

University-Level puppetry training

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Abstract: For seventy years puppet theatre in the region of Central-Eastern Europe has been developing in a different rhythm than elsewhere. Introducing puppeteer training was a natural consequence of the establishment of institutional puppet theatres. The puppetry schools were modelled on art academies; after all, these academies had been educating artists, musicians, actors, so why not puppeteers? University-level faculties of puppetry finally emerged in the 1950s because, so to speak, the realities of the era had demanded it. What is the situation now? Is the long-term professional training of puppeteers still interesting, useful, needed? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the system of the university-level puppeteer training?

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The world has become surprisingly small. We need a day or two at the most in order to meet face to face, regardless of whether we are in Europe, Japan, Australia, South Africa or Argentina. Internet applications allow us to be in touch with one another in a matter of seconds. We watch, at least on-screen, the results of the work of various artists active now and in the past. We compare. We criticise. We appraise. What we do as a result is borrow, copy, combine, and with a greater or lesser success transform things, and sometimes we generate some new standards, fashions, even styles. Living in entirely diverse realities, we negotiate a

peculiar process of migrating topics, forms, modes and means of expression. We create a diverse, yet strong, multifaceted puppetry milieu.

Does this new situation affect the puppet theatre? It certainly does. Does being a puppeteer mean something different than it did in the past? It certainly does not. And the essential question is: as a consequence of these changes, has puppeteer training undergone, or should it undergo, some fundamental changes? The answer is not going to be that easy.

I shall focus only on the latter issue and, in addition, only in a very special context, i.e. the situation of Central-Eastern Europe. This is because for seventy years puppet theatre in this region has been developing in a different rhythm than elsewhere, and also because long-term professional training of puppeteers on the university level originated here.

The different rhythm of Central-Eastern Europe puppetry results from its structure. Changes that occurred after the Second World War and the new balance of power that resulted from the emergence of the Soviet bloc affected puppetry insofar as that independent puppeteers and small private theatres vanished. From then on, they were non-existent until the political upheaval of the late 1980s, when they started to come back to life. They were absent in the Balkans, in the Baltic states, in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania, not to mention the Soviet Union. In the process of the ongoing nationalization and Sovietization, the theatres (including puppet theatres) that emerged in their stead were state institutions with staffs of dozens, sometimes hundreds of people, including specialized services, technical equipment, and audience organization specialists, and above all with their own buildings as a permanent place for their repertoire (performances took place every day); they also had artistic and financial units. Many an artist of puppet theatre worldwide dreamt, and in fact sometimes still dreams, of being given such conditions. The only thing lacking in post-war Eastern Europe was a sufficient number of puppeteers. The formation of specialist colleges for training professionals in various branches of puppetry was thus only a matter of time. Such colleges began to be instituted in the early 1950s. They were modelled on art academies; after all, these academies had been educating artists, musicians, actors, film-makers, so why not puppeteers? As the status of their education rose, the puppeteers gained more prestige. After the war, puppet theatre was classified as an art for children, which, in spite of oft-repeated declarations, was (and in fact still is) not treated

on a par with art for adults in regard to its gravity, rank and prestige. The creation of puppetry training programs was, therefore, yet another step towards an ennoblement of the puppetry milieu, a special nod to such unquestioned masters as the Soviet puppeteer Sergey Obraztsov, who in the 1950s was the oracle in all matters of puppetry in the entire bloc.

University-level faculties of puppetry emerged because the realities of the era, so to speak, demanded it. The initiation of puppeteer training was a natural consequence of the establishment of institutional puppet theatres. Curricula were developed slowly and painfully, not without conflicts, and with the accompanying ambition of highlighting the specific puppetry milieu which constituted each given school (and almost every country had something of its own to say in this matter). As time went by, this specificity was becoming increasingly historical—the *kukła* in Poland or the *vertep* puppet in the Ukraine being cases in point—and despite attempts to articulate it, the curricula of puppetry colleges reflected the artistic formation of the institutional theatres in each country. After all, puppetry schools were training the staffs for puppet theatres, with the same artists employed in each institution. And the theatres, although occasionally diverse, were similar in principle, founded as they were on analogous dramaturgy, methods of directing, and puppetry techniques. Puppetry dramaturgy, even though international, was advanced only to serve the needs of the developing repertoire of the eastern bloc puppet theatres. The art of directing was strongly rooted in Stanislavski's system or, in the areas closer to Berlin, Bertolt Brecht's system. It was, perhaps, puppetry techniques that for a long time were the clearest unifying element of Eastern European theatres, with Obraztsov's "Javanese" rod puppet, the hand puppet, and the marionette being the dominant types, with the occasional use of masks, stage puppets, shadow puppets and more local types of theatrical puppets. As a result, puppetry colleges in today's Russia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Germany, Romania, Croatia, Ukraine, Belarus, Baltic states, the countries of the Caucasus, and even in Kazakhstan are different, yet similar. They have various specialized courses, from a most narrow focus (at the faculties of puppetry and directing) to those that attempt to encompass the entire field of puppetry, including dramaturgy, stage design, puppet technology and construction, costume design and production skills. The colleges have very many and very diverse teachers, true masters at times, who

are responsible for specific fields of knowledge, technique or craft. At these state-owned colleges, the ratio of just a handful of students to one teacher is not at all unheard of. In extreme cases, the number of staff equals the number of students being instructed in the art of puppetry. These colleges are, therefore, expensive and – like all art academies – highly individualistic institutions, even though the majority of classes are conducted in small groups. Above all, the students are taught teamwork, because they are meant to work in companies.

Puppetry colleges accept 15 to 20 students per year. They are usually secondary-school graduates with little idea of their chosen profession; in some cases they have never watched puppet theatre performances before. They are fascinated with theatre, and with film or television perhaps even more, but they assume that any path may lead to their goal. In some countries the situation is more complex. In Russia, for instance, apart from the university-level puppetry colleges, there are also several puppetry-oriented secondary schools. Very young people attend five-year courses there, often achieving excellent results, entirely comparable with university-level training. If despite these achievements they decide to go on to regular puppetry studies at the university, they expand their skill levels. Of course, they also acquire the degree of Master of Arts, which brings both prestige and greater remuneration. In addition, many recognized colleges conduct extramural puppetry courses intended to train personnel needed by specific theatres.

In essence, the curricula of all university-level puppetry programs consider the broadest needs of future puppeteers. Since a puppeteer (in Eastern-European contexts) is by definition an actor, the teachers' attention is focused on the parallel development of both acting and puppeteering skills. It would be a grave error to assume that practical puppetry courses are merely an addition to the curricula. Becoming familiar with and developing puppetry skills is an essential element of the learning process, similar to acting and stage movement classes, voice technique and interpretation skills, and physical training not to mention a variety of theoretical and intellectual courses that constitute a university education. Hundreds of teaching hours are devoted to acting classes – and similarly hundreds of hours are devoted to the theatre of the hands, working with objects, the animation of particular types of puppets, even the rudiments of puppet design. When the situation of puppetry acting in the period

before the institution of specialized colleges is compared with its quality little more than a decade later, the differences are unimaginable. In the course of decades, actors/puppeteers trained at puppetry colleges have not only attained academic success but have also achieved the most in their careers after college. Many of the graduates finally made it to non-puppet theatres or the film and television industries, by which they may have fulfilled their secret dreams. This career development is typical for the modern-day puppetry education system.

Regrettably, however, these changes were, and so far still are, quite detrimental to other elements of puppetry art, beginning with the puppet itself. It is obvious that every academy, like every theatre, goes through better and worse phases in its history. Once the DAMU (the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts) in Prague enjoyed resounding fame, but those halcyon days are long over. There were the great eras of Michail Korolev in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), of the schools in Sofia, Berlin, Białystok or Wrocław. Today, the academies in Budapest and Bratislava are more powerful, perhaps. Their curricula differ from each other, of course, but it is the people who stand at their head or set the given college's standards that exert the strongest influence. The question is: are they, in fact, puppeteers?

From this point onwards I shall focus on only one country, Poland, because in each place the circumstances are naturally different and generalizations would lead us astray. In the past, puppetry colleges were headed by great puppeteers, or at least it was they who set the tone. In Polish contexts, it was the directors; some of them had worked as puppeteer-actors, but in any case they were undoubtedly outstanding artists: suffice it to mention Jan Wilkowski, Jan Dorman or Wiesław Hejno. They were surrounded by an aura of celebration, each meeting with success, the way a master's energy is passed on to his disciples. Perhaps great talents spring only in the presence of great masters.

Their successors in subsequent generations shone with an increasingly reflected light, because the homogeneous organizational structure of the Polish theatre did not allow for genuine diversity; also, not all of the noteworthy creators were interested in bringing up successors to themselves. In addition, academic milieus, although large, have a rather hierarchical structure that is easy to fall out of, sometimes even unintentionally. We have now reached the moment when puppetry col-

leges are directed by puppeteer-actors who are not endowed with the charisma of their predecessors and who are employed in puppet theatres, often under the directorship of someone they themselves employ as an academic teacher. Actors are further and further removed from puppets, because they are not puppet-makers themselves, and because above all, being puppeteers, they have no influence whatsoever on whether they will handle puppets at all in their theatre; or if so, in what performances or under whose creative directorship. Finally, their vision of puppet theatre is far closer to that of theatre in general, rather than as a theatre making use of a specific instrument: the puppet. Puppets, although prominently featured in the curricula of puppetry colleges, are thus not their priority. Culminating degree performances are rarely staged and when they are, they are too traditional and mediocre to be of interest to anyone. At puppetry events, the colleges usually show brief puppet études, because this is a sort of a primer through which every student of puppetry should go; in fact, a truly interesting catalogue of ideas, acts and études has been developed over the years and is still being enlarged. Hence, the first condition for a well-functioning puppetry college is for the teachers to be convinced that the college's fundamental aim is to train a puppeteer. Not an actor, not a vocalist, not a mime, and definitely not a universal artist, but a puppeteer. This conviction can spring solely from the teacher's own profound and thoroughly considered experiences. Most teachers are not familiar with puppet theatre and not in touch with it; often they are not even curious about it, especially outside their own theatre, and they treat every new experience as an infringement of a sacred and acknowledged tradition, of the time-honoured belief that "this is how it has always been".

Academies must be a little conservative; of course, this is inscribed in the concept of academicism. It is impossible to teach experimenting; experiments have to be made, but a safe dividing line between the past and the future must be found.

Little more than a decade ago, the European academic world went through a period of upheaval involving standardized matriculation systems. The course of study was to be either uniform from the first to the last year of a four-, five- or six-year program; or, following the so-called Bologna process, divided into a three-year bachelor's degree program and a subsequent two-year master's program. Poland voted uniformly

for the actor training programs to be of the former kind, and the course of study was prolonged from 8 to 9 semesters. At the time this decision seemed to be absolutely justified. Today, I would not simply be much less certain, but instead would have voted very much against it. This is because during the last decade practice has demonstrated clearly that puppetry studies actually take 6 semesters (3 years), the study load is far too heavy, and the quality of education is lowered as a consequence, because after several hours of workshop classes per day it is very hard to sit down to philosophical analyses and historical or theoretical writings. The following 3 semesters, in turn, are practically wasted, especially on those students who are rejected by the European student exchange systems. The exchange systems also make it harder for budding puppeteers to start a career, because young people are not yet graduates (not even holding a bachelor's degree) and contrary to expectations, the system makes it more difficult for them to produce a written MA thesis, since they are involved in preparing final performance projects, the quality of which is usually low and whose usefulness is very limited. The introduction of the baccalaureate after 3 years would give young people a chance to immediately start their professional careers, while the most gifted and ambitious would be able to produce valuable, genuinely university-level master's theses. Hence, the second condition for having well-functioning puppetry colleges in Poland would be to introduce the Bologna model of standardized degrees.

The third condition is associated with systems of organization and financing. In the system of university education, the more students a organizational unit has, the more money it receives; similarly, the higher the teaching staff's qualifications, the more money the unit receives. This, however, brings us to a certain threshold that will very soon undermine our whole sense of education. Today, puppetry students not only have no cadre of masters, but worse still, are taught by their older colleagues, only 2 to 3 years their senior. The system of assistantships available immediately after graduation, or even while still studying at a second faculty (directing), causes recent graduates to immediately begin the procedures required to obtain doctoral and post-doctoral degrees. This strategy is beneficial from the point of view of the college authorities; alas, it is a thoughtless one that paralyzes the teaching process as a result. To invite renowned puppeteers from all over the world to conduct workshop cycles

could be a substitute solution. It could, but it won't, because in order to be employed at a European university, a person must have proper university titles, which puppetry masters do not have because they have never needed them. Long-term puppetry education on the university level is quite obviously in great danger; it is being sentenced to mediocrity.

The next weakness of the system of university-level puppeteer training in Central-Eastern Europe is its low receptiveness to transformations in the art. It has already been mentioned that after the political breakthrough of the year 1989 the countries of Central and Eastern Europe began to laboriously rebuild (or rather, permit the existence of) independent puppetry and small autonomous puppet troupes. In various countries of the region this process is unfolding at different speeds, but it is already evident that university-level training of puppeteers to work in permanent, repertoire-based puppet theatres is, or soon will be, no longer a priority. We should educate creative artists who will possess all the necessary skills, but above all who will be able to think independently and to follow their own paths instead of the beaten track laid down by their predecessors. The closer a particular school is to Western Europe, the more prevailing and more powerfully embedded is this educational philosophy.

But the most important element is awareness of the fact that it is the puppet that constitutes the fundamental creative material for puppet theatre. Many creators display only vestiges of this awareness. They keep repeating: "I am doing theatre". Only this "theatre" is not at all glad to have them, and they are occupying positions that might otherwise be held by puppeteers. Puppeteers are probably all around us, but are increasingly rare in puppetry colleges. In Białystok, the entrance examinations measure dexterity, and vocal and musical abilities are very strongly emphasized, but plastic-art skills are not assessed at all. Yet whatever his or her place on the stage might be, a puppeteer must have a feel for the substance, the form of puppetry.

It is, of course, impossible to master all types of puppets, just as it is impossible to master all musical instruments. One must choose. The choices have always depended on context and local conditions. And on the ambitions of the one doing the choosing as well. Looking at the Polish puppetry scene, where outstanding and truly puppet-focused shows are not infrequent, it is hard to resist the feeling that the concept of pup-

pet theatre is becoming increasingly blurred. This topic would merit a separate discussion, but two points are worth mentioning here. Years ago, when the foundations for the system of university-level puppetry training were being laid, the issues of stage design and puppet construction and technology were entirely overlooked. This resulted from the fact that after the war, the milieu of theatre scenographers was exceptionally strong. Drama theatre was not the area for more ambitious experiments, one of the reasons for this being the obligatory Socialist Realism. Emerging puppet theatres, even if they staged socialist-realist plays (which they did more rarely than the drama theatres), offered the opportunity to propose entirely novel visual conceptions, original ideas for stage and performance design. This was the domain of scenographers. Then the old masters were gone and the young masters were fewer and fewer; finally they ran out. And so we have puppet theatre without a puppet, because there is no one to design it, while new scenography faculties are still in their infancy. In Białystok, the opening of the faculty of puppet scenography has been announced for so many years that it probably has to be relegated to the realm of wishful thinking.

On a brighter note: in the last decade, after years of efforts and various initiatives, we have managed to develop truly outstanding puppet dramaturgy. Even bringing it onstage no longer presents a problem. All puppet theatres are showing new puppet plays, however most often, although not always, without puppets. But in this instance the reason for their absence is entirely different. Contemporary Polish puppet dramaturgy is several steps ahead of the contemporary Polish puppet theatre. It is simply that puppeteers have no idea how to show a talking puddle, bus stop, a blob of bird droppings, cross-eyed fishes, a snowflake or Santa's beard without making a reference to actors' costumes, which may still be funny at times but, alas, is infinitely banal. But at least there are plenty of topics for consideration. Puppet dramaturgy is a subject at the university-level puppetry studies. Maybe this will bring some fruit.

Yet is it at all possible to teach the art of puppetry? Should it not be simply patiently practiced?