

*Festival Review by Bonnie Kim*

**Figura Theaterfestival, the 13<sup>th</sup> International Biennale of Puppetry and Visual Theatre**, was held in Baden, Switzerland from June 12-17, 2018. 17 different venues of varying sizes were located in the city center of Baden, except one venue, a puppet theater in Wettingen was located in the next town which could be easily reached by bike or bus. Some of these venues were outdoor locations for street performances and events. For six days, this superb biannual festival transformed the whole town into a festive puppet playground. Most of the groups and artists featured were from Europe or currently based in Europe. The quality of the festival program was outstanding and diverse.

One of the things I loved about this festival was the small city setting. All the venues were within walking distance as well as bike ride distance in the charming old city center of Baden. It felt like the whole town was celebrating the festival, and the warm welcoming and excitement of the festival could be felt all over town. The signage for the festival throughout the city at various sites was excellent. Some creative window displays in shops with the festival logo was humorous and delightful. It was one of the best and well-organized festivals I've been to. It was run by a small group of dedicated enthusiastic festival staff and numerous volunteers. Definitely the sense of community was strong and positive. I was amazed at their selection of high quality and very diverse works of puppetry and different styles of object/visual theater. I saw about 30 shows during the festival. The festival offered many amazing and inspirational works and wonderful opportunities to connect with other artists. I was also impressed with the reserved restaurant and café for the festival. Even the staff at these places was so welcoming, and food and drinks for performers, staff, volunteers and guests were excellent.

Diversity of shows in the festival for puppetry, object theater performances and installations was superb. Different sizes and styles of performances for different age groups, from young children to adults, were also very diverse. Different venues, ranging from small intimate space with about 50 audiences, to medium size theaters, and to bigger spaces with a house of 250 or more, well suited different sized shows.

The opening show, *Meet Fred* by Hijinx Theatre in association with Blind Summit from Great Britain told funny and poignant stories of people with disabilities with simple cloth tabletop puppets. Another Great Britain company, Pickled Image, presented a clown show, *Coulrophobia—Two Clowns Trapped in a Cardboard World* which integrated slapstick comedy, pantomime and puppetry.

*Putin is Skiing* by Czech company, Divadlo Líšen was a great example of how the arts could express and comment on political issues and for social justice. The play was based on a true story and the book, "A Russian Diary" by journalist Anna Politkovskaya who was murdered in Moscow in 2006. The satirical play told the stories of Putin's corruption through physical theater, paper puppets resembling babushka dolls and other objects. The play was also staged inside the military tent, giving audiences the sense of place and time.

Theater Meschugge from Germany/France presented exceptionally amazing works integrating puppetry, masks, dance, music, singing, and acting. In *Weisst Du was? Dann tanze jetzt!* (*Creatures*), the puppeteer/performer, Ilka Schönbein seamlessly transformed her body and movement into different puppet/mask creatures without leaving the stage to change. Different creatures told their own stories of aging and transformation. Two musicians were also superb. Not only did they play music for the show but also became different characters in the story while playing music.

*Stroh zu Gold...und andere Spinnereien (Rumpelstilskin)* by Theater Meschugge directed by Ilka Schönbein was another exceptional work that integrated puppetry, masks, dance, music, and acting by two performers. Multi-talented performers changed their characters and roles on stage throughout the play in such interesting and surprising ways. This show was one of the morning shows offered for school students. Another outstanding show, which was also part of morning school show program, was *Dumpu Dinki—How Strangers Become Friends* by Anne-Kathrin Klatt from Germany. Her bare hand characters with minimal props could communicate so much more than with words. Her artistry and passion for puppetry was infectious. After the show, many children were creating their own bare hand puppet characters as they were leaving the theater. Seeing that was so rewarding and inspirational.

One of the programs in conjunction with the festival was a site specific youth project called "Monster". Two school classes worked with artists to create monsters based on their own interpretations. These monsters were lock up in the medieval city tower in Baden which was actually used as district jail from 1846 to 1984. It was a great site specific installation and interactive performance exhibit by youth. One of the monsters in jail cell was Trump (his speech on building a wall between the US and Mexico was playing in his cell).

Various street performances and events made the town even more exciting during the festival. *i-Puppets* by Close-Act Theatre from Netherlands roamed the streets of old city center and the futuristic puppets contrasted with the old European cityscape in delightful and surreal ways.

Several shows had interactive components with the audiences. In *Une poignée de gens...quelque chose qui ressemble au bonheur (A Handful of People...Something which Resembles Happiness)* by Vélo Théâtre from France, the audience participation was essential to the show. The audiences experienced and participated in the train ride from waiting at the train station to riding the train with ever-changing chair formations and group formations. Throughout participating in different scenes, the audiences were asked to reflect on the meaning of happiness. The participation was not only for the play but also provided opportunities to interact with other audience members just as we would interact with others and strangers in real life. At the end of the show, a miniature set of different places that we would see in a train ride was revealed. Each audience member was invited to put a miniature chair to a place where we would feel most happy in this miniature scenography. It was so heart-warming to find our own happy spot to put the chair and share this experience with others. Many people stayed after the show to share their experiences and their thoughts on happiness and their spots in the miniature set.

Several shows integrated technology with puppetry and performance. *STRPTS//episode 1: Mirlo & Rula* by Cinema Sticado from Spain was very technological in terms of how they performed their live cinema show using simple cardboard set and paper cut out puppets and shadow puppets. It was amazing to see how two artists created a graphic novel film/animation live in front of the audiences without any crew or tech support. Using their phones, they controlled live video editing while performing, changing sets and filming. They did all the live camera feed, special effects, live voice editing for different voices for different characters and music on stage. It was a very elaborate setup and very high tech. One of the artists in the show, Xosel Diez, engineered the program to do the live video & sound editing and control all the changes and live feed via wifi connection from their phones to computers on stage.

*Le pavillon des immortels heureux (The Lodge of the Blessed Immortals)* by Marcelle Hudon was an interesting installation of simple objects, puppets, such as Indonesian shadow puppets

as well as automatons. This visual object theater integrated technology and puppetry into nonverbal performance art. These objects and puppets were animated by inaudible low frequencies through speakers and small motors. Interplay of shadow images and moving objects were simple yet ethereal.

Another fascinating installation performance was *Je brasse de l'air* by French artist, Magali Rousseau. The audiences moved through the performance space as she told a story of a young girl who wanted to fly. Rousseau's metal moving artworks/automata were weaved into her performance and storytelling. Just looking at her beautiful and amazing metal automata by itself was so fantastic but seeing them come to life while she told a story related to those moving objects made it even more magical.

Her work was one of five works nominated for the festival prize competition. Several juries viewed these works during the festival, and the final winner was announced on the last day of the festival at closing ceremony.

There were so many other great, interesting and inspirational works at the festival. I'm so grateful for the opportunity through UNIMA Festival Sponsorship Program to check out this amazing festival in Baden, Switzerland. Generous hospitality and warm welcome from the festival staff and volunteers were great. Different components of the festival were very well-organized, and every detail was exceptionally taken care of. I look forward to returning back to Baden for more amazing festival experiences.

