beginning of the 1980s), Assistant Professor Lyubomir Garbev (during the 1990s), and the acting troupes (during the 1990s and into the beginning of the 21st century) from the puppet theaters in Dobrich, Vidin, Varna, Plovdiv, and elsewhere.

Nicolina Georgieva talks about performances, methodology and the basis of puppet miniatures in her 1976 book *Theater of Shadows and Improvised Puppets*, 1976. In this 68-page book she shares her ideas and thoughts about bare hand silhouettes; it has turned out to be one of the most popular titles in 21st century puppet theater art. In her work and teachings after 1962 we see the appearance of shadows combining the hands with the human body and with various other elements, as well more use of lighting for the shadows and stage. These innovations confirm Nikolina Georgieva not only as a predominant figure in local and regional puppet theater culture because of her work with hand puppets (with and without props) and shadow puppets (with and without the use of the hands), but also as one of the foremost figures of shadow innovation throughout the world, not to mention the whole contemporary culture of the puppet theater from the 1960s until the present day. In 2008 Professor Georgieva was deservedly awarded the national Order of St. Cyril and Methodius and went on to be decorated with numerous Bulgarian and international awards. She truly deserves her recognition as one of the classic scholars of Bulgarian culture in the 20th and 21st centuries. Professor Georgieva also reveals the secrets of her success with bare hand shadows, and of some of her later innovations, through her teaching and productions in Bulgarian puppet theaters and with amateur puppet theater groups. She has continued to lead various workshops around the world, culminating in shows in Japan, Italy, France and Germany. Through her teachings at the end of the 20th and on into the 21st century at the International Institute of Shadow Theater in Germany, she was able to share her creative experience, and from there help to spread it around the world. This served to complete and popularize her already world-famous shadow plays. The process was also helped to a great extent by the institute's publication of three of her books.

We will return now to the time of the 1969 puppet theater festival in Varna.

Critics saw the Kardzhali Puppet Theatre's production of



Iлона Molnar's *Window and Horse* by the theater's new director Ruta Kiselova (with artist Mihayl Mihaylov) as a local success and as a step forward in the theater's development. However, in comparison with productions by other theaters, it was found wanting. The unpopular presence on stage of an actor with a mask as "The Horse" (played by Romyana Chavganova) combined with the other child protagonists in the form of puppets did not go over well with the critics. Ruta Kiselova, then the wife of the famous theater director Mladen Kiselov, arrived in Bulgaria and on the Bulgarian puppet theater scene for a prolonged stay. She brought with her some more avant-garde influences from the Baltic region of the Soviet Union. Eymuntas Nekroshyus, then a puppet theater director in the Baltic region, proved to be a strong influence on the form and make-up of her puppet theater productions. With these influences and experiences however, she was unable (for subjective and objective reasons) to lead the Bulgarian puppet theater in any other direction. However, her different way of thinking as a certified circus director without a doubt influenced the Kardzhali Puppet Theater.

The Galats Puppet Theater of Romania was a welcome festival participant with their production *Rebel's Ballad* (director Trayan Gachesku-Churia and artist Mirchia Nikolay), a play aimed at adult audiences.

The Plovdiv production by Yana Tsankova of *The Curious Little Elephant*, based on the work of Rudyard Kipling was a runaway success (Yana Tsankova was screenwriter, director and scenographer). Based on hand shadows accompanied by a few additional details made from paper and cardboard, a more striking visual effect was given to the animals portrayed on stage, and the show was transformed from a well known story into something new, presented and interpreted differently, and peppered with new innovations (even in the scenes with the hand shadows). The whole style of the production not only managed to keep the watching children curious but also forced the viewers to ask themselves "Why? Who? How?" The demanding style of the play brought pleasure to the viewers because of the aesthetics, the whole construction of the production, and its openness to a deep level of understanding and interpretation. With this production Yana Tsankova introduced herself as a strong and original creative artist, who was able to combine the skills of director, screenwriter and scenographer. Tsankova was supported by the famous composer Peter Stupel's excellent music, who with his flair for theater and understanding of the directorial decisions involved, made a significant contribution to the different nuances that were introduced, as well as to the general atmosphere of the production.

During the review of the Varna 1969 event the theater expert Nadezhda Atanasova discussed in detail every show performed. She considered the productions by the state puppet theatres to be proof of a new advance in Bulgarian puppet theater art. However, she emphasized that there only some successful new production and scenographic ideas emerged. Atanasova also argued that many of the productions lacked style, a problem that according to her, and in the context of the development of Bulgarian puppet theater, would never be completely solved. In practice this attitude often seems unnecessarily negative. We only have to look as far as the Plovdiv theater's *Curious Little Elephant* as a contradiction to this theory.

In her review, biting comments like the ones seen in the official lectures on methodology from the previous Second Theoretical Conference in 1969, did not appear.

The review titled "The Problems Facing Puppet Theater" from the then-director and head of the Stara Zagora puppet theater Vasil Apostolov was made up of three parts. The author's desire to satisfy official demands for actuality was evident in his call for plays to be full of "pioneers" and "tank drivers" (a reference to Communist children's organizations – *translator's note*) to "fire up" children's imaginations. The second part consisted of an analysis of the positive and negative components that made up the dramaturgy of the puppet theater. This analysis echoed to a certain extent Margarita Sapareva lecture from the second theoretical conference (1969), which paid particular attention to the necessity of a clear division between good and evil, and their subsequent expressive presentation. The third and final part was devoted to the necessity of certain requirements for a dramaturgy that preserves "puppetness" as a particular quality. Apostolov concludes, which are based on his experience and observations, that puppet play authors were trying to adapt their productions according to the constantly evolving ages of their young audiences.

Despite this "call" for plots involving "pioneers and tank drivers," Apostolov's paper continues to debate the peculiarities unique to a audience made up of children, and the necessity of taking their ever-changing dynamics into account. The review paper included the seventy theoretical findings and conclusions from the psychologist and pedagogue M. Sapareva, from the end of the 1960s. The review also offers us an insight into what producers such as Vasil Apostolov – i.e. producers who passed through the acting school at VITIZ during this period – understood puppet dramaturgy to include. Even though the paper was not published in its entirety, it acted as a supporting reference for the analysis and understanding of the puppet theater of the next decade (the 1970s).

The 1969 festival at the Varna Puppet Theater represented an *internal glimpse into the Bulgarian state puppet theaters. It marked the year when these theaters put themselves on the map of children's arts.*

The participation of the children's theater *Shturche* acted as one of the sources for nourishing the ideas and forms emerging from the creative pieces that were produced for children by children. Their participation brought a fresh perspective, and not only a clearer understanding but also a more complete knowledge of puppet arts in Bulgaria, and one that reached beyond the 1970s.

1969 also celebrated the memory of Mara Penkova, who laid the foundations of modern puppet theater which, independent of the political or social environment, was fundamentally different than that of dramatic theater. These differences were really due to the puppet theater's peripheral positioning amongst the powers that be and amongst the larger parts of society. The puppet theaters' constant contact with foreign puppet art cultures was also a defining factor. The ten-year anniversary of Mara Penkova's death marked a general home-coming for various art centers. It was in this way that the Varna Puppet Theater re-formed after the split of 1952.

The self-analysis of the 1970s allowed Bulgarian puppet theater to gather strength for what would be a later development of the puppet theater as an art that was avant-garde, with its own identity, and with innovations, new methods, imagery and ideas. ■

Translation by Angela Rodel

