

# The worlds of puppet theater

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Puppet theater „sans frontiers“ in a variety of formats, a synthesis of various staging approaches. This comprises the treasury of the Golden Dolphin festival, a frantic and unique race through what appear to be parallel worlds.

This year's 15th edition of the International Puppet Theater festival Golden Dolphin Varna showed 22 performances for children and adults in 6 days, 10 of which were foreign and one stage design exhibition of the students of professor Maya Petrova of the National Academy of the Art of Theater and Cinema. Those were wonderful performances, each one with its own exclusive element, although not grouped by topic or motive. The most impressive thing about this year's festival was the variety of the performances both in terms of genre and their artistic and theatrical approaches.

## The Shadow of Tango

The festival was traditionally opened by students of the National Academy for Theater and Cinema with the performance „Tango. Shadows Show“ of Professor Zheny Pashova and assistant professor Petar

*Левет и нещо  
Nine and a bit*

Pashov. With only several white screens and nylons, huge white balls and the spotlights the graduates draw us into a world of dreams, a world beyond imagination, while at the same time depicting everyday life in 8 miniatures. The show can be relatively divided in three parts: the first one is poetically romantic; the second is humorous; and the last one, supported by documentary frames, makes a powerful finish, touching upon a social problem – wars and their consequences. A 360 degrees' turn. Yet, are love and war not the most universal topics, the most fundamental ones? What is more, such a masterful staging makes even the banal squabbles between men and women over the choice of a partner very emotional. It seems possible and paradoxical to depict violence in a grotesque and tender way. The actors' language is the tango. What could be truer than the way our bodies respond and experience? Archetypal and lofty at the same time, this language transfers to the audience the vibrations of pure emotion, reflecting an objective picture of the world and the people that populate it who are not subject to a global change.

## The mask does not hide, it discloses

„A mask is always two-directional: it sends messages inward to the wearer and projects them outward to the spectator“ (Peter Brook). That seems to be the motto of the Masks Theater from Vitleem, Cunnecticut, USA: „This world, the next and then the peach orchard & Blues, Blues“. Because the mask is a tool that accompanies the theater since its birth and using a mask, it turns into a portal. The actor is at the same time closed inside, in his soul to control and free her physical expression and is thus more sincere to the spectator and more vulnerable. Larry Hunt and Adelka Polak invite him the everyday life of extraterrestrials reading newspapers, of stalking lemurs, of imaginary magnetic creatures, even in the world of the puppets of Romeo and Juliet. The effect is striking: by just changing the mask, the costume and the posture the actor disappears and transforms into a strange creature. If the mask is not rejected by the body, it could not only express the depicted emotion but many others as well, it could inspire a specific mood, situation, attitude, unearthliness.

In the fragments of this performance one could differentiate the drive to intimacy; the two characters were looking for each other or for their own other „self“: the coldness of the extraterrestrials is the pole of warmth between people (an unhappy man and a tired tormented woman trying to find the elixir of life in the flower); the shapeless Azalea inhabiting the existence of something that has never happened and searching for the visible, real, tangible; the three faces that are homeless and want to take up with a body; the illusion of a merging of face and back in a homogenous mechanism. The understanding and the minor dissonance between the two in the second part are interwoven into the music and the dancing harmony of blues and jazz. And the final parody of Romeo and Juliet, the same round blue hairless puppets breaks the

achieved romance to pieces.

In order to be convincing enough, the masked performance needs continuous physical training, flexibility, intuition and „stripping“. Larry Hunt and Adelka Polak proved to the Bulgarian audience that the masks theater is an astonishing art, very different from anything else.

### Puppets for adults

The theater of the Dutch artist **Toon Maas** is yet unknown in Bulgaria. Because it is a traveling street theater, puppet theater for adults, non-verbal and because it is a short and wonderfully performed show. Spectacle that does not captivate you with the story or speculation, that is funny but not sketchy, lacks a center but the cabin placed on the open stage reminds you more of a mugger's show than a puppet performance. The

*Този свят, гугуеат и  
градината с праско-  
вине / Баус, баус*

*This world, the next  
and then the peach  
orchard & Blues, Blues*



puppets are varied and have the wonderful quality of being somewhat independent and equal to the actor. Simple gestures, sharing with the audience, real human behaviour of the clown puppet that is a self-manipulating marionette. The intense interest of actors and students made Toon Maas hold a workshop on the main steps in his approach to art. A street marionette theater in the form of a concert featuring stars like Elvis Presley and Celine Dion was demonstrated by Pole Kshishtof Falkovski.

The show „**The Argonauts**“ of the State Puppet and Youth Theater of Batumi, Georgia depicts the grandeur and charm of the ancient world, influ-

enced by and mixed with myths and legends. The puppets are a triumph of colours, forms and movements and the actors take them through all the adventures carefully and with precision to the goal – the Golden Fleece with the same make-up and costumes, only looking like puppets. The result is a delight to the eye. Hardly has anyone ever been closer to Jason and the Argonauts in their minds and feeling more empathic to their ordeal (in spite of all the movies made about them).

The stage design is equally in the spirit of a fairy tale come true, the materialized heaven. We can see a structure that modifies from a ship in a the open sea, through a palace to various islands that either hide hardships Argonauts or need their help. Hera is the patron of brave Jason. Her voice, just as her turquoise blue dress seems to come out of the deep sea. Thanks to her desire Jason's fate is a series of happy coincidences. Gracious Medea decides to give him an ointment to help him win the dragon, keeper of the Fleece. At the end not only does Jason come into possession of fleece, but he also takes Medea as his wife with him.

The important moments of the show are reinforced by original and memorable music and author's songs (the festival music award for „The Argonauts“ is indisputable). This impressive show is constructed as a whole different world, full-blooded and flexible. All its bright components call for the natural drive for exciting adventures that every spectator has inside.

### Princes and princesses...

Along with the non-standard performances there was also classical puppet theater for children. When we return to the world of fairy tales, we are usually overwhelmed with the optimistic charm of the strong and lasting love, of the unreal adventures and mystic kingdoms. Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm Brothers are among the favourite masters of fairy tales and often preferred by the producers for puppet theater performances. Their works are full of tenderness, cruelty and fantasy.

Apart from the authors one thing that united the three performances

„**The Princess and The Pea**“ (SPT of Sliven), „**The Little Mermaid**“ (SPT of Stara Zagora) and „**Tsar Drozdobrad**“ (SPT of Burgas) was the stage design of Svila Velichkova – colourful, spectacular and simple at the same time, original but preserving the exact logical colours – blue for „The Little Marmaid“, green for „The Princess and The Pea“ and motley for „Tsar Drozdobrad“. The marine master for example is like a storm – wise, awesome head on top of the sea spiral depicting the submarine world; the father of the princess in Tsar Drozdobrad is plump, flaccid and very comical; Alex, the Little Mermaid's buddy is a grinder-like fish. The theatrical atmosphere of the performances is achieved with the help of stylization and lack of excessive flamboyance. Svila Velichkova has given full colour to the stories, creating an atmosphere out of somewhat vague stage design that keep transforming the entire time – castle, garden, city, coast or the bottom of the sea. In spite of their conditionality they are like a key motive of where the action takes place, richly decorating the narrative.

You should not however expect to see the fairy tales literally moved on the stage. They have undergone certain changes subject to the objectives of their creators, most often a mitigation of the story and the opportunity to add mischievous elements. We are quite familiar with the three tales. The performances use the core moments and build their stage reality around them. To that they add their creative interpretation of the specific fairy fragment. The result is a visually rewritten story.

The tales are only seemingly simple. They also address the big questions of life, but using other methods, those of the codified fantasy. This is exactly what nails us in the reasonable center of the bearable. Without that powerful combination of traditions our civilization would have passed beyond control by now. In the past the fairy tales were replaced mostly by mythology and religion. The tales also educate in the much needed humanity.

In all three performances the actors are also the story tellers and puppeteers. The ease and wistfulness

with which love comes to its culmination is striking, and love is the red line in all three tales and implies the moral. The Little Mermaid is the symbol of selflessness, self-renunciation and voluntary pledge to martyrdom. The princess in Tsar Drozdobrad shows us how to give up our vanity, arrogance and loftiness. The princess with the pea is an example of modesty and delicacy. All these virtues, their emergence and maintenance come from the love that has the strength of being unalterable. In its name Tsar Drozdobrad is the most patient man, having persistent will and confidence. In the three stories no one gives up her love, which is ultimately what matters most.

„A Story of a Gull and a Gang of Tom-Cats“ of the Sofia Puppet Theater reminds us of an action comedy without the stunts. The street cats all of a sudden appear to be the guardians of a gull. This contradicts the idea that the street is a ghetto and a jungle. Who would believe that cats will take care of a bird? The flexible, obscenely grinning cats are puppets with pipe-like spring bodies that make their acrobatic flying around the stage possible. At least as long as it takes to teach the baby gull how to fly. This is a social cause, a mission that no one would challenge. Then the pathetically comic situations begin, some of them created by Stoyan Royanov-Ya-Ya who plays live on stage. This musical picture provides a natural setting that catches the attention. This is an astonishingly rhythmical performance that offers the audience a sip of freshness and joy with its spontaneity. A carefully designed performance that snatched away most of the awards in a cat's sty;e from its main rival „The Vampire's Bride“.

„The Vampire's Bride“ is close to the perfection beyond the limits of the rational; it is a must-see performance. It uses the story of Nikolay Raynov's tale to build its concept of love in the two-dimensional world of good and evil. It is a one-hour dazzling fairy play of colours, materials, masks, odd masterly creatures, an impressive and unique fury that fits perfectly into the theatrical relativism. A shining competition between the actors' performance and the stage design originality. The introductory and the final scenes are pieces of a mask ball: stylish and

gracefully elegant but also detailing the story and the intimate feelings that it inspires. The puppets are of human size, which is in itself an allegory of the missing or sinful elements of our life. And when the music and objects on the stage (the chariot with white and black horses, the ancient-looking candelabras, the web bed, the gardens and the raging whirlwinds) complete the picture, the result is unattainable even for the movies. The visual tricks that are achieved without the support of any multimedia however are beyond description. Once you see the, your idea of the theater will be changed. The stage design is relative and abstract and the messages are transmitted mostly through it (designed by Stefka Kyuvlieva), while the text and the play are only its tools. The realm of „darkness and blood“ is in fact a projection of jealousy and hatred that replace the holiest love possible, that of the mother. Grand duchess Vasilena and grand duke Narinan are doomed to impossible happiness, divided in their love, trying to protect each other without causing each other sorrow or pain. The purity, true feelings and inexorable will of Vasilena save Narinan from the curse. But the two halves, the dark and the light one, remain nested in him as a metaphor of the dual human nature, of the hidden vampire buried in every one of us. Are they the greater barrier or the repulsive and authentic vampires who are helpless in the face of love? Here comes the other truth again: the evil only steps back to absolute and unconditional love.

Those were my accents, the initial laureates of my conscience and intuition. Performances that prove that the art of Puppet Theater is moving along its development path and enchants both children and adults headlong. The festival itself was however deprived of the feeling of celebration and euphoria. Quite unexpectedly, the residents of Varna are unaware of the existence of the Golden Dolphin. I



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do not know what the reason is: is it their indifference or is it insufficient advertising. Anyway, it is unacceptable that such a significant event for the art of Puppet Theater should be so closed and isolated. Are the festivals, as the theater in general, meant to be inspired by the audience and made for it? Is that not the ultimate meaning and purpose of art, while all the rest is its background? ■

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