

Puppet Theater and the Future

Prof. Rumen Rachev

On the 29th of October 2012 at NAFTA „Kr. Sarafov“ was held a Scientific Conference on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Creation of the Professional Higher Education in Puppet Theater. We publish the major part of the report read at the conference.

I realize that I have displayed certain boldness when putting the title of my opening report „Puppet Theater and the Future“ because people have said, „Man proposes and God disposes“. But let me remind me you the well-known phrase „In the dark future I do not look clear, but I love my art so dear.“ So I ask you to accept this report as an opportunity for a creative professional discussion, in which we can bring together a vision of how puppet art and puppet theater in particular will develop in the near and in the distant future. But in order to exist the Future, a Past and Present should exist as well, right?

In Wikipedia it says: The past is a term used to indicate the totality of events which occurred before a given point in time. The past is contrasted with and defined by the future. The past is the object of such fields as archaeology, astronomy, geology, paleontology, history, cosmology, philosophy and physics, and when it refers to puppet theater – the object of research of Prof. Doychina Sinigerska.

So let's go back 50 years ago!

It all began in 1962. November. Day 15th. A crucial date! Crucial, because it was the first day of school for the new subject „Acting for Puppet Theatre“ in the Department „Acting“ at the NAFTA „Kr. Sarafov“ in Sofia.

A group of 15 people. 15 people willing to dedicate themselves to puppet art! 15 people eager to give soul to the dolls. In front of the class, as an artistic directors, not less eager, stood two persons. The young drama directors Nikolina Georgieva and Atanas Ilkov.

First period! The beginning is set!

But to reach this exciting beginning, alongside the names of Nikolina Georgieva and Atanas Ilkov, we should put the names of the architect Ivan Tsonev because the three of them are the authors and creators of the introducing of the subject. And the idea is made possible with the great support of Professor Zhelcho Mandadjiev - Rector of the National Academy at that time, as well as actors from all over Bulgaria, who are in love with puppet theater.

Let us honor them!

Years of search for artistic-creative work and inventions followed. Years of consideration and reconsideration of the successful and the unsuccessful moments. In regard of the failures nothing is said, but I guess there were such, even a few.

Formative years of creative work. During that period the analysis of practice includes the fundamental theoretical works on the specifics of puppet theater, and especially the professional training of actors - puppeteers. Theory follows practice. And this is quite natural, because the mind hardly follows the flight of human spirit. Authors of these quests are Nikolina Georgieva, Atanas Ilkov, Vasil Stefanov, Eshua Bello, Doychina Sinigerska, Elena Vladova and many others. These theoretical works and the creative immediate contact with the authors enabled the next generation of teachers (to which I belong) to form their own individual methods in the training of students in „Acting for Puppet Theatre“, as improperly it is called today.

But let us go back in the 60s and the early 70s. Bulgarian puppet school was growing and developing, based mainly on a rich aesthetic platform. It surprised Bulgarian and foreign viewers with the bizarre play of creative imagination, exquisitely delivered philosophical and moral messages and civil position. It also astonished with the skillfully formed, rich in their psychology, metaphorical puppet theater figures. This turbulent process of artistic development, creative searches and findings was possible only at the cost of the serious legal and financial care of Bulgarian state for the new professional puppet art and education. Puppet theaters opened doors! Many of them! Puppet Theater Connections were created! For example, the connection Sofia- Pazardzhik - Plovdiv - Stara Zagora. In this regard only Nova Zagora had no theater, probably because it was still really new!¹ Or the connection Vidin - Mihailovgrad (now Montana) - Sofia. A puppet theater between Mihailovgrad and Sofia was lacking, but Petrohan was an obstacle. That is why the village of Gintsi remained without a puppet theater!

The strategy in the slightly distorted, but steady puppet theatrical connection Burgas-Varna-Shumen, Targovishte (Popovo was omitted because of the name²) - Tarnovo-Gabrovo (and through Vitinya)-Sofia was also impressive. What an importance it had! And though I'm kidding, ladies and gentlemen, please note - professional puppet theaters were opening doors. Widely!

And now?!...How about today?!... We don't say a word.

Let us go quietly back to the next stages of the development of the art of Bulgarian puppet theater, that we love so much. In the 70 years of the twentieth century puppet theater made a big step forward in its development, and so it left the screen behind. The same screen without which the magic of „the genuine puppets“ was impossible. And those who gave life and spirit of the puppets appeared like spirits next to their puppets.

Exciting, but embarrassing!

Exciting, because new action possibilities for the puppets arose. New approaches for puppeteers that allowed

¹ Nova Zagora - a town in Bulgaria, which name means „New“ Zagora, i.e. the author is showing a play upon words.

² The author is using an untranslatable play upon words in reference with the name of the Bulgarian town Popovo.

more diverse visual solutions, not corresponding to the limiting condition – screen. The fact that we could already see the genuine eyes of the actor-puppeteer, and through them we could look into the soul of the puppet character, and even see the tears that would have never appeared in the eyes of the puppet, was exciting. Of course, when next to the puppet was standing an actor, not just a puppeteer.

And that was wonderful!

But it was also a little embarrassing. At least for me. Perhaps, however, not only for me, because this is how it all began: „key situations“ such as infantile hats, ... sewn with white thread,... costumes, that would turn the actors-puppeteers into part of the environment... And you start wondering what are the puppets doing in the hands of bushes, trees, clouds, weather-cocks, etc. Of course this is easily explained. The puppet artists (actors and directors) consciously and subconsciously tried to preserve the magic, the mystery of the genuine puppet. It was exactly that desire that was the reason to appear similar visual solutions, touching with their naivety.

It didn't work! Then things became clear. The emptiness that had left the missing magic of the independent puppet character was not replaced. And we started to fill this gap with the theoretical explanations and formulations, motivating the presence of the animating to the animated and their unbreakable relation.

Poor puppet actor, what a role didn't he have to play?! „The soul of the puppet“, „the director of his/her puppet“, „a side-observer, a commentator of the action“, etc. etc.

And it didn't work again! And afterwards things became clear again. And it was impossible for it to work actually, because, just imagine please a drama performance in which on the stage next to the characters of the play, close to all of them, stands the director and guides them. Or right next to the well played stage figure, who has left the state of incarnation, has insolently stood the actor – citizen, who observes the figure that he has an idea of and comments on it. And because he finds his intervention insufficient, has caught it in his hands and manipulates it, as a matter of fact! Poor stage figure! What a painful idea, right?

And so on to the end of the 80s, when the Present finally came! Present, which the defining dictionary determines very shortly – A contemporary reality – Today.

And today the contemporary reality has blown away the spirit of the spiritual field. And instead of spirit, the spiritual field puts the question „Where to get money from?“ In the spirit of today the spiritual field has started to sell – entertainment. And the contemporary reality looked into our eyes and softly, like a mother, told us: „Do not analyze, do not assess, just survive“ Of course the artists in puppet art faced the need to build a creative product, which is spectacularly attractive, dynamic, funny, easily understood, entertaining, mobile and cheap, and all that meant „marketable“. And in the hysterical pursuit of the cherished merchantability Bulgarian puppet theater began to ignore the theater inside it. After all, theater is the art that captivates the viewer and besides amusing him, takes him to a different world, allowing an experience of other people's destinies and emotions, often not felt by him in real life. It is exactly in the puppet theater where the small viewer feels the miracle

of the animated lifeless matter. It is in the puppet theater where the child is trapped into unfamiliar and surreal worlds inhabited by bizarre creatures, whose experience and emotions are so similar to those of people. And when real life puts the small human being in front of situations and dilemmas, similar to those of the theater reality, his will and morals will now be more prepared for the right decision.

Yes, but no! Instead, at festivals and in the theater halls we see people on stage who, for some unknown reason, have put on a red nose, and make us laugh on something, which is not funny even to them. With or without puppets, they are trying to tell us something that even they do not understand. „They make puppets come to life“, i.e. they animate puppets, as if with the only purpose to show us how lifeless they are. They establish direct contact with the audience in a way that alienates it even more from what is presented on stage. They speak and act in such a way as to make us doubt the mental health of the actors. Increasingly, film-shows are introduced in the puppet theaters, so that to demonstrate us that besides not being a theater, the puppet theater might not also be a cinema. And all that, with the unique purpose to create a „fashionable, different, marketable“ puppet theater show. Often these shows are even curious in their formalistic quests. The personal decisions and moves, that compose the structure, surprise with ingenuity and creativity. They impress us with their aesthetic design. And yet they do not „capture“ us, i.e. they do not make us feel a true part of the theater reality!

In this regard, I would like to tell about the following case of my teacher's practice. After a show that we had watched together with my first-year students, I asked them the question, „what did they like and why“. And also „what they did not like and why“. Of course, my aim was to provoke their analytical reflection and draw our conclusions



together. I was surprised by the diversity and difference of the answers. They varied from the total approval and enthusiasm from what they had seen to its absolute rejection. But it seemed like these opinions answered the question „what“ (did they like or no). Only one girl answered also the question „why“. She said: „I was curious, but I did not like it, because it did not touch me!“ This simple, sincere statement included that great quality that the art of theater is supposed to provoke and which unfortunately is starting to disappear. Namely, the capacity of theater to touch us, while watching the show. And if this lack continues, more often we will be going out of the theater hall, after having seen a puppet show, with our eyes full and our souls - empty.

In order to avoid this gloomy view, I think we should remember the base of theater art, especially puppetry. We should remember that there can be no theater if the show does not have its clearly defined **topic**. That the abundance of topics is not a variety of suggestions, but a lack of a basic drama, which interpretation we follow. That this interpretation of the main topic, we - the viewers can follow, only if it has built a well-structured and definitely clear acting **stage narrative**. That only the striking **action conflict** sets in motion **the main action** and **the main counteraction** in the theater show. That only with the sincere effort to resolve the action conflicts and in progress of the main action, the drama characters can reveal the profundity and the rich diversity of their emotional and psychological nature. And going through the accurate detection and masterfully compiled **events and facts** in the course of the action, they should make their way forward and become unforgettable, complete, convincing stage figures. That **the causality** is a necessary condition for the formation of behavioral score of the stage character. That even the „absurd“ logic of behavior has its strong causal reason. That it is ridiculous in terms of life logic, and not because of the lack of causality.

That... That... That... These „that-s“ are countless and we know all about them. I am far from thinking that I say something new, but I begin to long for shows, built on a strong basis of professional work of the initial phase of their formation, particularly **the action analysis**. I crave for a puppet world, inhabited by characters with rich psychological nature, for stage figures, made by artists and directors who are able to discover the invisible for the viewers **background**, which determines and motivates the actions and deeds of the characters! For puppeteers who have accepted the **artistic metaphor** as their creative motto!

The present - a contemporary reality, today. Who, for God's sake, composes these dictionaries?! A truly contemporary reality are the formulations in the additional provisions of the draft law for the Performing Arts, where it says:

Section 1 - For the purposes of this Act:

Item 4 - „Drama repertory theater“ is an organization with a troupe, in which performances of Bulgarian and world dramaturgy are executed and distributed.

So far so good!

Item 5 - „Puppet repertory theater“ is an organization, in which performances of Bulgarian and world puppet dramaturgy, are executed and distributed.

As you will notice, in this formulation the word „troupe“ is missing. And if the supreme effort of the importers in the repertory puppet theaters is that the troupes disappear, by virtue of this law, I see no reason neither for „repertory puppet theaters“ to exist, nor law!

Item 6 - „Drama-puppet repertory theater“ is an organization with the troupe, in which the execution and the distribution of performances of Bulgarian and world dramaturgy and dramaturgy for puppet art, are combined.

Thank God, they have the right to a troupe! But nobody says how this troupe is formed. The director has recruited in the troupe drama or puppet actors, professionals or amateurs. My God, I do not understand what idea is suggested into this formulation by virtue of this law! But I guess that there is no sense to look for an idea, because I do not know a single Drama Theatre in Bulgaria, which uniformly and regularly performs both activities - to produce approximately equal numbers of drama and puppet shows. If you, ladies and gentlemen, have seen or heard about such a show, please tell me! I will be grateful and I will apologize for my ignorance.

Unfortunately, such is our present reality - our contemporary reality! Today! Time, when a recently elected mayor in a Bulgarian town asks the longtime director of the state puppet theater in the same town, „Why don't you play for free? Aren't you doing a theater for children?“ And when the astonished director tries to explain that this is impossible, because they need money for salaries, artistic and accompanying activities, the mayor declares with foresight: „You will play, you will play.“

The rest is silence.

But today the opinion of the Board of Managers of ACT-UNIMA, which turned into the „Standpoint of the Faculty of Performing Arts at NAFTA „Kr. Sarafov“ in reference with the draft Law for Performing Arts is a reality. It is a standpoint filled with dignity, wisdom and concern for the art! A standpoint of professionals of a high standing! And the authors of this standpoint do not limit only to the marking and formulation of the imperfections of the draft law for the performing arts, but create and shape as a written document 25 recommendations for a full compliance with the draft Law on the Protection and Promotion of Culture and the Law on Higher education. And this analytical and creative written work has reached its addressee. It has reached them, but so what! Nothing is known of this! As the saying goes, „The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on!“ I sincerely hope that the audibility between the healthy strength and the common sense will improve in the future.

Future: The time that will come after the present. A tense, meaning an action that will occur after the moment of speaking. How accurate and beautiful is the explanation



in the Defining Dictionary of the word „future“, filled with dreams, hope and faith.

I also have hope! Maybe I do not believe that much, because my faith, like an old lace has been stained from the present filth and has entangled a little... But there are still hope and dreams.

And I have a dream! I dream of a future when my art will be loved and respected. I dream of a future when there will be no country that is no good for anything. I dream of a future in which I will not hear directors who say that young people do not want to work into the theaters (because this is not true) and will compete to offer opportunities for creative development and at least tolerable living conditions and remuneration. I dream of watching exciting puppet theater performances, which impress with professional realization. I dream of a future when the actors in the repertory state puppet theaters will not „just act“, but will artistically „master“. If one can put it like this. I dream of a future when the theoretical knowledge in puppetry will have differentiated „Illustrative brief theatrical form with cognitive purpose“, „Theatrical fun game“, „The illustrated and played out lesson with educational function“ and „Puppet theater show“. And without ignoring the need of the existence of each one of the manifestations of puppet art, will make the difference among them, will identify their individual characteristics and their respective address. I dream of a future when my favorite puppet theater will register that it remains behind the dynamics of child and youth percep-

tions, because with the scientifically proven existence of indigo children and their increasing number, the enhanced dynamic capacity of perception and reaction to the world around them, is encoded still in the embryonic stage. And we have to find new dynamic methods and techniques for enfolding the stage narrative in the middle of the increased attractiveness of the theatrical grandeur. One of my dearest dreams is that the puppet theater leaves the kindergartens and nurseries and goes back to where it belongs - the theater. Because I wish that the dream of my students will become true - to be and to feel artists. I dream of a future when it will be forbidden to „the poor in spirit“ to call the results of art „a product“ and demonstrate their dominant wit, saying that „in a market economy, each product must be exposed on the stall“. What a crazy sophistication of the spiritual and metaphorical poetic thinking! I dream of a future when the claim of Oscar Wilde „...it is still true that life imitates art far more than art imitates life“ will not be only a brilliant aphoristic quote from „The decay of lying“, but a structure of the social thinking and lifestyle.

So many dreams! I hope that it's true that if you strongly desire something, it will definitely happen. At some point in the future! The Wonderful Future, from which perspective the Present is Past. And even if I'm not here anymore, I will be happy and glad, though from afar...

Because Life is short, Art eternal! ■

Translation by **Nadia Zhereva**

Приказка без край или 50 години висше образование за куклен театър

Станислава Кирилова



Не случайно избирам да нарека текста си по повод юбилейната 50-годишнина от създаването на специалност „Актьорско майсторство за куклен театър“ на едноименния роман на Михаил Енде. Причината се корени основно в приказните хора, които са създали специалността, които вярват, че Смиъл все още има, които се опитват всячески да се противопоставят на „голямото сиво нищо“, което отхапва все по-голяма част от света. Поради причината, че в този детски роман се крие толкова истинска мъдрост за големите, които само трябва да решат да я видят и дори по-добре да се поучат от нея.

На 21 март 2013 г. в кинозалона на НАТФИЗ „Кръстьо

Сарафов“ беше представен юбилейният сборник „50 години висше образование за куклен театър“, чийто съставител е проф. Дойчина Синигерска. Избраната дата за представянето, съзнателно или напълно случайно, съвпадна със Световния ден на кукления театър, Индийската нова година в допълнение със Световния ден на поезията и 50-та годишнина на УНИМА-България. За водещ на представянето беше избрана проф. Николина Георгиев, която заедно с проф. Атанас Илков са и първите преподаватели в специалността. И както винаги се случва на празниците, поздравленията се стичаха от всички страни. Беше прочетено Международното послание от УНИМА, от