

MÓIN-MÓIN

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Tossed on the seas of Visual Theatre: challenges to Puppetry's survival as an independent discipline¹

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Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences (Estõnia)



Figure 1 – *Gulliver's Travels* (2018, director Taavi Tõnisson) in Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences - the only theatre in Estonia that consistently includes puppet and visual theatre productions in its repertory. Photo: Siim Vahur.

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Tossed on the seas of Visual Theatre: challenges to Puppetry's survival as an independent discipline²

Leino Rei³

Abstract: The goal was to understand the current situation and give an overview of Baltic and Nordic countries' puppet theater and puppet theater training traditions and whether and how the puppeteer's profile has changed recently. To get an idea of the trends in this area, the common ground of the different countries, I interviewed theatre makers from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. To have a wider look at the puppetry, I also did two additional interviews. One of them with Marek Waszkiel - "Puppetry's challenges in the new visual theatre paradigm" and another one with Russian director Yana Tumina - "The puppeteer in the 21st century".

Keywords: Theater of Animated Forms; Puppet Theater; Visual Theater; Education.

Lançado nos mares do Teatro Visual: desafios para a sobrevivência do Teatro de Formas Animadas como uma disciplina independente

Resumo: O objetivo era compreender a situação atual e dar uma visão geral do Teatro de Formas Animadas e tradições de formação nos países bálticos e nórdicos e se, e como, o perfil do bonequeiro mudou recentemente. Para se ter uma ideia das tendências nesta área, o terreno comum dos diferentes países, entrevistei representantes da comunidade teatral da Finlândia, Suécia, Noruega, Letônia, Lituânia e Estônia. Para ter uma visão mais ampla do teatro de formas animadas, também fiz duas entrevistas adicionais. Uma delas com Marek Waszkiel - "Os desafios do teatro de bonecos no novo paradigma do teatro visual" e outra com a diretora russa Yana Tumina - "O titereiro do século XXI".

Palavras-chave: Teatro de Formas Animadas; Teatro de Bonecos; Teatro Visual; Educação.

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At a seminar held at the International Puppet Theatre Festival in Finland a few years ago, attended by puppeteers, directors and festival organizers from various European countries, it suddenly emerged during conversation that puppetry was no longer taught at the university level in the Nordic or Baltic countries. In most of these countries, schools specializing in the discipline had once operated, and some were still operating not that long ago. Puppet theatres continue to operate and international festivals are regularly organized. Of course, there are fewer and fewer productions and festivals that focus exclusively on puppet theatre; to an increasing extent, visual theatre productions and festivals set the tone, and puppet theatre is just one element. Inevitably, the question arises: can puppet theatre be sustainable as an independent discipline if the rising generation lacks formal training?

It is clear that puppet theatre has been experiencing great change for some time, so it is important to map the current situation and discuss the future of the field. The aim of this study is to survey the current state of puppet theatre in the region and invite discussion about how practitioners in the field can seize the reins themselves to guide the future of puppetry.

The following overview focuses on analysis of puppet theatre in the context of visual theatre and also examines visual theatre from the perspective of puppet theatre.

To get an overview of the situation in the Nordic and Baltic countries, I asked representatives of the puppet theatre community from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to answer questions about the puppet theatre history and education in these countries, as well as the current situation and future prospects. The respondents were selected from practitioners, most of whom have been involved in the field for decades and who are still currently active. The interviewees are Merja Pöyhönen, a Finnish director, lecturer and member of the board of UNIMA Finland; Helena Nilsson, artistic director of the Stockholm Puppet Theatre in Sweden and the Pop Up Puppets International Puppet Theatre Festival; Anne Helgesen, Norwegian lecturer, doctoral fellow in theatre studies and artistic director of the puppet theatre festival

Figurfestspillene i Tønsberg; Ģirts Šolis, Latvian director, actor and lecturer; Vilmantas Juškėnas, artistic director of Lėlė Puppet Theatre in Vilnius; and Taavi Tõnisson, director and actor with the Estonia's Noorsooteater (Youth Theatre).

To map puppet theatre-related topics in this region, I asked all of the interviewees eight topics/questions about the theatre field in their home country:

1. Please give a brief overview of the history and current situation faced by puppet theatres.
2. Please give a brief overview of the history of puppetry education.
3. Please describe the current situation of puppetry education at the university level.
4. Why are puppetry schools disappearing in the Nordic and Baltic countries?
5. Do you think there is still a need for specially trained puppeteers at the university level today?
6. Please state who is a modern puppeteer?
7. Are the changes in the puppet theatre field a tragedy or an organic development in the theatre?
8. What do you envision as the position of puppet theatre in the theatre field twenty years from now?

We will now move on to discussion of the above topics, examining the responses and comparing the situation in different countries.

History of puppet theatre

The roots of puppet theatre in the Nordic-Baltic region would certainly deserve a separate overview. The traditions are connected with folk and religious beliefs, as well as the marionette theatre becoming widespread in Western Europe in the beginning of the 17th century. Touring puppeteers who used glove puppets, shadow puppets and mechanical figures in the 19th century should also be mentioned as influencing the later development of the discipline in Scandinavia and the Baltics. However, we will limit our overview to professional puppet theatre and related education.

Based on the answers given by the interviewees about the history of the puppet theatre in their home country, we will map the most important events and place them in chronological order.

Although the two regions were separated by the Iron Curtain from the 1940s to the 1990s, oddly enough the puppet theatre seemed to be on parallel wavelengths during this time and thus very many innovations and transformations took place at the same time, regardless of the regime or form of government.

Of the Scandinavian countries we looked at, Norway has the longest tradition of professional puppet theatre, with professional activity beginning there in 1918. The wide range and continuity of puppet theatre in Norway gives rise to a pattern: almost every decade in the first half of the 20th century is characterized by a different theatre whose activities included puppet theatre:

- * 1908–1918 – the literary cabaret Chat Noir in Kristiania (Oslo), Puppet theatre performances were an important part of the cabaret program;

- * 1927–1936 Lillehammer Artists' Youth Theatre; from 1937 to 1942, a library theatre performed at the Grünerløkka Library in Oslo;

- * 1948 to 1954, the author Agnar Mykle and his wife, the visual artist Jane Mykle, operated the private Norwegian Puppet Theatre they founded.

Latvia was the first of the Baltic states to have a professional puppet theatre. The beginning of puppet theatre in Latvia is associated with the 1920s. One of the best-known names in this field is the puppeteer Ivan Rudenkov, who moved to Latvia and started performing there after the First World War. He is mainly known for his use of marionette puppets in productions for adults and children.

The 1930s and 1940s were a very intense period throughout the Baltics, a time when puppet theatre was discovered by professional, semi-professional and amateur theatres.

In Estonia, interest arose in professional puppet theatre in the early 1930s, when in a couple of semi-professional puppet theatres made forays into the medium. A significant event took place in 1935, when the legendary Czech theatre professor Josef Škupa and his marionette theatre gave performances in

major Estonian cities. Škupa was a true legend of his time, and served as the president of UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette – the International Puppetry Association) from 1933 to 1957. The first troupe operating at a professional theatre, the puppet troupe of the Estonian Drama Theatre (1936-1944), was inspired by Škupa's stints as guest artist.

At the same time, an upswing in puppetry in Latvia could also be noted: Puppet theatre director Herberts Līkums directed children's performances at the Daile Theatre over the span of one year (1935-1936).

Important developments also began to unfold in Lithuania: Professional Lithuanian-language puppet theatre began in 1936, when the renowned Lithuanian artist Stasys Ušinskas opened the Puppet Theatre in Kaunas. Ušinskas also made the first puppet film, *The Dream of the Fat Man* (1938) and wrote the first book about the puppet theatre, *Puppet and Mask Theatre*.

Several other puppet theatres operated in Vilnius during this period: 1933–1941 Vilnius Jewish Puppet Theatre Maidim; 1937–1941 Bajka and Vilnius Puppet Theatre (Wilenski Teatr Łątek); and the professional puppet theatre in Lithuania was further developed by Mykolė Krinickaitė, who headed up the puppet theatre troupe at the Vaidila Theatre in Vilnius in 1941–1944.

One can only wonder how the development and popularity of puppet theatre would have been affected if the boom of that era had coincided with a more politically stable period. But as it was, puppetry, while still taking its first steps in Estonia, found itself in a political tempest. Several of the same actors and directors who had an interest in puppetry migrated to different theatres, to which the puppet theatre happened to be routed in the course of continuous reorganization – in 1944, the puppet theatre was incorporated into Puppet Theatre of the National Youth Theatre; in 1948, the puppetry troupe moved back to the Estonian Drama Theatre, operating there until 1951; Viljandi's Ugala Theatre (1948–1951) and the Kuressaare Theatre (1949-1951) also developed a capability for puppetry for a short period.

In the light of these events occurring over a short space of time, it is interesting to observe the pattern of national puppet theatres in the Baltics

consolidating almost the entire country's professional puppetry discipline under one respective roof, becoming landmarks for this type of theatre both at home and abroad and serving as the largest theatres in the field, right up to the present day.

In Latvia, a professional puppet theatre (Latvian Puppet Theatre) was established in 1944 with state support, and until 1989 it was the only theatre of its kind in the country. A similar theatre was established in Estonia in 1952, when the Estonian National Puppet Theatre (now the Estonian Youth Theatre – Noorsooteater) was opened, led by actor, dancer and puppeteer Ferdinand Veike. The Kaunas National Puppet Theatre was opened in Lithuania in 1958.

At the same time, developments occurred on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and in Scandinavia as well, the 1950s were a period that marked the inception of several longstanding theatres. As a result of social democratic cultural policy, a national touring theatre was established in Norway. At the end of the decade, there was a crisis in Oslo's theatres, which led to the merger of the Folketeatret with Det Nye Theatre, creating the Oslo Nye Theatre. The puppet theatre was then renamed the Oslo Nye puppet theatre. It still exists today.

The Norwegians' steps probably had an influence on their neighbours in Scandinavia, and it is possible it rippled to the Baltics. In any case, the oldest puppet theatre in Sweden, Marionetteatern, was founded in 1958 (the same year as Kaunas National Puppet Theatre). Its founder was a legendary theatre figure, Michael Meschke, who introduced contemporary puppet theatre. Several puppet theatres have evolved out of Marionetteatern, and for years it was the only venue that provided puppetry training. Meschke's activities had a very significant impact on the field both in Sweden and in Finland, where in the 1990s he managed to teach the country's first puppet theatre courses at the university level.

The 1970s were a very important period – first, in 1971, the theatre with the second-oldest traditions was opened – the Vilnius Puppet Theatre (now the Lėlė Theatre in Vilnius). At the same time, the independent theatre movement reached Norway, and puppet theatres were well represented among them. Riksteatret founded a puppetry school in 1975 and a troupe immediately started

touring. The theatre and its troupe existed until 2010 and, with support from freelance artists, continues to perform now and then.

In the 1970s, a professional theatre was also established in Finland. During that decade, a state support system was established there and five state puppet theatres were opened. Two of them were closed in the 1990s, but three continue to operate as small state theatres: Nukketeatteri Sampo, Helsinki, founded in 1977; Teatteri Hevosenkentä, Espoo, 1972; and Teatteri Mukamas, Tampere, 1979.

Sweden also enjoyed a golden age of puppetry in the 1970s: "It is very difficult to get the finances to start a new theatre these days. It looked completely different in the 1970s when the theatres that have now closed were started." (NILSSON, 2021)

In the last decade of the 20th century, new winds were blowing, which had already picked up speed in the late 1980s. The Panevėžys Puppet Wagon Theatre was founded in 1986 (initially as an amateur theatre, it later became a semi-professional and today operates as a municipal theatre); The Klaipėda Puppet Theatre (started in 1991–1992 at Klaipėda University, became a theatre in 2000); Vilnius Table Theatre (independent object theatre, 2004).

The end of the Soviet occupation and the opening of borders exerted a stimulus effect on puppet theatres. Several private theatres were founded in newly independent Latvia: Liepāja Puppet Theatre (a municipal institution) was founded in 1989; Liepāja Travelling Puppet Theatre (private theatre) – 1994; Umka.lv (independent group) – 2004; in addition to these, there are also private puppet and puppet theatre groups, but they are generally not professionally trained.

The 1990s were a heyday for Norwegian puppetry. The recognition was high, and it led to the authorities being generous with funding for puppet theatre activities. These funds were given preferentially to established institutions. (HELGESEN, 2021)



Figure 2 – Museum of Puppetry Arts in Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences was created out of a need and wish to find a place where to store and display puppets that had reached the end of their stage life. The goal of the museum is to introduce everything that is created and done in the theatre, and to provide inspiration for alternative teaching methods by introducing the method of puppet-thinking as a means of self-development. Photo: Mattias Malk.

Current state of puppet theatres

If we look at the current situation in the Scandinavian countries, the number of independent puppet theatre groups in Norway was about 30 in the 1980s, and this number remained stable until the 2000s, but now it has an even more substantial footprint.

There are currently 60 small private theatres performing puppetry productions in Norway. At the same time, many of the theatre institutions that received money to invest in puppet theatre have closed down this 'line of business' (Riksteatret, Agder Teater and Hordaland theatre). (HELGESEN, 2021).

The current state of the Finnish theatre landscape is dominated by the private sector. About 100 professional puppeteers work as freelancers, and there are 10-20 private theatres. Freelancers move between different theatre projects, and many productions were created in collaboration with drama theatres.

The independent scene has been burgeoning in the theatre landscape because the state support system isn't taking in any new theatres. Formally trained puppeteers very rarely have long-term job opportunities and positions in Finland. Most educated artists have therefore ended up working as freelance artists and forming their own companies that are mostly unregistered groups. In the 2010s the independent scene started to get more organized under professional networks/production frameworks, the biggest being Aura of Puppets (about 70 members). (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

Twenty-five puppet theatres are registered with the Swedish UNIMA. Some of them are in a dormant phase; some are amateur and semi-professional groups. About 12 of them are active and operate at a professional level year round. These troupes are distributed throughout the country and vary in size from 1–2 members to 4–5.

Freelancers move between different theatres with different assignments. A permanent posting is increasingly unusual. Sweden lacks a system of private and state puppet theatres.

Established theatres receive state and/or municipal grants on a regular basis. Grants can also be awarded to a group or constellation for a specific project. The number of puppet theatre groups in the country has decreased dramatically over the past 10 years. This is mainly due to the fact that those who have operated the individual theatres have grown older and given up their business due to age. It is very difficult to get the finances to start a new theatre these days. It looked completely different in the 1970s when the theatres that have now closed were started. (NILSSON, 2021)

In Estonia, today's Estonian Youth Theatre is the only professional puppet theatre that receives state support. "Today we focus on a combination of elements of different theatre forms. A lot of our performances use elements of drama theatre, visual theatre, puppetry, physical theatre and multimedia theatre". (TÕNISSON, 2021)

There are also some small amateur puppet theatres in Estonia that operate as private theatres, and in rare cases professional puppet theatre productions, and productions in which puppets are used in other Estonian theatres as well.

There are currently more than 10 puppet theatres operating in Lithuania.

Over the last ten years the number of professional puppet theatres did not change. There were some new interesting developments in conventional theatrical companies, where puppetry elements were used in performances, but this did not develop into a general trend.(JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

Although recent developments point up trying times for puppet theatre's position, the patterns recurring over history give the impression that everything comes in waves, and ups alternate with downs. As the focus in the current phase is on higher education in the field of puppetry, it is worth remembering that professional activities are always connected to education and vice versa.

History of puppetry education

The history of university-level puppetry education in the Baltic and Nordic region is not long. It is immediately apparent that compared to countries with a long puppetry tradition (Russia, France, Poland, Czech Republic, etc.), where both puppetry and puppet theatre schools have deep roots in the local culture, the history of puppetry education in the Baltic and Nordic countries is much shorter and may thus have been more vulnerable to interruptions.

The country with the most extensive university-level puppetry education traditions in this region is Latvia, which has trained five classes of puppeteers over five decades.

Starting in 1971, the Jāzeps Vītols conservatory trained two classes of future puppet theatre actors (they graduated in 1975 and 1984). In 1990, the Latvian Academy of Culture was founded, which takes over these functions. The puppeteer classes graduated in 1996 (third graduating class), 2005 (fourth graduating class) and 2019 (fifth graduating class). Latvia has never trained puppet theatre directors specifically, this only takes place abroad (Russia, Poland, Germany and France). (ŠOLIS, 2021)

In addition to Latvia, Norway also stands out in this region as having longer traditions in this field.

The National Touring Theatre has opened a school for puppetry education twice (offering three-year programmes – L.R.), first in 1975 and then in 1990. The school had a practical orientation and was aimed at the theatre institution's own needs. The Academy of Puppetry, which opened in 1991, was a university college. At the Academy of Puppetry, there were two areas of specialization; one for actors and one for set designers/puppet makers. The school's principal was Mona Wiig. The

teaching was largely project-oriented with guest teachers from the international puppet theatre community. (HELGESEN, 2021)

Lithuanian puppetry education is likewise eclectic. There is no consistent tradition of educating puppeteers, but nevertheless two classes of puppeteers were trained in Vilnius:

The Lithuanian Music and Theatre Academy in Vilnius, which is the main school for theatre professionals (it trains theatre and cinema actors, directors, playwrights and theatre scholars), trained dramatic actors and puppeteers a few times, but only two classes of actors and puppeteers were successful and joined the professional puppetry field in 1979 and 2010). Mostly they were trained as dramatic actors, but with some kind of 'puppet theatre' specialization. (JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

Interestingly, in the 1990s, the issue of vocational education came up in several countries. Latvia felt the need to make changes in the educational landscape after 20 years of operation. In a broader context, it was also symbolic that Norway had by that time reached a situation that is currently also very salient as regards the puppet theatre— in effect, the visual theatre had swallowed puppet theatre.

Anne Helgesen:

In 1998 there was a coup at the school. A new principal was hired, who defined puppet theatre/(figureteater) as visual theatre, where the actors were considered the figures. The students were told that this was the new and modern form of puppetry. The established puppet theatre people were branded as old-fashioned. This led to a deep rift between the students and the established Norwegian puppeteers. The school has changed its name and content and is now called the Academy of Performing Arts. (HELGESEN, 2021)

While Latvia and Norway restructured their existing schools and former schools became a part of new top-level organizations, their very first puppetry programmes at the higher education level were opened in Finland and Sweden. Finland succeeded in creating a systematic educational program that was kept alive and developed continuously for 20 years.

The Turku University of Applied Sciences had a four year BA programme from 1999-2018. About 10-15 students were admitted every two years, and all of them received the same overall education consisting of manipulation, directing, puppet building etc. Over the years, a total of about 100 students have graduated from the BA programme. Before the Turku school was founded, there were some

shorter classes and vocational training in the 1990s, even one three-year course led by Michael Meschke from Marionetteatern Stockholm (1994-1997 in Turku School of Art and Communication). (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

The momentum in Sweden did not last as long, but they still managed to leave a legacy in term of training highly educated puppeteers. In the 1990s, the Drama Institute produced two graduating classes in puppet theatre education.

A total of eight students graduated from this course before it was discontinued due to financial problems. Before that, various variants of education – in the form of traditional school and apprenticeships – had been provided over the years at Marionetteatern. (NILSSON, 2021)

While recently there has been much talk about how contemporary puppeteers should be universal actors who are familiar with different types of theatre, the University of Klaipėda in Lithuania explored this avenue years ago.

Ten years ago, there was a hope that some kind of new puppetry training school could develop in Klaipėda University as there were (starting from 1991) some attempts to train puppeteers as multifunctional artists – actors, directors and designers. Two classes of puppeteers successfully joined Klaipėda Puppet Theatre (in 2000 and around 2012-2014), but a few years ago university reforms put an end to the training of puppeteers in Klaipėda. (JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

Estonia is distinguished by the fact that opportunities to acquire education at the university level have been almost non-existent, which is why many have gone abroad. They also have availed themselves of studio training at the puppet theatres and dramatic actor training in the course of practical training.

Unfortunately Estonia lacks consistent and regular university-level training in the field of puppetry. The first artistic director of the Estonian National Puppet Theatre, Ferdinand Veike, founded a studio for young people interested in puppet theatre. A few of the graduates later became actors in this theatre. (TÕNISSON, 2021)

During the Soviet era, opportunities were of course limited, and only a few puppet theatre “ patriots ” interested in obtaining a higher education studied in St. Petersburg at that time. After Estonia regained independence, and especially at the beginning of this century, the spectrum of education became broader.

There was one master`s degree level course of puppetry in the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre about 15 years ago, and some of our actors studied there. Most professional puppeteers and puppet directors in Estonia studied abroad (Finland, UK, Russia, Czech Republic, etc.) (TÕNISSON, 2021)

When four puppeteers trained at the Russian State Institute of Theatrical Arts joined the theatre in the second half of the 2000s, it was a breath of fresh air.

The same can be said in 2009 when a group of Estonian students were sent to Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland, several of whom later started working at today's Estonian Youth Theatre.

In summary, university-level puppetry education has generally been quite eclectic in the Baltic and Nordic countries, and the overall educational background of puppeteers and directors is a mixture of special education, conventional dramatic training, studio training, short-term courses and skills acquired on the job.

Current situation as regards educational opportunities

As can be seen from the above, all specialties offering university-level puppet theatre education in the region have now closed down. However, it is important to note that schools have not always ceased all activities, but have sought ways to integrate puppetry with other disciplines.

Finland:

Theatre students at Turku University of Applied Sciences still have some courses in puppet theatre. Otherwise, though, professional education doesn't really exist at the moment, even though there is high interest in puppet theatre education and courses from theatre students. The programme was shut down about the same time as the new educated generation of puppeteers were just starting to break through and make puppetry known as an interesting contemporary form of art. (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

Norway:

Norway no longer has any puppet theatre education at the university level. The theatre education at Nord University is Lecoq-inspired and gives random courses in puppet theatre. Oslo-Met offers six-month courses in puppet theatre as part of its teacher education in aesthetic subjects. The latter is not art education, but still, new Norwegian puppet players are currently recruited from this course. Of course this is far too little! (HELGESEN, 2021)

On the other hand, the general wide range of theatre education opportunities is also a very good indicator of the growing popularity of puppet theatre.

Traditionally, the number of students studying acting at the Norwegian Theatre Academy has been regulated depending on the needs of institutional theatres. But now there are six official theatre programmes in Norway. In addition, many study abroad. This has led to an explosion of independent theatrical groups – also in puppet theatre. (HELGESEN, 2021)

Sweden:

At a polytechnic school with a focus on crafts, it is possible for those who find an apprenticeship to train as puppet makers during a year of study. Other than that, there is currently no permanent puppetry training programmes in Sweden. There is no training at all in puppetry at the established theatre, mime, dance or circus schools in the country. Despite this, it is not uncommon for students at these schools, such as degree projects, to choose projects that include puppet theatre, and that they then notice a lack of knowledge and instruments and thus turn to, for example, Marionetteatern for advice and guidance. (NILSSON, 2021)

The Swedish example is also a good example of the current period: if schools do not provide such education, continuity and the transfer of knowledge to existing practitioners will decline.

An important trend to highlight is the integration of puppetry courses into the general training of drama actors. This is also a logical step, considering that for some time now, classical spoken-word theatre has been rapidly converging with visual theatre, including elements of puppet, object and material theatre. Puppet theatre as a theatre that uses pictures to tell stories did not have to take such a big step to become a visual theatre, because it has always been a theatre of form. Thus, the theatres may not necessarily differ that much from each other, as obviously dramatic actors can learn skills that were not previously in his toolbox from puppeteers.

Head of the last puppet theatre course of study in Latvia, Ģirts Šolis:

As for the special school and education system, I have had several discussions about including at least one year of basic puppet theatre training in the curriculum for drama actors. And the Latvian Academy of Culture has shown an interest in it. The current acting class at Liepāja Pedagogical Academy was recruited especially for the Liepāja Theatre.

To my surprise, it offers puppet and (general) object theatre studies, which are completed in one year. (ŠOLIS, 2021)

The same trend can be noticed in Estonia as well:

The current class of drama actors studying at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre had an annual puppet theatre study, led by the artistic director of the Estonian Youth Theatre Mirko Rajas. A few years ago, in collaboration with our theatre and the Russian Drama Theatre, there was an acting course at the Viljandi Culture Academy of the University of Tartu, where part of the teaching focused on puppetry. During the four-year study, some guest lecturers and practitioners from different parts of the world participated in the course. (TÕNISSON, 2021)

However, also characteristic of the era is the integration of different disciplines, with young students able to familiarize themselves with the puppet theatre. The Lithuanian example:

The Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts trains scenographers and for several decades, young students have been introduced to puppet theatre as a discipline. Perhaps this is also the reason why Lithuanian puppet theatre is considered very strong in visual aesthetics. (JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

Estonia has a similar initiative. The scenography department of the Estonian Academy of Arts is headed by the artist, scenographer and director Ene-Liis Semper. Her students' first public works demonstrate bold experimentation with different visual disciplines. Future scenographers will not position themselves as theatre artists with an established image, but will also be performers themselves, performing artists who combine different types of visual theatre in their searches from puppet and object theatre to multimedia and physical theatre. Their creative forays show that they are thinking intuitively and symbolically, incorporating the full palette of the visual theatre.

And another interesting phenomenon in the current theatre education landscape in Estonia is the International Master's Degree in Contemporary Performing Arts of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (CPPM), initiated and led by Jüri Nael, who was a physical theatre teacher in London for many years. This programme is not limited to physical theatre, either, but intensively seeks contacts with different types of theatre on a visual theatre scale.

Current movements can be compared to avant-garde searches that also explore puppetry from a new angle. If there is anything to worry about at all in this light, perhaps it should be considered whether the addition of traditional puppetry to these curricula could be more of an inspiring added value that allows the new to be integrated with the old so that one supports the other?

After the emergence of the first schools offering specialized programmes in the 1970s, the next wave crested in the 1990s. Now we can note that this cycle, too, lasted about twenty years and has now been replaced by a new period – the visual theatre period. Looking at this whole busy educational landscape, one might think that perhaps the current closure of all specific schools in this speciality is only a coincidence and a temporary state? With the exception of Finland, puppet theatre classes have been enrolled in other countries for a longer period of time, so it is possible that maybe Norway will get around to training a new class of puppetry students by around 2025, Latvia in 2030, Lithuania in 2035, and so on. So why is the educational landscape of puppet theatre so disjointed? What does this depend on?

Disappearing puppetry education

It may be difficult to say unequivocally whether the establishment and operation of puppetry schools is a purely cultural and educational policy decision in each country or whether it is determined by general trends in the theatre field. Still, it is clear that countries with longer puppet theatre traditions have managed to maintain their schools and seek out contact with contemporary theatre, but the countries covered by our study have not succeeded at doing so.

In many places in Europe, the puppet theatre became the theatre of the working class and eventually also a national affair. These countries developed strong and independent puppet theatre institutions and thus also strong, traditional and independent educational institutions. In Norway, puppet theatre has always been placed under institutions that have other main functions besides puppet theatre. It has succeeded well as long as these have had leaders who have been genuinely interested in puppet theatre. But as soon as a leader who was not interested showed up, the puppet theatre business was shut down. (HELGESEN, 2021)

The observation that the vitality of puppetry at the level of both education and professional theatre depends to a large extent on a charismatic and mission-oriented leader has a major grain of truth to it.

However, what is the probability that a charismatic puppet theatre leader will continue to do good work if the field is not a national cultural policy priority and a large part of their energy must be directed to finding resources and constantly proving oneself?

We are seeing a new flourishing of Norwegian puppet theatre art now. They live by virtue of the artists' and the audience's fascination with animation. If the puppeteers do not get to strengthen their professional support and get a unifying leader, I am afraid history will repeat itself. (HELGESEN, 2021)

The Swedish experience suggests that the power of individual colourful "patriots" tends to be the exception, not the rule, and may not be sufficient to prove the necessity of the whole field.

Training programmes are closed and due to financial reasons, new ones are never started up. Also because those in decision-making positions do not understand that puppetry is an art form in its own right and that specific knowledge is required to understand and exploit its full potential. (NILSSON, 2021)

However, the lack of a clear cultural and educational policy plan will, in the long run, eat away at both the stakeholders and the state's own resources. Even if resources for producing one graduating class of puppeteers have been found as a short-term goal, the benefits will be, to put it mildly, meagre unless there is sustainability. The Latvians have years of experience in puppet theatre education, and are thus well poised to identify bottlenecks.

First of all, what we need in Latvia is more professional puppet, visual theatre and non-traditional format theatres or at least a reason or will on the part of the government to have them. Meanwhile, state puppet theatre has been stagnating for 30+ years and this is a huge problem. Only 40% of actors working there are professionally educated in puppetry. Mostly they are recruited from different dramatic acting graduates between the years in which specific puppetry classes are admitted. The irony is that the theatre could never accept (or wasn't interested in recruiting) in its troupe more than four actors from each course of puppetry class! Many actors with specialized puppetry training work in different drama theatres, independent theatres and

(puppet and drama) groups or don't work in their profession at all. (ŠOLIS, 2021)

It is clear that the movement of actors between different theatres, as well as the change of interest in different types of theatre, is an organic part of the process, but the prerequisite for launching any new theatre course is that the need for actors has been mapped in advance. Based on this, the theatre can count on the arrival of new troupe members both in terms of job creation and repertoire planning, as of it has been coordinated in advance with the financing source – i.e., the state. It is a complex and systematic whole, which requires communication between all parties (student, theatre, school, state) so that the needs and expectations of some parties can be assigned as responsibilities to others.

In Finland it seems to be part of a larger phenomenon where much of the art education established about 20 years ago is now being downsized. It has especially hit the smaller forms of (performing) arts: many courses in, for example, physical theatre, music theatre and performance art ended up in the same rubbish bin. (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

The fact that the Finns are not merely concerned about old-school puppet theatre “patriots” becoming embittered is evidenced by the fact that they had indeed reached the crest of the wave – including on an international scale. At one of the world's largest and certainly most prestigious puppet theatre festivals in Charleville-Meziere, France, Finland was represented in 2019 with its own programme, which is a great recognition given the calibre of the festival. It is therefore worth seriously discussing why there was a need to close a programme that had become a national trademark.

The problem might also have been the fact that puppetry education existed under the University of Applied Sciences (professional higher education) system, which appeared to be too rigid for this kind of marginal art education. For example, to get money for the department, the group sizes needed to be bigger than would actually have been reasonable. In Finland the university system – also in the context of art education – is divided into two categories: universities (such as Arts University in Helsinki) and more practice-based colleges (such as Turku University of Applied Sciences). (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

As a small country, Estonia knows very well how difficult it is to create a school for a theatre discipline that has only niche significance in the bigger picture. There are not enough resources to go around, and this is probably the main reason that such a systematic and consistent programme has never emerged in Estonia. Taavi Tõnisson:

I think the problem is that contemporary theatre is a combination of different disciplines and a mixture of genres. It doesn't make sense and is too expensive to create a full-scale course in puppetry studies for universities, because puppetry seems to be too specific and a narrow discipline. Also, puppetry doesn't have a strong tradition in this region. For example, there is only one professional theatre in Estonia that focuses partly on puppet and visual theatre productions, so the demand for puppet theatre education is not so great. (TÕNISSON, 2021)

While only 25 years ago, this might have been only a problem faced by small and re-emerging countries such as Estonia, now there is not a single country in the region that is wealthy enough or culturally and educationally motivated to open a curriculum specializing in puppetry. Looking at the problem of puppet theatre education in the Baltic and Nordic countries as a whole, it is clear that it is no longer possible for everyone to get by if they just "hoe their own row". We need cooperation. The demand for new puppet theatres varies from country to country, but it is certain that no country currently can find a use for an entire graduating class of puppeteers every two years. It is therefore logical to consider establishing a joint puppetry academy in one of the countries under consideration, as an international curriculum that would supply all visual and puppet theatres in our partner countries with puppeteers, directors, artists and puppet masters. Making this idea a reality will require recognition of common interests, needs and readiness for cooperation. It will then require everyone to take preliminary steps in their respective home countries as far as lobbying educational and cultural policy planners about the need for a joint institution that will help to keep university-level puppetry alive in all Baltic and Nordic countries at the same time, while optimizing overall costs.

But let us put this idea aside for now and investigate the subject in greater depth and see whether we really do need puppeteers who have completed university-level education in their speciality.

University-educated specially trained puppeteers – are they essential?

Of course we already know the right answer –naturally, they are essential! However, if we look at how eclectic and haphazard education in the field of the puppet theatre has been in the Nordic and Baltic countries, we can also approach the topic from another angle and ask how the puppet theatre has managed to survive and pass on the traditions in spite of it all?

Vilmantas Juškėnas points out that compared to countries like England, Russia, France or the Czech Republic, Lithuania has never had a strong tradition of puppet theatre, and all the best examples of artistic achievements in puppet theatre history were a labour of love wrought by talented and motivated artists. "The school tradition has never been a stimulus for puppetry in Lithuania ;the stimulus has always come from gifted and talented people."(JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

But Juškeenas also notes that such schools are necessary for the development of the area.

Despite this, the general situation regarding lack of a puppetry school does not give reason for optimism and is not helping us to move forward. When we have no school tradition in general and when even the few last possibilities have disappeared (in Klaipėda), we feel bad about this and it is making it even harder to find new motivated talented local artists. (JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

We can also say that so far the skills passed down from generation to generation—from master to master – have helped to close the gap in academic education, but is it still sustainable today? Young people today are spoiled for choice in terms of choosing from a dazzling array of specialities. This has also led to a paradigm shift – fewer and fewer people see themselves committing to one narrow area. More and more people want to get to know each other, take part in something and try different areas themselves. On the one hand, it is gratifying that they have such a high interest in discovering the world, but on the other hand, areas that require a longer-term commitment, such as puppet theatre, are suffering. It isn't certain that they always have to suffer – if a young person's focus is on theatre and their interest in theatre includes getting to know the most

different types of theatre, mixing and developing these types, then it can also be an impulse for change and evolution in the current established notions of puppet theatre.

Opinions probably differ here – the advocates for traditional puppet theatre would not completely agree, but the more change-oriented visual theatre supporters view it with more equanimity. We try to avoid and analyse polarization – what is the most essential part of puppet theatre and why is it necessary to teach it at the university level?

Merja Pöyhönen:

To ensure the long-term future and development of the art form. The development will slow down massively if, instead of young people learning and discovering this art form together, they receive their 'education' individually, taught and brainwashed by older artists :)

- To evaluate the special skills and to give time to learn them (if it's clear that you need to spend years of practice with musical instruments, how come it wouldn't be the same with us?). School is a great place to learn the skills and tools for making art, and later on they can be used for each ones' own purposes.

- To give the future artist time to deepen their understanding, be braver, make mistakes and create their own puppet theatre language (without the pressure of yet selling the shows or even succeed every time. (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

In the context of visual theatre, however, the strengths of puppet theatre are cast in a different light. It is difficult to assess whether these specific values are always given their proper due and applied. But it is definitely helpful to start by highlighting values – we could call them “universal” values – that could be transposed to visual theatre.

Puppetry as a discipline gives a much wider perspective and teaches actors also to see and think on a more symbolic level. Contemporary puppet theatre is not based so much on traditional puppet manipulation techniques, as on use of elements of puppetry in combination with dance, physical, object and drama theatre, so I don't know if full-term academic and traditional puppetry studies are needed. But what is needed is a course of study where different disciplines are combined: dramatic acting training, puppetry training, circus and physical training, vocal training. (TÖNISSON, 2021)

Thus, the systemic foundation provided by the university is like a toolbox that teaches the future artist figurative thinking and the opportunity to find their own path, while drawing on traditions.

The image of puppet theatre in context of the general theatrical arts is also a separate topic. Puppet theatre is often associated with children's theatre, with the notion that it is a naïve form of theatre lacking a deeper dimension, with limitations that make it a better choice for depicting, say, the lives of animals and does not address deeper issues that provide both food for thought and emotional experience to audiences of all ages and educational levels. The current fusion of different types of theatre tends to help change this image, because we increasingly encounter different types of visual theatre, for example, in spoken-word theatre productions, which help to enrich the figurative language of the productions. Ardent puppet theatre professionals themselves have never had any doubt that puppet theatre can be just as serious and deep a form as any other theatre, it would certainly help to get it across to others if there were educational programmes in this discipline.

Education at the university level is of great importance for puppetry, not only to teach knowledge, but also for the prestige it adds to the art form. The existence of an education means acknowledging that there is knowledge specific to this particular art form. (NILSSON, 2021)

As a characteristic trend of the time, it can be pointed out that more and more people working in the field of visual theatre seek professional assistance from master puppet theatre practitioners, and do not try to reinvent the wheel themselves. Helena Nilsson:

As an artistic director and director of a puppet theatre who uses a lot of puppet theatre in their productions, I am often contacted by performing arts professionals who are interested in using puppet theatre elements in their work but who realize that they do not have the necessary tools. They want to know more, they want to understand more. (NILSSON, 2021)

Here, following the example of Sweden, it is good to encourage performing artists whose output is visual theatre to seek more contact with puppet theatre professionals (whose toolbox also includes object, material and mask theatre). Puppet theatres could also be more active in creating opportunities for training visual theatre artists in puppet theatre-related genres. In Sweden, visual theatre artists appear to have realized this need:

When my company offers professionals in the field of performing arts courses in puppet theatre, they are quickly fully booked by directors, actors, set designers, other staff. I experience a great curiosity at the puppet theatre and a great desire for knowledge and tools. (NILSSON, 2021)

To sum up this section, continued formal training of actors, directors, puppet masters, etc. is vital from puppet theatre's perspective.

I believe that strong classical training is always the best foundation for postmodernist and contemporary theatre. To be a great improviser and to break/transgress all the rules, an artist must know the rules he is breaking and transgressing. (TÖNISSON, 2021)

Who is the contemporary puppeteer?

Based on the above, it appears that everyone has a fairly clear idea of the qualities that make up a contemporary puppeteer. However, it is not at all certain whether these characteristics can be formulated as an unambiguous definition for everyone. Certainly, the view depends on the cultural space and the depth of the experience with the topic, and even then the definition may change over time. Therefore, let us consider the following opinions from different people who know their field, and which help to broaden the general understandings that have developed.

Taavi Tõnisson:

A modern puppeteer must be able to seamlessly combine different skills. Quite often I have noticed that Eastern European puppeteers can have an excellent classical and traditional education and training, but a less modern view and approach to the material. Many puppeteers with Eastern European traditions do not consider themselves artists in the broadest sense of the word; rather they are puppet manipulators. Many Western European puppeteers and directors have very interesting and modern ideas, but sometimes they clearly lack basic training in puppet manipulation techniques. Wouldn't it be nice if there was a training that combined the best features of classical puppeteering with modern techniques? (TÖNISSON, 2021)

Ģirts Šolis:

For me as a director/puppeteer, the most important things are imagination, theatrical language, idea, intelligence and uniqueness. The more an artist knows, the richer the theatrical language they use. However, it is difficult to remain 'interesting' for decades, regardless of the art form. (ŠOLIS, 2021)

Helena Nilsson:

Puppet theatre is a multidisciplinary art form that has a lot in common with other theatre types such as dance, facial expressions, circus, painting, sculpture ...But it also has specific conditions. It is a great advantage if people in puppetry also have excellent knowledge of other performing arts. For example, we don't want puppeteers who are phenomenal in manipulating a puppet perfectly, but can't play a dramatic actor on stage at all. But we also don't want a great actor who has no understanding or knowledge of what it means to bring a puppet, an object or a material to life. (NILSSON, 2021)

Merja Pöyhönen:

For me, the essence of puppetry is to give life to something inanimate by animating it. A puppeteer (including contemporary ones) is one who is able to create the illusion of an object-puppet-material-nothing, so that the audience believes that it is alive and can also play this role = can technically bring out the required emotions. About the same is true of directors, they must have an understanding of the laws of puppet manipulation and an understanding of puppet dramaturgy.

For me, the 'contemporary' part is not about using new tools or other art forms. It should be more related to the modern way of understanding, analysing and questioning one's artistic choice. This challenges us with questions such as: why is this production being performed with puppets; what can we do only with puppets; what does it add; what is the effect, how to bring to the forefront the idea of animating inanimate objects. This means that it must not be taken for granted, but that the basic laws of puppet dramaturgy must be found and specified each time. And only then bring in skills (borrowed from the 'traditional' puppet theatre) to create a wow effect and to think that you invent it all yourself every time! (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

Anne Helgesen:

As a theatre historian and as a doctoral fellow at the Academy of Puppetry during the great conflict there, I have thought a lot about what defines the art form and yet can include both history and the new things that are happening. A definition must not be restrictive or preservative. It must be essential. My definition is that puppetry is an art form that uses ANIMATION as the main element and / or concept. This is interesting also because it includes new trends in the visual arts. (HELGESEN, 2021)

Vilmantas Juškėnas:

Anyone who is a modern puppeteer depends on the theatre they create or participate in. I believe that there is no general definition of a 'contemporary puppeteer' because artistic people are different, they are oriented towards different artistic expressions, and they are talented in different artistic expressions. I like what Vitalijus Mazuras said when he was asked what puppetry is. The Lithuanian puppet theatre master

answered: 'It's the same theatre. Only the instruments are different'.
(JUŠKÉNAS, 2021)



Figure 3 – *(D)arkhh* (2018, Directors: Tiina Mölder, Christin Taul) in Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences has won the Estonian Theatre Award 2019 in the best children's production category. Photo: Siim Vahur.

Changes in the puppet theatre world –tragedy or evolution?

The question is, of course, intentionally provocative. For a person who is involved in the process, it is likely to be seen as an organic development – not something one is judgmental about but which is just experienced, lived through. At the same time, for a person who has withdrawn from active puppetry, but has opinions and attitudes shaped decades ago, the current trends may seem like a tragedy. However, whenever major changes in a field occur not only due to the activities of one particular organization, but which concern theatres around the world, then it is probably a mistake to look for one sole culprit.

The Latvian director Ģirts Šolis' s comment serves as a good introduction to this topic: “What changes? I only see opportunities. Something that does not change for years isn't interesting to anyone, for either people seeking entertainment or for the entertainers.” (ŠOLIS, 2021)

Certainly, such a healthy attitude helps us to tolerate changes in every area of life and prevents blind fears, which can have a devastating effect on the development of the field as well as on human relations between people who share a common interest in puppet theatre.

Helena Nilsson:

Building walls around oneself and one's own world is an expression of fear and can only lead to one's decay and paralysis. Puppet theatre has no limitations, it can be blended through experiments and discussions, layers can be added to it and doubled in countless ways in its quest to touch and tell. This is only good, there is no tragedy. (NILSSON, 2021)

It is possible, of course, that excessively rapid changes will threaten to displace existing values.

Taavi Tõnisson:

So which is better? A traditional puppet theatre that seems a little dusty and museum-like and has very little connection to the modern world, or an ultra-modern performative puppet theatre act that has very little to do with tradition? It's a question of balance. I think we need both. It is best to look ahead, but always remember the past as well. (TÕNISSON, 2021)

Being open to everything new does not mean that problem areas should not be highlighted or that the whole process should not be critically analysed. As long as criticism is constructive and helps to draw attention to circumstances that should not be overlooked during rapid change, it will benefit both the industry and the relationships between those who care about it, even if their opinions differ.

Anne Helgesen:

If one looks down on the craft and the professional toolbox and the historical diversity that the art of animation is made of, and still calls oneself a puppet theatre artist, it can easily lead to tragedy. But for the most part, this development has led to great diversity for Norwegian puppet theatre. (HELGESEN, 2021)

At the moment, it is difficult to predict whether the current changes in puppetry education are just growing pains related to the beginning of the next stage of development. But there tends to be hope that they will not be the fatal changes described by Merja Pöyhönen:

If these changes mean the shrinking of education and the dissolution of puppetry into other art forms, I would say that would be a tragedy. At least in Finland, it is quite sad to be involved in the boom of the modern form of this art form and then see a future where it will fall again, because there is not enough new blood.

It is also quite obvious to me that this 'flowering' would not have happened without the active involvement of artists of my own generation. We have influenced, empowered and been challenged by each other, and that is why this marginal art form has managed to stay fresh in this northern periphery as well. This seems especially important for an art form where processes are so deeply group-dependent. (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

Hopefully, the current visual theatre boom has only shaken up some established perceptions for a moment, and in the long run the effect will tend to be positive. While it can now be observed that people who prefer to discover everything themselves, including puppet theatre, have made an energetic entrance into the field of visual theatre, there are likely to be more and more examples similar to the Swedish experience, where puppet theatre professionals are asked for advice. So far, it is up to the puppet theatre makers to analyse what is their positive agenda for keeping this type of theatre alive and also make the case for the need for puppet theatre education to return to the curricula of theatreschools. As Vilmantas Juškėnas says, history has a habit of repeating itself:

Tragedy is war, sudden death, disease and human stupidity. Changes in the field of puppet theatre, on the other hand, reflect the organic development of theatre. I think this situation just repeats itself historically. Let's just recall the first decades of the 20th century and all these Dada, Constructivism, Futurism and other art movements, Bauhaus experiments elements of puppet theatre were used very often. Later, puppet theatre began to fade, being pushed into a box as an art form intended only for children. And later, from the 1960s on, it began to flourish again, looking for new means of expression, when the actor was brought out from behind the screen and became visible when the relationship between the actor and the puppet began to be openly explored ... this happens all the time, in cycles. (JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

Puppet theatre 20 years from now

Regardless of form, theatre must always be a little ahead of its time. Inevitably, this will lead to a change in old practices, which can sometimes be too sudden and frustrating. Developments in the sphere of puppet theatre pose a challenge to the current practitioners – how to grow without cutting through the

roots? Probably it comes down to an article of strong faith whether the roots of puppet theatre are strong enough to be able to maintain identity regardless of change. What is certain is that there is no other way than to look forward. As the last group of topics, let's allow our imagination roam and ask how we envision puppet theatre in the future.

Helena Nilsson:

Puppet theatre will always continue to attract children's audience and its creators, and if it is allowed to be as cross-border and multifaceted as it truly is, it has an indisputable role in the modern performing arts landscape, which avoids defining its means of expression and likes to mix physical and visual forms. (NILSSON, 2021)

Ģirts Šolis:

I see puppet theatre as having the potential to be used as something digital, something technologically advanced like robotic puppet theatre, and at the same time I see some space for something traditional, too. We live in a very eclectic century. So I see puppet theatre in general as a fantastic platform for various theatrical research, collaborative experiments, etc., as long as one is interested in animating objects, playing with toys and creating. (ŠOLIS, 2021)

Vilmantas Juškėnas:

I think 20 years from now, or even earlier, we will see some interesting artistic research in puppetry related to artificial intelligence, robotics, virtual reality, other media and technologies (in fact, it has already begun). At the same time, puppet theatre retains the best traditions as it has done for millennia. As for the position of puppet theatre in the general theatre field, I believe that it will remain the same – as something parallel, alternative, not so 'important'. Maybe even the opposite – exclusive, but suited only for the connoisseur). (JUŠKĖNAS, 2021)

Merja Pöyhönen:

I think this continued interest will lead us to a situation where puppet theatre is even more used as an interesting side tool for other art forms. But if there aren't enough (new) artists, we may lose the position where puppet theatre is the leading art form – the one that uses the tools of others for its own purposes. And this means a great risk to the development of the art form itself. So... My guess is that in Finland the today's puppetry wave will pass by when this generation retires, but hopefully by that time ... well acknowledged And then some day in the distant future somebody inside the need and the education wheel starts to be invented again .. maybe at that time as a part of the Theatre Academy. (PÖYHÖNEN, 2021)

Anne Helgesen:

I'm not a fortune teller. But my experience is that puppetry and animation are such a fundamental and natural part of humanity's creative imagination that it will always re-emerge in new fantastic forms, whether or not puppetry has to endure condescending attitudes, oppression and predatory economics. (HELGESEN, 2021)

Taavi Tõnisson:

The idealist in me believes that puppet theatre as an art form will not disappear. It is changing and evolving. In art, everything comes in waves, maybe there is a more traditional puppet theatre behind the next wave? That is why it is our duty to keep traditions alive. And when I say 'alive', I don't think we should always use traditional puppetry. Above all, we need to keep alive a specific way of thinking and seeing the world. Today it is very popular to experiment and think outside the box. Maybe in ten years from now, everyone will want to think inside the box again? (TÕNISSON, 2021)

Conclusion

Time will tell how deep an impression the visual theatre leaves on our theatrical sphere, how long it will remain there and what it will develop into. Theatre does not tolerate stagnation and change is always a part of whatever we do. More importantly, whether we call it performance, multi-genre or visual theatre, we always remember why we pursue this field.

The borders are open and information is moving fast, so let's use it! The opportunity for puppet theatre to preserve traditions, ensure the continuity of this type of theatre, and speak to today's audience is in our own hands. Although it currently seems that puppet theatre is turning into a marginal niche on the periphery of the theatre field, it is also a great time for practitioners to join forces and establish a joint university-level Nordic-Baltic puppet theatre academy. Are we ready for this challenge?

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APPENDIX 1:

Puppetry's challenges in the new visual theatre paradigm – Interview with Marek Waszkiel



Figure 4 – Marek Waszkiel and Leino Rei in Festival Mondial de Marionnettes de Charleville-Mézières, France, September 2021. Photo: author's archive.

Leino Rei (LR): The art of puppetry is strongly in the winds of change. It is difficult to predict whether this is the irreversible process where one important period, when puppet theatre was established as an independent type of theatre, is being replaced by a new era of visual theatre. However, what is the nature of both puppetry and the visual theatre, what are their strengths and weaknesses,

for how long a period has visual theatre come, and what kind of mark will be left on the puppet theatre in the long run? We discuss these and other questions with Professor Marek Waszkiel, a Polish teacher, director, puppeteer, and theatre researcher.

Marek Waszkiel (MW): There is no doubt that contemporary puppetry is very different from traditional puppetry, although we puppeteers are in the fortunate situation that indeed we can still watch live various forms of the art of puppet theatre: those developed over the centuries and those created today. Visuality is to some extent a permanent feature of puppetry: a puppet must always be created, given a shape, form; it does not exist as an element of reality. But I understand that when using the term “visual theatre”, we are talking more about the theatre of artistic narrative, based not on dramatic text but on visual images, composed of various theatrical means: space, objects, movement, voice and sound, also from contemporary media. Such theatre has been in existence for more or less one hundred years, since the era modernism, the great theatre reform (although its progenitors can be found much earlier, e.g. in the activities of Philip de Louterbourg⁴ in England in the 18th century). I think that its origins in the puppet theatre date back to modernism, and of course the abandonment of the screen dividing the world of the puppet creation and the audience space, which happened more than fifty years ago, accelerated this process.

LR: In your excellent article "University-level Puppetry Training"⁵, you disassemble the problems of modern puppetry art. You note that the cause and effect are not all that one-to-one, but in the big picture there are still some clearer trends that can be distinguished.

⁴A French-born British painter who became known for his large naval works, his elaborate set designs for London theatres, and his invention of a mechanical theatre called the "Eidophusikon".

⁵Marek Waszkiel's article:

<https://www.revistas.udesc.br/index.php/moin/article/view/1059652595034702142015219/7809>

A lot of it could be summed up as the aftermath of the collapse of the centralized Soviet-era cultural policy. But, as you note, not everything is so easy to explain, which is why to let's try to broaden this topic a little bit more.

One of the most important points you refer to is the convergence of informational and cultural space. The borders are open, information and people are moving lightning-fast. There has been a rapid growth of multiculturalism and of course traditional puppet theatre hasn't been left untouched by it.

MW: The Soviet system was extremely friendly to puppetry for various reasons. First, by building a state network of great puppet theatre institutions, it essentially raised the prestige of the art. Secondly, it defined the audience of puppet shows (a child) and built a huge network of relations between the puppet theatre and children's audiences. Thirdly, and finally, it took care of the extensive infrastructure necessary to develop the genre: including puppetry education and repertoire for theatres, festival and conference life, and magazines. Of course, it was different from one country to the other in Central and Eastern Europe.

The same Soviet system that professionalized puppetry led them to narrowly specialized professions and, as a consequence, unfortunately cut them off at the same time from the centuries-old traditions of this art. The puppeteer-puppet relationship has been broken. I remember a Russian conference where my friends talked about the existence of 100 registered professions in the puppet theatre today. And this cut off the East of Europe from the West, where being a puppeteer is primarily the awareness of practicing this profession, regardless of whether my learnt preference is related to dance, circus, fine arts, theatre, multimedia or puppetry. The puppeteer is most often an independent creator: the author of an idea, concept, often a puppet maker or performer of a performance. Of course, the puppeteer uses the skills of many partners, because theatre is team work. But it is his consciousness and imagination that determine the shape of the performance.

In our part of Europe, we have only been closing this half-century gap for the last two or three decades (in the Soviet Union / Russia it lasted almost 100

years). Fortunately, we also have a lot to offer, because the Soviet system provided us with other puppetry advantages. And for some time, now that there are no boundaries anymore, we can exchange fairly freely, use each other's possibilities, skills and experiences. All this makes the European puppet theatre more and more dynamic. We use the same means that we process individually, we look for a common language to communicate better and, consequently, we aim at visual theatre, because it is the closest to the universal viewer, the most modern, not based solely on words, drama and literary texts.

LR: Since the changes in puppet theatre are happening all around the world, it's worth looking for these common, universal influences that have given impulses regardless of the established social order or the countries' cultural policies.

One important influence has been the rapid development of technology over the last couple of decades. In a sense, the situation is comparable to the late 19th and early 20th century, when electricity, telephones, airplanes and trains were all invented in a short period of time. It was so much at once it also left its mark on art. After all, different art movements like the avant-garde, Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism etc. were created around that time. At the beginning of the current century, none of us could imagine that in 20 years everyone would, figuratively speaking, be carrying the world in their pockets. The development of the internet and smartphones has altered our ways of information exchange and language of communication to be a lot more image-centric. Long texts can be summed up with a creative meme or emoticon etc.

MW: It is just a change of the means we use. But this is an important change because it affects the methods of social communication, and consequently the way of communicating with the audience. We are more and more dependent on images. But the accelerating pace of life also means that we limit complex text statements. The characters' dialogues are getting shorter and shorter, we give up stories in favour of emotions, associations and various

provocations, and consequently we build such an associative structure of the performances. Its reception always depends on our (viewers') own experiences and thoughts.

LR: Of course theatre, as a mirror of society, can't look past the language in which people communicate, the informational space in which they move. How the cultural space is designed is also becoming increasingly important. It is therefore inevitable that different visual approaches are making their way into theatre. Completely unexpected and new contacts are being forged between different types of theatre. Sure, puppet theatre has always been looking for a common area with object, material and mask theatre. But now, multimedia and digital theatre have strongly made their way on to the scene. Physical theatre is also looking for contact with the aforementioned types of theatre. Figuratively speaking, it's like lots of faucets with different contents that have been arranged around the same pool, which allows theatre makers to mix a combination of the most different types of theatre.

MW: Oh yes. From the very beginning, puppet theatre had many performative elements in it. The Soviet structure limited this performativity by enclosing the puppet shows in the box of the stage, but in general the bond between the puppet and its viewer, child and adult, existed and still exists. Especially today, in the era of the decline of the Anthropocene, our interest in objects, materials and forms is growing. The issue of giving and bringing life to a puppet or an object takes on new meanings. When I look at Hoichi Okamoto's⁶ performances, I mainly see the use of the achievements of Japanese traditional art and its philosophy, *butoh*, but recent years' performances draw more and more boldly from what contemporary art has brought, including multimedia and the digital world. And it is equally fascinating, it broadens the means of puppetry art. Yes, I totally agree that contemporary theatre employs the means of various

⁶Japanese solo-puppeteer (1947-2011) who studied puppetry, mask, gesture, and dance, and fused these art forms in his performances. For more information: <https://wepa.unima.org/en/dondoro/>

genres of art. And I think that this unification is natural, although it does not stop us from distinguishing actor's theatre from dancer's theatre, puppet theatre, circus art or art performance.

LR: As an example of a positive trend, you also mention in your article that in Poland, a new wave of hope has appeared out of thin air for puppet theatre – a new generation of playwrights who see theatre with fresh eyes. It's possible that the key to the future of puppet theatre's development lies in these new and unanticipated combinations.

MW: Indeed, Polish puppet dramaturgy experienced an incredible boom at the beginning of the 21st century. There was a galaxy of great young authors who entered theatres in a broad wave. They introduced new themes to the repertoire of theatres, they noticed the modern child, especially its problems. I think that at times, live theatre did not keep up with their ideas. They are still there, but it seems to me that the relationship between the author and the theatre has changed a bit. Today, the authors are probably often the dramatists, co-authors of plays (next to directors, set designers...) rather than the playwrights. This is a very important shift. They still write texts, but working much closer to the theatre, they know it better and participate more sensitively in the creative process on stage. Sometimes they build scripts, or even the dramaturgy of the performance.

LR: Do you see the change of puppet theatre's position as a tragedy or do you look at it more as the natural flow of things? If the current situation is such that old puppetry countries with long traditions such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, etc. struggle not to disappear into the overall theatrical picture; not to mention that the Nordic and Baltic countries with shorter traditions no longer have any university-level courses specialized in training puppeteers, does it tell you more about the inadequacy and lack of interest of the current generation or is it an organic process – theatre has always been changing and

young people have to be given a chance to go their own way? If the whole cultural and informational space around us is centred around images, is it inevitable that its impacts make their way into theatre and we just have to accept that we're no longer talking about puppet theatre specifically, but in broader terms about visual theatre, which, in addition to puppet theatre, unites object, material, mask, as well as physical, multimedia and digital theatre?

MW: We absolutely do not experience any tragedy. Changes, also in puppet theatre, are completely natural. In countries where puppetry traditions are strong and the puppeteer education system has existed for decades, today we observe a great variety of puppetry. It is true that the popularity and audience demand for this genre of art mean that we often encounter children's theatre rather than puppet theatre in the strict sense. The puppet is present in it, but not always dominant. Anyway, it was so before, at least for several decades. But at the same time, and surprisingly now, during the pandemic, there are plenty of genuine puppetry initiatives. Puppetry is a really difficult art, it requires craftsmanship, patience, technological background, and the artist's conviction that it is thanks to this form of theatre that he can express himself more fully, more interestingly, or differently. In countries with rich puppetry traditions, there is something to refer to and to draw from. In countries with slightly more modest traditions, especially if there are no puppet schools there, the puppetry facilities are smaller and you can count on the happy cases of creators who discovered the puppets themselves. But if we look at today's leaders in the world of puppetry, it will turn out that many of them discovered puppets a little by accident and on their own, to name the aforementioned Hoichi Okamoto, Duda Paiva⁷, Nicole

⁷Duda Paiva has studied dance and acting in Brazil, India and Japan; He has lived and worked in the Netherlands since 1996 where he founded the Duda Paiva Company (2004) which creates performances with dance and puppets. Associative, narrative performances – sometimes without text – are performed in theatres, at festivals, indoor and outdoor locations, in the Netherlands and internationally. For more information: <https://dudapaiva.com/en/> and <https://www.marekwaszkiel.pl/2021/05/08/duda-paiva/>

Mossoux⁸. It is contemporary theatre, mixing conventions and meanings, that allows for such discoveries, including discoveries in puppetry.

LR: Speaking of the puppetry training of Nordic and Baltic countries, it has never been taught in Estonia (except for one exceptional master's course) and our puppeteers mostly have a dramatic stage actor background and received puppetry training during an internship or was outside Estonia. The other Baltic countries have been a little more consistent in this respect, and at least occasionally, in certain years, specialized puppet acting courses have been accepted at the theatre school. In the Nordic countries, the historical background and cultural policy have been different, and the continuity of puppet theatre schools has been somewhat more stable.

But none of them remain today! At the same time it can't be said that those schools were just abolished or closed down without warning. Yes, the university-level training specializing in puppetry has disappeared, but we can spot a tendency of puppetry training to be merged with other disciplines – it has become part of a classical theatre actor's training or integrated with physical, multimedia, digital theatre training etc.

You have dealt with this subject a lot, having been a professor for decades, and just a year ago you started a joint master's programme in puppetry⁹ for four countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland), what are your feelings about that?

MW: To be blunt, university puppetry education is the best form of puppetry education and care for the future of puppet theatre. It also guarantees the specific prestige of this profession from the very beginning. In the post-Soviet

⁸Nicole Mossoux is a Belgian dancer and choreographer born in Brussels on 3 January 1956. After studying at the Mudra school of Maurice Béjart, she created several solo pieces in 1978, became interested in psychoanalysis. Later, after meeting the playwright and director Patrick Bonté, the two artists founded the Company Mossoux-Bonté, which never ceased to melt dance and theatre in a single language, exploring the troubled areas of sensibility and the unconscious, in a strange familiarity to meet the spectator's imagination. For more information: <https://www.mossoux-bonte.be/en/>

⁹ For more information: <https://ma-puppetry.eu/programme/>

countries, puppetry education has existed for 50-70 years and has gone through various periods. Education is a really long process. I have been associated with the Warsaw Theatre Academy for 45 years. And I can see how puppeteer education has changed, how it is still changing. The programmes are revised almost every year, because the theatre, lecturers, students and the time when it all happens are also changing. But I think that in countries that do not have such a rich tradition of puppetry, starting your education with undergraduate studies, or even regular, systematic courses in well-organized theatres is a path that can lead you in the right direction. It is all about sensitizing yourself to the puppet, noticing its possibilities and falling in love with it. The rest is talent, work and luck.

When it comes to international studies, initiated by Kata Csato, a young Hungarian puppeteer, and four Central European university puppet colleges (Budapest, Prague, Bratislava, Bialystok), it is difficult to say how and whether this wonderful project will develop. The programme was approved by the European Union and large funds were allocated. Entrance examinations were carried out and a dozen or so candidates from different continents were admitted to the international puppet master's studies. And then a pandemic broke out that prevented the beginning of studies from starting last fall. When approval was obtained to postpone everything for a year, the situation in Hungary became complicated. The changes at the local Theatre University, which is the leader of the project, turned out to be so painful that the more senior students in their puppetry faculties will probably graduate from various art academies in different European countries. Misfortunes alone, I can only hope, will not sink this excellent initiative.

LR: I am generally a bit sceptical about shaping so-called universal actors who can do anything – when we try to give the future actors as many different techniques as possible, but none of them in depth, we end up with an actor with no clear identity of their own. But at the same time, I've seen that it's possible. Ruslan Kudashov, the artistic director of the St. Petersburg Bolshoi Puppet Theatre, who is an excellent, even seminal director, also runs the directors'

course of the puppet theatre. I've seen some of their work throughout the years and I can see that these young people assemble in them all of the qualities which I appreciate in a modern puppeteer – they are great drama actors, have figurative thinking thanks to working with materials and objects, are able to realize their ideas with their own hands, to be anything if necessary, be it a puppet master, an actor (regardless of the type of theatre), a director, a playwright.

MW: I do not share your scepticism. No university is a vocational school. Years ago, I visited a Chinese high school that taught a game with a hand puppet. The boys (because they were children), after four years of study, went out with the knowledge of the technique for animation of hand puppets. From our point of view, their skills were stunning. But they got to know one performance deeply. European puppeteer education is different. In the past, puppeteers were trained for large ensembles of existing theatres, who were aware of different puppet techniques and playing styles (acting and puppet). For some time now, puppet schools have focused much more strongly on the artist's individuality, their predispositions and awareness, thanks to which they will be able to make choices, also in terms of the means that they will use if he decides to pursue the profession of a puppeteer.

The case of Ruslan Kudashov is slightly different, but also extremely interesting. Earlier, before the opening of the directing course, he taught a course for actor-puppeteers. And the effects of his work were amazing. But these are the courses of Kudashov, the master, moreover, who runs his own state-owned puppet theatre. In contrast, in most puppetry colleges there are many masters building a common curriculum for students to follow. And someday they will choose their path, or they will give in to chance.

LR: Without knowing exactly how their curriculum has been built, I can see that the most central part in shaping them into universal creators is played by their teacher, who masters all of those different types of theatre himself. But unfortunately, as you highlight in your article, it's rare to find these charismatic

leaders who know their field down to the smallest detail and at the same time have not changed their attitude towards puppet theatre to be museum-like, but are instead able to translate it into a modern theatre language, a language which ignites and excites a modern young person.

MW: Exactly. Since there are not too many such charismatic artist teachers, and moreover, the European education system imposes many restrictions, for example related to the necessity for artists to obtain academic titles, there is usually quite a large number of hired professors. This makes the teaching broader-based, and the choices of students are more individual. Such universities offer freedom with regard to teaching and learning. It is a community where students also have a voice.

LR: Which is why it's inevitable that puppetry training integrates with different fields depending on the interest, experience and, in a good way, how mad, how creatively wild and uninhibited a specific school and specific teachers. We simply don't have masters as universal as Kudashov, but if a school finds that they have know-how in puppetry and digital theatre, we have to be happy that the new synergies created by the symbiosis of those two types of theatre are being sought on a school level. This direction will probably fragment the former puppetry field even more, but at the same time creates possibilities for new findings.

In and of itself, this searching mindset is welcome, but it begs the question, are these current changes merely a modern trend and if, for example, in ten years' time there's a wish to return to traditional puppetry, will some kind of consistency have been irreversibly disconnected? How do you perceive the aforementioned fears and possibilities and what is your positive programme for puppetry?

MW: Yes, I also think that a certain variety of education, resulting from the coexistence of various genres of art, which make up contemporary theatre, and from our individual skills, is desirable. But it's also good that there are schools

that are a bit more centred around a master, focused on their leader. With today's communication possibilities, this only increases the offering targeted at young, potential puppeteers. I would also not rule out the inclusion of digital puppetry in programmes. Today, at most, short workshops are organized at universities, because this is a field that is just developing, in an experimental phase, although it is becoming bolder, and you can learn recognized and proven phenomena. And it is needed.

Puppetry is changing and when we think about education, we must draw conclusions from this observation. Probably in our latitude it would not make sense to teach classical *ningyo-joruri*¹⁰, because you have to start in childhood and it is untranslatable. I would also not encourage you to teach the Polish nativity play (*szopka*), since it has disappeared despite several centuries of enduring. But we should remember such forms and university studies offer such a chance. Fortunately, the present day puppetry allows for the coexistence of really different styles, very old and modern forms, and the majority of the audience enjoys communing with them. Therefore, I would not be afraid of either turning away from traditional puppetry or forgetting about it. On the example of Albrecht Roser and Frank Soehnle's string puppets, you can see what path we are going. Soehnle is the first apprentice of Roser, a marionette virtuoso. He fundamentally transformed a classic marionette and also achieved a master level. This is what happens in the art of puppetry. But we know dozens of outstanding puppeteers still working with the classic puppet and I am sure that there will never be a shortage of them. Kudashov and his students in the performance *We reached for classic rod puppets* (Javanese style) and also made a breakthrough. He staged an extremely modern performance.

I don't think it is new technologies or materials that will change puppetry. Artists are changing them. Time changes them.

¹⁰Bunraku, also known as Ningyo Joruri, is one of Japan's representative traditional performing arts. Bunraku is a rare form of puppet show in the world in which Tayu recites lines to the accompaniment of shamisen and puppeteer manipulates a puppet to enact a story. For more information: <https://media.fitspot.jp/topic/560>

APPENDIX 2:

The puppeteer in the 21st century – Interview with Yana Tumina



Figure 5 – Leino Rei at the stage of his production *The Boy and the Butterfly*.
Photo: Mait Visnapuu.

Yana Tumina is a Russian theatre director who does her most important work in puppet theatre. A number of her productions have won Russia's highest award in the theatre, the Golden Mask, and have been performed at international festivals across Europe, including Estonia's TREFF. Tumina's idiom as a director is rich in imagination and symbolism, her sensibility is natural, while understated, precise and philosophical.

Leino Rei (LR): Who or what is a puppeteer – a puppet actor, as we say in our language?

Yana Tumina (YT): A puppeteer is a person with a special treasure store and gift – modesty, humility and a willingness to give of themselves. A little like a shaman and demiurge for whom the world of things and nature is often more comprehensible than the human social sphere.

LR: Do we even need puppeteers and puppet theatre directors with formal training in their speciality?

YT: Yes. We need puppeteers and directors and not only to maintain the specific nature of puppet theatre for preservation's sake but also so that there are actors and directors who are capable of realizing their full unique potential precisely in puppet theatre.

LR: The general theatre scene has become much more visual and directors are increasingly using elements from the world of puppet theatre, object theatre and material theatre, not to mention digital and multimedia theatre elements. Will the need for puppeteers fade away in the next 10 years, will puppet theatre be integrated organically into the general theatrical world?

YT: Integration is inevitable.

LR: Will the new actors be performance artists who are familiar with a certain type of visual theatre – material, object, puppet, physical and multimedia/digital theatre, and so on?

YT: The new actor keeps in step with the times. The globalization era, the age of synthesis. This could change but as long as it is the way it is, actors will be expected to have universal skillsets.

LR: Does training universal actors run the risk of the actor being a jack of all trades but a master of none? (I mean, in a number of theatre academies, puppet theatre is one of many subjects, is that enough?)

YT: It all depends on the individual's personality. There's nothing wrong if education approaches subjects in a broader and more cross-disciplinary way. In practice, each person will make their own decision which areas to study in greater depth.

LR: The main question is, does the concept of puppeteer have to be revisited?

YT: Yes. It's generally very beneficial to review any conceptions.

LR: How would you comment on the trends in the Nordics and Baltics (there are no universities in these countries that regularly train puppeteers and director)? Is the merger of puppet theatre into general visual theatre a tragedy or the natural course of things?

YT: Europe has always reflected, depended on progress. I take a philosophical attitude toward trends, I tend to accept them and take an interest, but it's important for artists to have the opportunity and retain the privilege to find their own identity in an art form that is as unique as puppet theatre. For that, boundaries are needed, although they can be flexible.