

# At International Puppet Festivals in Bulgaria... Bulgaria Comes in the Lead!

Adelka Polak

Puppeteer, Dancer, Movement Artist (USA)

My recent experience as a performing artist and extremely grateful audience member at the 15th International Golden Dolphin Puppet Festival Varna 2011 on the Black Sea in Bulgaria left every cell in my body buzzing over the heightened creative energy. The Bulgarian State Puppet Theaters from across the entire country have been hitting new heights. While there were remarkable performances presented from Spain, Russia & Georgia, the three shows from the hosting county that utterly stole the imaginations of international viewers with charm and precision were „The Little Mermaid“ from Stara Zagora, „The Seagull and a Gang of Tomcats“ from Sofia, and the most stunning work of all „An Outlook of a Stump“ from Varna, the city of the festival itself. Each show thrived with vigorous artistic energy, twisting, turning, and considering their viewers through every breath. Liveliness, artistry, dark-twisted humor, and clarity of objective through physicality are just a few of the aspects that made me crave more bold, daring, and concise theater like what I saw there this year. With these troupes coming from three different parts of the country, each view and style was so unique from the next, and I could not help but feel a tinge of competition amongst them. With livelihoods at stake through funding cuts Bulgaria has held on to their traditional drive for excellence while thrilling audiences with new ventures in regards to techniques, artistry, and approaches. They are working very hard to survive in quite uncertain times with the State, so a bit of competition is healthy when it allows for the creation of such brilliant works of puppet art. Puppetry Theater touches the human spirit.

Have you ever left the theater feeling a bit more human? While „An

Outlook of a Stump“ objectifies an object that is seen as very unmoving indeed, the action of the production was anything but while revolving around the most famous stump of all - Pinocchio. Do not be fooled by the topic. Adults created the audience for this piece, which truly takes a philosophical perspective on this very familiar story about creation through artistry, notions of humanity, and humility from mortality. Familiar is the story, while unique and bold is this presentation from Varna. „Outlook of a Stump“ contains all of the purely vibrant performing spirit like I usually see in the performances at LaMama, E.T.C. in NYC, but what melted the audience's souls in Bulgaria that day was the utter precision of timing and pointed focus between the cast members to create a fervent ensemble. The direction by Tedy Moskov was so clear and the performers so expressive in their body language, my skin enlivens just thinking about it. What a great thing it is to be human, and that little piece of wooden puppet imagined that for his existence. That human element is exactly why the theater exists, so this show took this story to amplify this notion and remind us all of why it is we keep going as puppeteers while the world around us seems to be crumbling, economically and structurally. We cannot see the world as we always have, although things rarely seem easy for artists at any time in history.

Understand „An Outlook of a Stump“ along with the two other performances to be discussed were all performed in Bulgarian for this festival. Now the Varna troupe warned me beforehand how regional and colloquial all the jokes and dialogue were in the show and expressed fears that all would be lost to audiences who did not understand the language, but the show was perhaps the best at the



Festival for the international audiences. We were ecstatic from the performance, and celebrated joyously in Mandarin, Turkish, Bulgarian, Spanish, and English afterwards in a continued shared experience of the party. The performance hooked us. The costumes, props, and visuals such as masks were so clear and compelling as combined with the rhythmic calculations and mood transformations displayed by the performers that we got it. Without understanding each word, we felt and heard the show's heartbeat, which was brilliantly built into the writing, and completely in sync with the direction. The writer and director are one and the same, Tedy Moskov. Mr. Moskov could not have chosen a more excellent cast, which included the Artistic Director of the Varna State Puppet Theater herself Vera Stoykova along with the brilliant cast including Stoyan Stoyanov, Galin Ginev, Krasimir Dobrev, Boyan Stoyanov, Gergana Gospodinova, and Diana Tsolevska. (They won the award

*Този свят, гругият и  
градината с праско-  
вите / Блуз, блуз*

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



*Този свят, глумят и градината с прасковите / Баус, Баус*  
*This world, the next and then the peach orchard & Blues, Blues*

focused on the joints with added seam-like lines at those points.

To be human is also to die. Time is precious, so death can be motivating, especially if it is a long-limbed, lanky woman with a bold haircut and a scythe chasing after you like Gergana Gospodinova in this production. She frightened Gepetto, played with excellence by Galin Ginev, while delighting the audience with her bizarre simultaneous grace and horrifying persistence. What a surprise her character was! Never has death been more compelling through personification.

In the 2011 presentation of „Rusalka“ or better known to English-speakers as „The Little Mermaid“ by the State Puppet Theater from Stara Zagora, the prince's close touch with death allows him to meet his true love

and reimagined in various configurations for the changing settings with the most prominent placement looking like a whirlpool or tornado while moving much more gently and fluidly than that. Being suspended allowed for gentle bobs in movement of the spiral when the puppets touched the set piece. The set in many ways became a giant puppet for itself gracefully shaping the frame for our eyes' delight. The Stara Zagora State Puppet Theater hits top marks for grace, joy, and delight within this magical presentation of dreams within the sea.

The children's show that swept the awards was from the capital city Sofia. „A Seagull and a Gang of Tomcats,“ based on Luis Sepulveda's novel, depicts how one tomcat protects a lost egg to have it soon hatch on the dock of a bay. The newborn little seagull cries „mama“ when her first sight in life is this tomcat who makes his gang care for the little feathered friend. An unlikely and lovely relationship forms amongst all of them. This production, adapted by Katya Petrova and Ina Bozhidarova, is a joy in rhythm, visuals, and honest delivery of character, including beat-boxing and live drumming. The unique style of puppetry, including the cats' bodies made out of collapsible furnace vents, combines with sincere acting, which is shaped here through sound as thrilling live percussion and spoken word-like scenes keep the audience's imaginations active and hearts' pumping. The children who get to see this have such a unique and thrilling experience connecting with a show about empathy, compassion, and caring for our community while having fun all the while. This is what the world needs now.

With the global culture of austerity everything is at risk and while the livelihood of the Bulgarian State puppeteers and staff are threatened as so many others are in this world their competition strives for quality. In tough times, they have only begun to work harder, and as they work harder within competition they are in actuality working for each other so that the art of puppetry may survive in the country. The pride overwhelming the puppeteers is not undeserved and can be soft as the trade hopes for, but that „head held high“ is exactly what reaches for excellence. I will take it. ■



*Маакана русалка*  
*The little mermaid*

for „Best Actor“ as a collective for the festival.) All of these puppeteers were asked to do something very different from usual, and that was to act, move, breathe, and express an idea. They did not even use puppets, although simple props sometimes created the illusion of a puppet. The main character is Pinocchio, so the actor had to technically play a puppet. He was very much human, though, even with him being „clothed“ in wooden pieces covered in bark that were stylistically „carved“ off of him to leave an interesting costume (by Svila Velichkova) beneath that

of the sea. The little mermaid finds a way to meet him at high costs, causing him to not recognize her without her voice, traded to the evil Sea Queen. This brilliant, delicate and playful production for young audiences features a gorgeous set consisting of a large spiral by the endless award-winning designer Svila Velichkova. (Award for „Best Design“ at the Festival for this production and several others including „King Thrushbeard“ and „The Princess and the Pea“). The deep blue suspended spiral is manipulated throughout the piece