

- В момента разработваме и друга програма, касаеща децата, които се отличават с таланта си и биха искали да продължат да се занимават с изкуство, търсим накъде да ги насочим и как да ги подготвим още по-добре. Затова нашият бъдещ Център за работа чрез изкуство с деца в риск или в неравностойно социално положение (тоест деца с нисък социален статус или такива, които идват от приемни родители) би било добре да се кооперира с основното училище в Широка лъка.

**- Как енергията на Родопите влияе на работата с децата?**

- Когато през 2002 г. заведох близо 30 актьори от България и Европа, за да започнем първия ни проект, който се наричаше „Арт експедиция ТОРНА“, тези хора, които бяха 20-годишни, веднага се влюбиха в мястото и хората, както и местните хора се влюбиха в тях. Трудно е да не се влюбиш в Широка лъка. Това е много специално и автентично място, което пази дълбока традиция и култура на българското във вековете.

**- Енергията на тези деца липсва ли ти в града?**

- Много важно за програмата ни е да не си позволим да се привържем към децата. Когато съм там, те са всичко за мен, но не мисля непрекъснато за тях, все пак не съм им майка... Тези деца обаче знаят, че във всеки един момент могат да ми се обадят. Обичам и тях, и артистите си еднак-

во. В екипа ни има правило, че не можем да осиновим дете, с което работим. Това е част от нашата етика - в момента, в който някой осинови едно такова дете, нарушава правилото на цялата структура на проекта и той ще се срути. Но се грижим за тези деца по друг начин. Например наскоро иницирахме една програма, чрез която тийнейджърите от дома за настаняване на деца от семеен тип в Смолян да се опитат да преподават на други деца в училищата и детските градини. Вчера ми се обади едно дете и ми каза: „Говорих с директора, това може да стане, ще пратиш ли пис-

мо, за да почна аз да преподавам?“ За мен това е много важно, особено след разговора, който проведох преди това с него и това дете ми заяви: „Няма да го направя, аз съм дете от дом, никога няма да ме приеме, аз не смея да отида и предложа нищо...“ След 2 месеца това дете вече беше преодоляло всичко, след като отиде и говори с директора на училището и беше казано: „Искам да преподавам бойни изкуства на децата от I до IV клас“ - ето това според мен е функционална връзка. Проектът ни се вържи на принципа, че всички деца за нас са еднакво важни. ■



## Elena Panayotova and the puppets orphans in the heart of the Rhodope

Patricia Nikolova

For many people it is not a secret that the theatre director Elena Panayotova has been working through theatre means (puppets, masks, music, dance, etc) for a whole decade with hundreds sensitive and artistic children between 6 and 18 years, deprived of parents' care. The project is called Summer Theatre Academy for children at risk in Широка Лука village, but every year in July guests of the great puppet-theatre festival are also many inhabitants of orphanages and schools in Devin, Smolyan, Plovdiv, Gotze Delchev, Haskovo, Panagyurishte and recently from Hague, Netherlands. Only in 10 years time Elena succeeded in

establishing a stable network from young theatre teachers from Bulgaria, USA and Europe who work with great desire with the little inhabitants mainly from the orphanage „Katya Vancheva“ and primary school „N.Y.Vaptzarov“ in Широка Лука.

The results achieved in the last 2-3 years are really respecting as the children on stage don't even look like amateurs that entertain themselves, but are like future professionals, that skillfully play with the puppets, enter into amusing roles, move with interesting plastics and have meaningful dialogue. The knowledge and skills in music,

dance and theatre have as their aim to integrate these fragile minds in the harsh life outside, creating a flair for beauty and interest towards art in all its forms. It is not by chance, that the first encounters with theatre art, pass at first through the mask and the puppet, which the excited children touch with the anxiety of little people, that had experienced deeply the collision with the unfriendly world and had accepted the friendly hand of the puppet. In this sense the initial aim of the project – integration of the children in society – seems exceeded. The children have grown up and have become teenagers with manifested talents, ready to teach professionally other children (even children with parents) in primary Bulgarian schools and children gardens.

Elena Panayotova often travels to different points of the world – Costa Rica, Kenya, USA and Netherlands, where she teaches and participates in projects, concerning children at risk. Only this year in partnership with the University for arts in the town Utrecht, Netherlands and America over 60 children from the orphanages in Shiroka Luka and in Plovdiv „Olga Skobeleva“ and Smolyan family type home for accommodation of children were educated professionally in workshops for music, dance, theatre, masks, yoga, martyr arts and cinema. Their work was inspired by Chinese fairy tales and legends – a special theme of the festival that happens every year with some of the great world fairy tales treasure-houses. Past years the puppet director Rositza Minevska (together with a team of puppeteers) worked devotedly with children. This summer the actress from the Sofia Puppet Theatre Maya Bezhanska in team with the actress Rositza Kazakova educated young artists how to operate professionally with puppets and how through the specificity of the puppets the kids could put in order and express their confused identity. Designer of the puppets was the young artist Stanislava Krusteva, author of the scenography of the Vidin „Autobiography“ by Branislav Nushich. For the first time there was a professional workshop „Mask, character, theatre games“ carried out according to the original method of the French pedagogue Jacque Lecoq from the Dutch Sonja Ewald – founder of the independent theatre company „Mimekry“. Next year the puppet director Katya Petrova will show the children at risk how to create theatre with objects.

Unlike the tendentious idea from the near past "Banner of Peace", the Summer Theatre Academy for children at risk does not have idealistic political aims, but relies on the creative and the social moment – to include in the great game of life „the lost“ children of Bulgaria, discovering and developing their talents on time. What kind of adventures are there on the way to these children and how the puppet and the mask enter their lives stronger than the presence of the adult, you'll read below from the conversation with Elena Panayotova.

**– For 10 years you have been supervising this project and your team of puppet actors and directors**

**was working professionally with children long ago. Tell me more about the project itself.**

– At the moment we are developing the idea for the National centre for work with children through program „Theatre and education“, integrating children through art. It starts in December. There are project trainings elaborated in it for work with children from 6 to 18 years. For example if a child has problems with mathematics in school we'll help him with music. We have serious experience behind us, due to an organization that offered us to make a research working with orphan children in Kasson, Kenya. We've made this research and started the project „Artists for children“. We are going to train local artists there in order to realize Shiroka Luka model there. Then we'll help them to develop their own program. Thus our organization is turning into world network and during the years students were continuously coming to be trained by us, students from Netherlands, mainly from the University in Utrecht, where I teach, entering into partnership with their program „Theatre and education“. The fact that up to now we did not have state aid and we were supported mainly by private sponsors is very positive, as we had the opportunity to develop and gain experience.

**– To what extent the education of these children through theatre gives them the chance to integrate better in society?**

– According to me this is the most appropriate way for children at risk to integrate.

**– You work actively with children three weeks a year. How do you separate? Don't you attach to them?**

– The emotion has no relation to the project. All the time we were saying to the children that they were all equal for us, so we are trying not to attach and not to make one child more important than another. I am not taking care of these children all the time, there are always other people – tutors, director. Now I remind a situation when we started the program – the first year. It was the first time when we were making masks and playing with masks in front of the children. And the child Emo, for example, came out with the mask and started playing. The children were repeating „Emo, Emo...“ and then they forgot that he was Emo and started watching what the child with the mask was doing. And when at last the mask was taken off, they had entirely forgotten that this was Emo and were waving with hands to the mask. Then I said to myself: nowadays this amazement from theatre has entirely disappeared. The egoistic thought that theatre is alive and must be alive, gives me additional energy for this project.

**– Peter Brook had also passed through similar search of theatrical roots through the mask, ritual, primary amazement from theatre as art among the tribes of Africa. Does your search have anything in common with his?**

– I haven't thought about that. The ritualistic is important, but what I am doing now is that from these ancient cultures spring out some stories which are told by the children with puppets, masks, dance, song, martyr arts etc. For me these children are much more spontaneous than us, but they are not more different from all other children. Except for their desire to receive a little bit more love and attention than the other children, because that's what they're missing.



**- Tell us about another situation that happened during the working process with the children...**

- I remind a situation with a mask, again. There was a boy who did not dare to look at us for years, he was avoiding everything and was walking somewhat bent. When it was time for him to come in the mask workshop (he was already 15 years old) a little miracle happened with him. He put the mask and discovered a completely new way of expressing - the fact that the body moves freely and expresses without shyness everything, that can create stories, tremendously affected him. Practically this boy started changing: gradually he stood straight, started looking us in the eyes and greeting us. Here the mask had huge therapeutic effect, but there was no such initial aim. The first touch with art is indispensable.

**- And what is the influence of the puppet in the work with children?**

- The discovery of the puppet is always an incredible event for them. Even more that in the start of the project these children had never seen theatre before. The excitement during the work with puppets is always huge for the children and for the colleagues that teach them how to hold and lead a puppet. Of course the face of the Summer Theatre Academy for work with children at risk is not shaped only by puppet art. Every summer the children from Shiroka Luka meet children from Europe, guests from different continents of the world. This year we've had guests from Pittsburg, from America, from Germany, from Netherlands from wherever. This a meeting of different cultures in Shiroka Luka. This year we've had black Americans that I think is great - they were sent by an organization that was interested in our project, „Destiny Project“, near Pittsburg in America, but they are coming from entirely different organization and respectively they should return their experience back. It was very emotional for them to work with the children from Shiroka Luka, because they themselves are coming from the ghetto - these are people that were seeing murders almost every week, the father of one them is in jail, and the sister of the other was killed in front of his eyes. They have grown up as orphans, but work in the arts. Ayra is a professional dancer and Zigi plays seven instruments, so it not by chance that they go to this organization to work with this children and be their model. It is a mission for them. This is a special training program, part of our new international network „Artists for children“. It must not be underestimated that our experience comes from Europe and we are an European project working locally.

**- What is the fate of the children with manifested artistic gift, do you direct them towards some art schools?**

- At the moment we work on another program concerning children that show special talent and would like to continue and develop their interest in arts, we are searching where to direct them and how to prepare them better. Therefore it would be good for our future Centre for work through art with children at risk or in socially disadvantaged condition (or children with low social status or ones coming from foster parents) to cooperate with the primary school in Shiroka Luka.

**- How does the Rhodope Mountain energy influence the work with children?**

- When in 2002 I took nearly 30 actors from Bulgaria and Europe there to start our first project that was called „Art expedition TORNA“ these people that were 20-years old fell in love with the place and the people at once, and the local people fell in love with them, as well. It is difficult not to fall in love with Shiroka Luka. It is a very special and authentic place that keeps profound tradition and culture of the Bulgarian through the ages.

**- Do you miss the energy of these children in the city?**

- It is very important for our program not to allow ourselves to become attached to children. When I am there they are everything for me, but I don't think of them all the time, as I am not their mother... However these children know that they could call me any time they want. I love them and I love my actors the same. There is a rule in our team that we cannot adopt a child that we work with. This is part of our ethics - in the moment when somebody adopts such a child, he or she breaks the rule of the whole structure of the project and it will be ruined. But we take care of these children in a different way. For example we have recently initiated a program through which the teenagers from the Smolyan family type home for accommodation of children could try to teach other children in schools and children gardens. Yesterday a child called me and said: „I spoke to the director, it is possible, you must send a letter for me to start teaching?“ For me this was very important especially after the conversation I had had with the child before when he had declared: „I won't do it, I am a child from an orphanage, nobody will accept me, I don't dare going and offering anything...“ In 2 months' time this child overcame everything as he went to the school director and said: „I want to teach martyr arts to pupils from I to IV grade.“ - this is a functioning connection for me. Our project insists on the principle that all children are equally important for us. ■

Translation by **Kalina Terziyska**

