



## **95 Years Young and Going Strong!**

As we all know, the Union Internationale de la Marionnette, or UNIMA, was created in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1929, with the goal of globally promoting the puppetry arts. May 20 of this year will mark UNIMA's 95th birthday! This is yet another wonderful opportunity to celebrate our amazing organization.

We are all proud to be members of the oldest international theatre organization in the world. What, we might ask, has ensured UNIMA's longevity and endurance, in spite of a devastating world war and seemingly never-ending regional conflict? Of course, it's the puppets! It's our shared love of puppetry and theatre and our belief that these vital creative arts can make a positive difference to our communities, to the world, to our lives. This is the altruistic conviction that unites us. Also, puppetry and theatre do tend to attract very special people – people who are creative, keen to share, and keen to learn. Equally important, it's the friendships, our enduring friendships. The wonderful friends that I have made during my 38 years as a member of UNIMA are, without a doubt, the deepest and the dearest. I am sure it is the same for all of us. The special friendships that we have, because of UNIMA, is what further binds us together!

When UNIMA was founded in Prague in 1929, the most prestigious puppeteers and lovers of puppetry of the period came together to create an international organization devoted to the puppet theatre. In spite of its initial name up until 1969 – Union Internationale des Marionnettistes (International Union of Puppeteers) – one of UNIMA's founding principles was (as Margareta Niculescu records in her article on UNIMA for the WEPA) that “the organization should be open not only to puppeteers, but to all those actively interested in puppetry.

From the beginning, half the founders came from professions outside of puppetry” (<https://wepa.unima.org/en/union-internationale-de-la-marionnette-unima/>). Over the many decades that followed, the luminaries in the field of puppetry and its broader, diversified UNIMA membership, created and recreated the organization, making it ever richer, more diverse, and increasingly receptive to the changing realities of the times, new developments in the arts and culture, in politics, race relations, ethnicity, religious affiliations, gender, and the like.



So, thank you to all of the founders of UNIMA who, back in the 1920s, were all young or middle aged! You grew with the organization as you created it and ensured its growth. And, thank you to those equally amazing individuals who followed in our founders' footsteps and contributed so much to making UNIMA the preeminent home for all who love, perform, study, research, teach, and enjoy watching puppet theatre. And thank you to all of our newest members, who come from all age groups and walks of life.

Young people, in particular, are key to our growth. It is your fresh way of seeing the world, your awareness of the latest technologies, your enthusiasm and energy that drive our development. Indeed, at the recent UNIMA Council held in April 2023 in Bali, Indonesia, many of our younger members were present. You brought new energy to our meetings and infused our encounters with infectious enthusiasm. You energized older members. (I, for one, feel more youthful than my seven decades, more vibrant, when I am engaged with motivated, fun, younger people!) You, UNIMA's younger generations, bring new ideas and vitality to our organization, just as you do to the art and practice of puppetry. So, again, thank you to all of our members who are under 40! You are the present and the future of UNIMA!

Headquartered in Charleville-Mézières, France, UNIMA's 7,000 members today constitute around 80 National Centres and "Representations" spread throughout Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, the Americas, and Europe. It is through the UNIMA commissions that special projects, which involve our members from around the world, are envisioned and achieved. The commission model is often echoed in our National Centres' own structures, within their own thematic working committees. UNIMA's commissions are discussed, validated, and some are restructured every four years at our Congresses. Currently, UNIMA's sixteen working commissions are: Communication & Public Relations; Cooperation; Education, Development and Therapy; Financial Planning & Fundraising Strategy; Heritage; Humanitas; International Festivals; Professional Training; Publication and Contemporary Writing; Research; Statutes; Youth; plus, the four regional commissions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Three Americas.



For more information about the work of these commissions, I urge all of us to go to each commission's individual page on the UNIMA website. For additional information, contact the president of each of the commissions. They welcome all questions and ideas.

This special birthday also reminds us that we are only five years short of UNIMA's centenary! During these five intervening years, we will carry out those other important projects that we have had on our to-do list since at least 2019 when we celebrated nine decades of UNIMA. Current ideas include commissioning an update of UNIMA's own history and updating the online trilingual WEPA – World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts / Encyclopédie Mondiale des Arts de la Marionnette / Enciclopedia Mundial de las Artes de la Marioneta. I urge you all to engage with one of our commissions and share your ideas about how we can further enrich puppetry over the next five years and launch UNIMA on a strong and high trajectory as it begins its second century.

For a brief history of UNIMA that also highlights the mothers and fathers and the succeeding generations of makers and shakers of UNIMA, please check out the WEPA (<https://wepa.unima.org>), beginning with the article, "Union Internationale de la Marionnette" (2015), by Margareta Niculescu mentioned above. Indeed, a regular perusal of UNIMA's unique contribution – its massive online encyclopedia in French, English and Spanish – is a must read! There is so much information in this treasure trove devoted to puppetry and the allied arts. With even more to come! Also, you must read UNI...WHAT? UNIMA (2019) by Nina Malíková, dedicated to the founding and subsequent history of UNIMA.

To conclude, let's keep in mind the wise words of one of UNIMA's luminaries, Jacques Félix (1923-2006), General Secretary of UNIMA International (1980-2000):

"With friendship and willingness, the greatest utopias become reality."

UNIMA is one such utopia that endures and thrives!

**Karen Smith**

**President of UNIMA (2021-2025)**