

# Festival Sponsorship - UNIMA International – Manipulate Festival 2019

par Antonia Leney-Granger

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In 2018, I was fortunate enough to receive a festival sponsorship grant from the **International Festivals Commission** at **UNIMA International**. Thanks to this grant, I was able to fly to Edinburgh, Scotland in February 2019 to attend the **Manipulate Visual Theatre Festival**.

During my stay, I attended more than 30 shows, work-in-progress presentations and artistic proposals of all kinds, in addition to participating in a masterclass on puppetry and words led by great British puppeteer **Sarah Wright** and one of the pioneers of contemporary puppetry in Scotland, **Gavin Glover**. As a result of this workshop, I had the opportunity to meet other local artists and create new relationships with puppeteers from the current Scottish scene.



The festival's venue, the **Traverse Theatre** in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town, is in an ideal location. All performances take place in one of the two theatres that open onto a common bar-café space, bringing artists and festival-goers together and allowing for a variety of social encounters and conversations.



In addition, the accommodation offered by Manipulate festival, in a magnificent villa in the heart of the city, hosted several artists throughout the week. I was thus able to meet with such inspiring creators as **Ishmael Falke** and **Sandrina Lindren** from the Finnish company Levsmedlet theatre or **Sabine Moleenar**, a contemporary dancer based in Belgium.

During my stay in Edinburgh, I attended a great number of unique and memorable artistic events. The diversity of the works presented taught me a lot about the notion of visual theatre, which includes puppetry and object theatre but also encompasses a much broader range of forms and media. Visual narrative techniques can often be used to capture complex realities while leaving room for the audience's interpretation, creating a intricate and challenging dramaturgical landscape.

I highly appreciated that many of the proposals dealt with topical issues or social phenomena such as homelessness, the migrant crisis or antibiotic-resistant superbacteria. Puppetry's talent for shifts in scale, metaphor and poetry seem to me perfect tools to reflect and portray such complex issues and make them accessible and moving for the audience. I also found the organization's efforts to maximize the accessibility of events, including the frequent presence of sign language interpreters near the stage, very impressive. As a festival devoted to visual theatre, this commitment to making art accessible to all inspires me greatly.

I was also particularly struck by the way that **Puppet Animation Scotland** (the organization behind Manipulate festival) supports local and emerging artists by offering them a variety of opportunities to present their work, whether in the form of a snapshot, a performance in-the-works or touring show. As a result of this vision, I was able to discover new work in progress by innovative artists and companies such as **Almudena Adalia Calvo**, **Freda O'Byrne** and **Tidy Carnage**.

Artistic Director **Simon Hart** has been working tirelessly for the past 12 years to establish visual theatre as a distinctive form of artistic expression, while trying to maximize the professional development and circulation of Scotland's puppeteers. This dynamism and commitment to the community has made Manipulate a must-see event on the Edinburgh scene, which is no small thing when you live in the city with the most festivals in the world, including the largest performing arts festival on the planet, the **Fringe!**

In addition to attending shows and film screenings, the festival sponsorship allowed me to be present at networking events such as the meeting with Puppeteers UK, the British branch of **UNIMA International**. **Rachel McNally**, artistic director of the **Puppet Place** in Bristol and member of the board at **Puppeteers UK**, was very happy to have the opportunity to discuss the state of puppetry in Quebec and Canada and the work of our professionals in promoting and further developing the discipline. As Vice-President of the **Association Québécoise des Marionnettistes (AQM)**, I hope to continue to multiply the links between our organizations in order to support the professional development of puppeteers from Quebec and abroad. My presence at Manipulate also allowed me to meet several established artists and programmers interested in contemporary puppetry and visual theatre. In addition, I have been able to establish professional relationships with other organizations related to my theatre company's mission, such as the **Edinburgh Science Festival** or the **Curious School of Puppetry**, led by Sarah Wright.

I am convinced that this trip will constitute a significant milestone in my career as a young puppeteer. By the quality of the encounters, by the inspiration that the works presented have given me, by the insights and discoveries made among artists from everywhere whose vision will shape my future endeavours, it is obvious that there will be a "before" and an "after" Manipulate 2019.

Finally, I would like to thank some of the people who made this trip possible and contributed their attentive, generous and inspiring presence: Simon Hart, Melanie Purdie, Nick Wong, Heidi Gordon and the entire team at **Puppet Animation Scotland**; Louise Lapointe and the **International Festivals Commission at UNIMA International**; the **Canada Council for the Arts** and **LOJIQ** for their support; Sarah Wright, Gavin Glover and all the participants from the "To Speak or Not To Speak" master class; Freda O'Byrne; Joan Davidson of **Edinburgh Science**; Ishmael Falke, Sandrina Lindgren and Sabine Moleenar; Rachel McNally and **Puppeteers UK**; and of course, all the artists who generously shared their work in front of this engaged and curious audience.

Thank you all for what you have given me. I keep your art and your spirit within me, and I hope to have the chance to come back to your side of the pond soon to develop or present my work!

If you are a young puppeteer or puppetry student, don't wait any longer and submit an application for a Festival Sponsorship! You never know what you'll discover when you leave home and meet artists who share similar concerns, but that's precisely the beauty of this experience. Thank you UNIMA for this unforgettable journey!

Antonia Leney-Granger  
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## Highlights of Manipulate Festival 2019

Among the highlights of this 2019 edition of Manipulate is *Intronauts* by English company **Green Ginger**, mainly for the remarkable changes in scale and the imagination of a future where microscopic "astronauts" wander inside our bodies to cleanse our multiple physical (and psychological?) wounds. The impressive integration of video projection makes this microscopic universe come alive for the audience's delight.

I also had the chance to admire the incredible talent of Germany's **Figurenteater Tuebingen** in *Wunderkammer*, a curiosity cabinet filled with creatures each more majestic, delicate, hilarious or scary than the next. Their string puppets manage to balance an almost meditative grace with a precise rhythm that allows for the most effective comedy. Wow!



In my list of favourites is also *Sleeping Beauty*, by the French company **Akselere**, a show of object and shadow puppetry that draws on the well-known fairy tale to tell the story of a tragic childhood in the suburbs of Liverpool. The performance is carefully calibrated to sustain the suspense throughout, and the emotional charge of this anti-fairy tale lingers long after the curtain has fallen.



To stay in the realm of object theatre, I also had the opportunity to see *Vu*, a creation by the French company **Sacékripa** that I had seen back in 2017. This quasi indescribable performance, both an ode to obsessive compulsive disorder and a wordless standup routine that scarcely gives people a chance to catch their breath between fits of hilarity, is set on a tiny desk in an almost empty space, with no more than twenty objects. A beautiful lesson in minimalism and the power of precision in the work of puppeteers and actors.



Another show that particularly struck me was *Transmographiles*, a proposal by young puppeteers from the **Hopeful Monster** company, most of whom graduated from the Curious School of Puppetry. The simplicity of the proposal - puppet characters created from hands assembled into increasingly complex compositions - charms from the outset, but it is the talent and precision of the puppeteers who make this work in development an impressive tour de force. Definitely artists to follow!



And last of all, I have to mention my favourite show at Manipulate 2019: *Invisible Lands*, by **Livsmedlet Theatre** (Finland). In a wordless dramaturgy where bodies become landscapes on which plastic figurines perilously travel, the two performers take us on a journey of migrants on the run, looking for a better future beyond their homeland. The simplicity of the device creates a series of sublime and tragic motifs that speak of the courage, faith and sacrifice required to carry out such an odyssey. One cannot experience this performance without being



changed, so that their view of all those who had to leave everything behind to start over is permanently altered. A show with a universal dimension that strikes at the heart of each of those who have the chance to experience it: a true theatre of empathy, made even more necessary in our era where mistrust for others still often prevails.