

He was one of the founding fathers – or even THE founding father of the modern Puppet Theatre in Georgia: Guivi Sartchimélidzé passed away on 18th August 2017 in Tbilissi at the age of 88. Until his very last days, he was the mentor and the spiritual and artistic guide of many generations of actors, puppeteers, set designers, playwrights as well as movie directors. He welcomed each and everyone with a smile, sometimes mischievous, always generous, be it in his class at the Theatre Institute of Tbilisi, located on the beautiful Avenue Roustavelli, or at the State Puppet Theatre of Georgia, where he was artistic director until recently, or in his Summer house in Kikéti, under the shade of its majestic trees.

He was born in 1929 in Tbilisi in a family of artists (his father was a famous actor at the Academic Theatre of Shota Roustavelli, his mother a ballerina at the Opera). In 1948, he starts his training in the Faculty of staging and dramatic art of the Theatre Institute. Graduating in 1953, he becomes the assistant to the chair of acting and directing, working with the great masters of dramatic art. At the same time, he becomes director of a company of amateur actors at the Maxime Gorki Cultural Center.

Attracted to the universe of puppets from an early age, he decides in 1969 to work as stage director at the State Puppet Theatre of Géorgui Mikéladzé in Tbilissi. In 1979, he becomes the artistic director of the Theatre, inviting many young artists to perform, and using poetic works from the Soviet “less-aligned” countries (as for instance *A Sunray* by the Romanian Alecsandru Popescu). Always innovative in his direction, always accompanied by his longstanding accomplice and friend, the great set designer Grigol “Iga” Abakélia (who died at the end of 2016), he put on dozens of shows. And these,

little by little, created, alongside the traditional soviet “model”, an authentic Georgian theatre, with unique characteristics, among which, the use of national legends and tales (for instance *The Tramp* by Mzija Khetagouri in 1979) and specific puppet handling techniques. Although these techniques came directly from the “traditional school”, they set the basis for the metamorphoses that this art went through, starting in the 80s, with for instance the introduction and participation of a “live” actor appearing besides the puppets.

More remarkable than anything is the warm confidence he always had in the young actors and actresses he trained since 1959, first working on his own, then, after 1972, in the Puppet Department he created in the Theatre Institute. In 1980, he created the Puppet Theatre of the City of Batumi, and later, in 1999, he completed his trajectory with the creation of a Faculty in the Institute of Arts of Batumi, which trained actors and stage directors for the local Puppet Theatre. He was appointed Professor at the Theatre Institute of Tbilisi in 1994, thus accumulating nearly 60 years of teaching experience, and helping several generations of actors and directors, both for the stage and the cinema, who today are working in Georgia or abroad. He gained a tremendous moral and intellectual prestige, when he decided to remain close to his students and his actors, during the darkest hours of civil war in the 1990s: at the time, he insisted on living and teaching his classes not far from Parliament, where President Gamsakhourdia and his followers had taken refuge and which had become the epicentre of all the dangers.

In his country and abroad, his work on the different techniques and processes that are specific to the Puppet Theatre have made him a leading authority in the domain. As an actor also, he has imprinted his strong

personality to several cinema roles (for instance in his role as the grandfather in one of Otar Iosseliani's last movies, *Chantrapas*.)

The shows he directed were presented in many international festivals. The theatre he directed became a member of the International Puppet Union (UNIMA). And from 1970 until the Soviet Union disappeared, he was a member of the UNIMA presidium of the Soviet Union, as well as President of the Georgian UNIMA, and later Honorary President of The Georgian UNIMA.

For his contribution to the Georgian theatre arts, and more generally for his commitment to the promotion of puppet art in the country, he received several awards and recognitions: Honoured Artist of Georgia, Knight of the Order of Merit in 2001, Award winner of the Sandro Akhmétéli in 2010, Medal of Merit serving the Georgian Culture in 2010 also. Furthermore, in 2017, he was awarded with the highest honour: the Palm of the "Patriarch of Art."

Not as well known in France as his colleague Rézo Gabriadzé, he nevertheless visited the Roussillon region on several occasions at the start of the 2000s (invited by Benard Guittet, Marie-José Malis and José Sobrecases). On these occasions, he directed actors, initiating them to the fundamentals of Puppet Art.

Commitment, training, transfer of knowledge define the character. Beyond the techniques developed primarily for children entertainment, Guivi Sartchimélidzé has made puppetry a complete art that meets its responsibilities, a "moral art".

José Sobrecases