

The director in puppet theatre (Eastern European context)¹

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Figure 1 - *Diablo!* based on Fernando Pessoa. Direction and set design: Joan Baixas. Animation Theatre, Poznań, Poland. Premiere: 2017. Photo: Jakub Wittchen.

¹ Conference in english available at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0poKIK2-ZoI>



Figure 2 - *Słoń i kwiat* (*The Elephant and the Flower*) based on Brian Patten. Direction: Robert Jarosz. Set. Design: Pavel Hubička. Grupa Coïncidentia, Białystok, Poland. Premiere: 2012. Photo: Michał Matoszko.

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Abstract: In Poland, as well in the East European countries, puppet theatres of the second half of the 20th century, and it seems that also in that of the first quarter of the 21st century, the most important person is a director. Was it always so that puppet theatre equals the director? So, the objectives of this study is to determine this problem. It was only in the beginning of 20th century, in the period of the great reform of theatre, that the director was given unlimited competencies. In puppet theatre this process lasted much longer, because the classical style of theatre organization, derived from unaccompanied and private enterprises of particular creators, also endured for longer. Today, it is a director who rules supreme in a puppet theatre. In practice, Polish directors are still convinced today that theatre is intended to tell stories. This process limited puppetry as an independently existing art based primarily on the abilities of the craftsmen; on the miracle of animating a lifeless object, a puppet, whose magical life has so much to offer the spectators. On the contrary, axis of this process stand the artists who see the meaning of their theatrical expression in bring lifeless matter to life. This – when puppet theatre is, after all, a show; it is visual art in motion, not storytelling.

Keywords: Puppet theatre. Director. Puppet. Puppeteer. Lifeless object. Puppetry in East European countries.

Resumo: Na Polónia, assim como nos países da Europa Oriental, para o teatro de bonecos da segunda metade do século 20, e igualmente no primeiro quarto do século 21, a pessoa mais importante é o diretor. No entanto será que o papel do diretor no teatro de bonecos sempre foi o mesmo? O objetivo deste estudo é determinar este problema. Foi somente no início do século 20, no período da Grande Reforma do teatro, que o diretor passou a ter competências ilimitadas. No teatro de bonecos, esse processo durou muito mais, porque o estilo clássico de organização do teatro, derivado de criadores específicos de empresas privadas, também perdurou mais tempo. Hoje, o diretor é quem controla completamente um teatro de bonecos. Na prática, os diretores poloneses ainda estão convictos de que o teatro se destina a contar histórias. Este processo limitou o teatro de bonecos a ser uma arte existente independentemente, baseada principalmente nas habilidades de artesãos; no milagre de animar um objeto sem vida, um boneco, cuja vida mágica tem tanto a oferecer aos espectadores. Pelo contrário, o eixo desse processo sustenta os artistas que vêem o significado de suas expressões teatrais ao darem vida à matéria sem vida. Isto – quando o teatro de bonecos é, afinal, um espetáculo – é arte visual em movimento, não contação de histórias.

Palavras-chave: Teatro de bonecos. Diretor. Boneco. Bonequeiro. Objeto sem vida. Teatro de bonecos em países da Europa Oriental.

At the beginning I wanted to present this paper during the Florianópolis conference, but when I was asked for the opening lecture I decided to present something more complex – the very personal video assembly of the short pieces of the puppet performances created by the famous contemporary puppeteers from different countries. This film was just commented by myself and I showed the three-five minutes excerpts of:

1. Ezechiel Garcia Romeu (Argentina/France) – *Aberrations du Documentaliste*;
2. Neville Tranter (The Netherlands) – *Schickelgruber alias Adolf Hitler*;
3. Ilka Schönbein (Germany) – *Old Lady and The Beast*;
4. Mark Down (Great Britain) – *The Table*;
5. Handspring Puppet Company / National Theatre (RSA/UK) – *War Horse*;
6. Hoichi Okamoto (Japan) – *Vein*;
7. Frank Soehnle (Germany) – *Salto lamento*;
8. Duda Paiva (Brasil/The Netherlands) – *Bestiaires*;
9. Aleksey Leliavsky / Karlsson Haus Theatre (Belorussia/Russia) – *Vanya*;
10. Janni Younge / Animation Theatre Poznan (RSA/Poland) – *Take Flight*;
11. Blick Théâtre (France) – *[Hullu!]*;
12. Veselka Kuncheva / Puppet's Lab (Bulgaria) – *I, Sysyphus*;
13. Yngvild Aspeli / Plexus Polaire (Norway/France) – *Ashes*;
14. Duda Paiva / Riga Puppet Theatre (The Netherlands/Latvia) – *Golden Horse*;
15. François Lazaro / Banialuka Puppet Theatre (France/Poland) – *Oresteia?*;
16. Yana Tumina / Osobniak Theatre (Russia) – *Gerda's Room*;
17. Konrad Dworakowski / Coincidentia Groupe (Poland) – *Don Kichot 2018*;
18. Gérard Schiphorst (The Netherlands) – *Rusty Nail & Other Heroes*.

For the publication of the results of The 3rd International Conference on Training in the Arts of Puppetry with the topic “Staging and diversity of contemporary theatrical creation processes” I decided to present my original paper: *The Director in Puppet Theatre*.



Figure 3 - Marek Waszkiel. Conference: *Contemporary puppet theater and training*. 3rd PRO-VOCATION, 2019, UDESC. Photo: Jerusa Mary.

In the Polish theatre of the second half of the 20th century, and it seems that also in that of the first quarter of the 21st century, the most important person is the director. When a production is successful, his role inside the theatre may perhaps weaken a little as the actors come to the fore, but outside it, the première is routinely associated with the director's name and it is the director that is later remembered. Stage designers get remembered with difficulty; these days, even the actors find it increasingly hard to enumerate the names of those who have collectively produced the visual side of the performances. Composers are virtually unknown, that is, usually a few celebrated names are mentioned, but hardly anyone links them with any première. The actors of puppet theatre are not even

worth mentioning. The names of Józef Kaczorowski or Franciszek Puget, the leading lights of Polish puppetry in the 1950s, mean nothing today; neither do dozens of others, from various decades. Nowadays there is no-one who would be able to enumerate actors from Jan Wilkowski's *Lalka Theatre* in Warsaw, those of Zofia Jar-emowa's mask theatre *Groteska*, Jan Dorman's theatre, Leokadia Serafinowicz's famous *Marcinek*. Andrzej Dziedziul is a name with no face attached; even the actors of Wiesław Hejno's *Mała Scena* in Wrocław or of Białostocki Teatr Lalek (BTL) are anonymous, even though the time of their glory was no more than two decades ago and almost all those who participated in the great premières of the 1980s or 1990s are still with us. If they names still function within the milieu, it is only thanks to the faculties of puppetry; they hold honourable professorial positions there, so they have pupils. Those who did not have the luck to land teaching jobs, disappeared.

Most curious! Was it always so that puppet theatre equals the director? 19th-century theatre (dramatic theatre, that is, for not much is known about puppet theatre of that time) is described as the era of the actor. And rightly so. Yet even there the director was present and did matter, even though his name and surname was not mentioned on the poster until more or less the beginning of the next century. His function was to impose order on the author's text and prepare it for stage, and especially to assign roles to actors. But it was actors who dominated. In puppet theatre this division did not exist at all, because there was either an itinerant soloist, who essentially was the steersman for his own ideas, or a company directed by an owner making use of the members of his own family or hired puppeteers. Until the Second World War, to find the director's name on a poster of a puppet performance is a great rarity. Even the first post-war posters did not report who the director had been; only the author of the text and sometimes the composer of music (songs) were mentioned.

It was only in the 20th century, beginning with the period of the great reform of theatre, that the director was given unlimited

competencies. It was he that could become the artist of theatre in the Craigian sense and the list of candidates to this honourable title began to grow unexpectedly fast. In puppet theatre this process took much longer, because the classical style of theatre organisation, derived from unaccompanied and private enterprises of particular creators, also endured for longer. After all, it is them that had always been the “artists of theatre”, even though they were often concerned with mundane problems, having to take care of their own survival and that of their families.

The art of puppet theatre directing emerged for good only after the Second World War. Since all the post-war puppet theatre in Poland was influenced by the Soviet organisational structure, which was modelled on the organisation of dramatic theatres, the system that governed drama was transferred on to puppetry. From then on, dramatic theatre became the reference point and its organisational structure, with the attendant prestige, professional privileges and institutional duties, took hold over the puppeteers’ imaginations. Specialised theatrical sections were transferred to puppetry. They were detached, just as in dramatic theatres: the acting company, the auxiliary team, the director, the stage designer, the composer, the literary team, the stage technician section, art workshops and many other positions, depending on the show being produced, on the imagination and the needs of the director. When a few months ago I attended an international conference in Moscow which addressed the role of a director in puppet theatre, I discovered that in Russia there are over fifty professions/positions assigned to puppeteers. Institutionalization favoured an employment system based on permanent posts of employment, and this, in turn, served to delimit the scopes of theatre-related professions. While in the early post-war period it still occasionally happened that the boundaries between particular specialties would be blurred, this resulted from the puppeteers’ poverty, the shortage of everything and the inevitable need to improvise things in order to actually arrive at a première. With time, specialties were becoming increasingly clear; institutions

were looking for employees to fulfil strictly defined tasks – and these were subordinate to the director's vision of the performance.

This is because in the theatre as practised in our cultural circle the chief person was, and still is, the director. It is he that takes the responsibility for the topic of the performance most often also for the selection of literary material, as well as for the selection of partners and collaborators, the assignment of tasks to actors, the course of all the stages of production and the final shape of the performance. The director! In the past, his closest partner was the stage designer, because in the classical Polish puppet theatre, whose performances are mostly stagings, the entire represented world required to be visually rendered. The actors/animators were either wholly invisible or of little importance from the point of view of the represented world. This world required being created and in this respect, the director could at most provide inspiration to the visual designer, who was the true creator of the stage space and the characters (i.e. puppets). This is the reason why this now distant period is spoken of as the era of superb creative pairs: Zofia Jaremowa – Kazimierz Mikulski, Jan Wilkowski – Adam Kilian, Leokadia Serafinowicz – Jan Berdyszak, Wojciech Wieczorkiewicz – Leokadia Serafinowicz, Wiesław Hejno – Jadwiga Mydlarska-Kowal, Krzysztof Rau – Wiesław Jurkowski, Piotr Tomaszuk – Mikołaj Malesza, to mention just a few creative duos from the past. They survived until the end of the 20th century and then disappeared. For nearly two decades there have been no such duos in Polish puppet theatres. Stage designers have retreated to the position of consultants who are useful in the creative process, and are most often the authors of actors' costumes; they do not share the responsibility of the final shape of performances.

Today, it is the director that rules supreme in a puppet theatre. This profession was slow in developing. First, our post-war founding fathers of puppetry referred to their own experiences, analysed the achievements of their colleagues, adapting them to their own condi-

tions and passing them on to successors who, in turn, passed them on to their pupils. The relay race of generations. Of course, each of them brought in something new, some on a great scale, some on a slightly smaller one. But we are still taking about directorial space delineated a few decades ago. In Poland, this space was constructed by Władysław Jarema – an actor of itinerant dramatic theatres, Henryk Ryl – a teacher and puppet aficionado, Jan Dorman – a schoolteacher and educator, Janina Kilian-Stanisławska – an art critic, Jerzy Zitzman – a visual artist, Joanna Piekarska – a visual artist and radio presenter, Alojzy Smolka – a teacher. This list could go on and on; but neither professional puppeteers nor directors are found on it. One of the few puppeteers of the first post-war years, Julian Sójka, was obliged to stay on the sidelines. The circle surrounding Jan Sztudynger, the pre-war guru of puppetry, very quickly found itself outside the new order. Even the Baj Theatre in Warsaw – which was the legend of the Polish pre-war puppet theatre, but for a long time, in the post-war era, remained under the influence of pre-war ideas of puppet theatre for children – after the war revived with great difficulty and was nationalised as almost the very last.

The new social, political and organizational order imposed a new model of operation. One of the first “trained” directors of puppet theatre was Jan Wilkowski. He completed a yearly directing course in Janina Kilian-Stanisławska’s school, just as Maryla Kędra, Aleksandra Grzyska, Jerzy Goc, who are now all but forgotten, and others. For a brief while, making use of a short-term scholarship, Wilkowski observed Bertolt Brecht. He certainly had an enormous talent, also for directing. Trained directors (by now without the inverted commas) were e.g. Krzysztof Niesiołowski, Michał Zarzecki (graduates of the Prague DAMU, 1958), Włodzimierz Fełenczak (DAMU, 1972), Tomasz Jaworski, Wojciech Kobrański and Konrad Szachnowski (Leningrad, 1978). Most of the Polish puppet-theatre directors of the older generation were granted directing authorisation by a Ministry decision in 1960; then a system of acquiring

diplomas externally came into operation. As the academic education in puppetry developed, the Białystok academy was concerned with training directors from the early 1980s onwards, and the Wrocław one joined it in the 21st century.

All of this took quite a while; but for a long time the system of acquiring directing authorisation in Poland has been precise and operational. Theatres are also operational; so whence the problem of a director in puppet theatre? And is there any problem in the first place? Perhaps from the Polish, or even Easter-European perspective the problem is nonexistent. Only, for more or less a quarter of the century it has been getting increasingly obvious that we are getting farther and farther away from the international puppetry milieu. In the past, the main obstacles were, above all, the centralised system of theatre management and the very limited contact with the wider world. In 1989 these obstacles disappeared. And yet, we are still absent from the most important events, we do not take part in the international puppeteer training, we have little to offer with respect to new theatrical practices, new technologies, new methods of constructing the actor – puppet relationship. We have equally little to show with regard to traditional genres. Much has changed since 1989, the Polish puppet drama underwent a revolution (and nowadays leaves the directors' imagination far behind) – and yet the fundamental style of constructing a show remains the same. Is it because it is perfect? Not really, although it certainly does have many advantages. After all, many interesting productions are staged, we win awards, we travel quite a lot. But for years no Polish puppeteer has entered the circle of masters. Those, we still have to invite from outside, from nearby countries and from farther away. So where does the problem lie?



Figure 4 - *W beczce chowany* (*Brought up in a Barrel*) by Robert Jarosz. Direction: Bogusław Kierc. Set design: Danuta Kierc. Białaluka Puppet Theatre, Bielsko-Biała, Poland. Premiere: 2007. Photo. Tomasz Sylwestrzak.

In the post-war past, it was the enthusiasts that would turn to puppet theatre directing. They would choose that theatre, because it was the best suited to their vision of how a performance should be constructed; whether it was one for adults or children did not matter much. This was the case with Jarema's *Cyrk Tarabumba* (*Tarabumba Circus*) or *Igraszki z diabłem* (*Playing with the devil*), Ryl's *Balladyna*, Dorman's *Koziołek Matolek* (*Matolek the Billy Goat*), *Leć głosie po rosie* (*Fly, voice, over morning dew*) by Gołębska/Zarzecki/Bunsch, *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) by Serafinowicz/Berdyszak, Snarska's *Pan Twardowski* (*Mr. Twardowski*), Smandzik's *Ptak* (*The Bird*), Wilkowski's *Spowiedź w drewnie* (*A Confession in Wood*), *Tryptyk władzy* (*Power Triptych*) by Hejno/Mydlarska-Kowal, *Samotność* (*Solitude*) by Lazaro/Zitzman, to mention just a few from a very great number of titles. Their pupils derived from the circles of actors/puppeteers, sometimes less sure of themselves on the stage, but certainly intelligent and gifted with a theatrical sensitivity (al-

though, as it was to turn out, not necessarily a puppeteer's one). Many of them later acquired degrees in Polish Studies, which gave them a very thorough erudite grounding. They remembered mostly screen-stage performances and had very great ambitions as to the repertoire. Being totally isolated from both traditional puppetry and the innovations with the puppet as the central stage character, which only rarely reached Poland, they focused virtually all of their artistic investigations on literature. In practice, Polish directors are still convinced today that theatre is intended to tell stories; and that those always have a literary form in the shape of finished plays in literary genres either existing or waiting to be adapted, providing an incredibly broad range of problems, topics, conflicts, which correspond to reality – all in all, with a nearly ready theatrical material.

To point is, this is only one of the ways of practicing puppetry. A valuable and very interesting one, to be sure, but – as practice has regularly shown – decidedly not one that exhausts the potential of a puppet as actor. In fact, it has turned out that this approach sentences the puppet to a marginal existence or, as it quite often happens, eliminates it altogether. We have found an attractive term “theatre of form”, which is a hold-all to a certain extent and which permits us to do almost anything without consequences. Yet the consequence is there; it is the absence of our directors on the international arena and, as a result, also the meagre presence of our performances in broader circles, which today is a commonplace problem. Of course, the large institutional system in Poland (and in our part of Europe) makes it possible for such a peculiar post-puppet puppetry to function in peace. But... this is not a very broad circle. It is to be hoped that in time, our “puppeteers” manage to join the international current in children's theatre, where requirements as to the genre are less rigorously binding.

Thus, a Polish director, when invited to collaborate, will either propose to stage an existing literary work or accept the proposal which the given theatre puts forward to him. Then begins a tedious routine of laborious literary analyses, the so-called table

rehearsals; we multiply analyses, set down tasks, delineate characters, conflicts, tensions... And then, when finally we get onto the stage, when – just a little before the première – the actors are given relevant puppets, it turns out that this texts sound better without puppets; that all the laboriously constructed table-rehearsal or situational interpretations are simply more attractive as actors' actions. We could make a long list of shows which had been conceived as puppet productions and which finally got rid of puppets or, at best, puppets were no more than signs in them. These are certainly not puppet shows; not even ones belonging to the circle of post-puppet puppetry. Who remains on the stage is actors, better or worse ones, sometimes actors whose only advantage over the audience who watches them is the courage to be on the stage. If the texts turns out to be engrossing, the theatre will count the attendance a success. This process eliminates puppetry as an independently existing art based primarily on the abilities of the craftsmen; on the miracle of animating a lifeless object, a puppet, whose magical life has so much to offer the spectators. But it is above all the directors who must be aware of this fact.

On the contrary axis of this process, so to speak, stand the artists who have nothing to do with institutions (a rarity in our country) and who see the meaning of their theatrical expression in bring lifeless matter to life. This seems to be the essence of contemporary puppetry. In its centre there stands a puppeteer/creator, who is more a performer than a director. He reaches for visual form in order to formulate through it the essence of what he wants to say. It does happen that he ends his investigations with a collection of etudes. It also happens that he develops his artistic statement much broadly. Then he brings in a director, a stage designer, a composer – because a theatrical work is always an act of collective creation. It is difficult to be self-sufficient in the contemporary world, which offers such a choice of materials, technologies, specialised abilities. But it is the puppeteer/creator's vision that characterises the microcosm which is being developed. The invited director plays the role of an expert,

a sensitive observer, a specialist conversant with the art of theatre, who can point out where lies some dangerous ground and direct both the intellectual content and the theatrical composition of the statement. He is usually anonymous and, in many cases, we are surprised that some puppeteer/creator had actually availed himself of the services of a director. But this version of puppetry art is both little known and little respected in Poland. It is enough for us to recall the names of Duda Paiva, Hoichi Okamoto, Massimo Schuster, Neville Tranter, Jordi Bertran, Ronnie Burkett, Michael Vogel or Frank Soehnle; we sometimes express our admiration for their performances – and then we return to practices that are familiar to us. What does the audience expect? Does it really want a well-known tale once again told by an actor in a bizarre costume?

Of course, in theatre there is space for every kind of artistic statement, also that of a well-read director; even that of a director who writes his own scripts. Yet at the point when this becomes a standard practice used by nearly everybody, we enter a totally unprofessional area. Most of the “writing directors” are not dramatists, although they very much want to be perceived as those. Most of them actually work marvellously well with actors. But – they have no feeling for puppets whatsoever. Puppets simply stand in their way. In effect, we often see productions which would be far more attractive if broadcast on the radio. This – when puppet theatre is, after all, a show; it is visual art in motion, not storytelling. In Polish puppet theatre, the director is rarely a puppet theatre artist, and this is where the paradox lies.



Figure 5 - *Wnyk (Snares)* by Robert Jarosz. Direction: Bogusław Kierc. Set design Danuta Kierc. Puppet and Actor Theatre, Opole, Poland. Premiere: 2012. Photo. Tomasz Sylwestrzak.