

So : puppet or not puppet?

Where is the puppet theater heading now? Which exactly puppets correspond to the contemporary vision of art? Finally, what can we consider a puppet nowadays? I don't have any definite answers to these questions, but I'm trying to figure them out and answer them, first of all to myself.

This year, I was lucky enough to attend three powerful theater festivals with my students from the Department of Puppet Theater Art at the Karpenko-KaryNational University of Theater, Cinema and Television in Kyiv:

- 11. INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF PUPPETRY SCHOOLS PUPPETNOPUPPET, held in June 2024 in Bialystok, Poland, 24.

[Akademia Teatralna](#)

- INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF PUPPETRY ART BABKARSKA BYSTRICA, held in Slovakia in Banska Bystrica from September 30 to October 6, 2024

[Program – Bábkarská Bystrica](#)

- and at another Polish festival 30. INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF PUPPETRY ART in Bejalska Biała from October 06 to 11.

[Międzynarodowy Festiwal Sztuki Lalkarskiej](#)

I would like to say right away that all three festivals brought together the most powerful performances, the festival days were dense and intense, each program contained performances that left us breathless and we felt very happy to have had the opportunity to see works that can be definitely called works of art. But... I could not call all the performances puppet theater. In many of them, there was no puppet at all; in some performances a completely unnecessary puppet appeared just to justify the fact that the performance was born in a puppet theater; in some performances the role of the puppet was reduced to a purely decorative function. And some performances raised the question for me: what exactly can be called a theater puppet?

Even the provocative title of the Bialystok festival PUPPETNOPUPPET prompted such questions. It's no secret that puppeteers in the post-Soviet space studied from and according to the books of Sergei Obraztsov and Mikhail Korolev. Korolev noted the main types of puppets, such as glove, rod, flat figure, shadow puppets, marionettes, and the very nature of puppet theater as the animation of inanimate matter, which is what a puppet is. A theater puppet should be characterized by imagery and metaphor.

Then can we call the TUNNEL show by Klaipeda Puppet Theatre (Lithuania), created in collaboration with Ljubljana Puppet Theatre (Slovenia), directed and set designer Miha Golob, a puppet theater performance? This show can be called a study of light, it has no puppets, no real scenography, only animation of light and darkness and unlimited possibilities for using various lighting devices and projection. And it was incredibly metaphorical and figurative when phantasmagoric figures were created from the rays of light. So can we call light itself a doll? After all, although it was not literally an animation of inanimate matter, light existed as a separate and expressive character.

[ŠVIESOS IR MATERIJŲ SPEKTAKLIS „TUNELIS“ \(BVTS\) - Teatras lėlė](#)

Or can we call the sound, which is the main means of expression in the performance IT WILL RAIN TOMORROW... by BIALYSTOK PUPPET THEATER (author Philippe Dorrin, direction, set design Anita Piotrowska), a puppet? The story is about people communicating in virtual reality, when two actors act on stage wearing VR glasses and the audience watches the action in headphones. Significant moments and movements of the actors are emphasized by sounds in the audience's headphones. In this performance, I saw a great performance by dramatic actors but, again, I did not see the puppet. At the end of the performance, I approached the actors and the director and asked if the sound could be considered a puppet. The director's response was as follows: we hadn't thought about it, but you're probably right, the sound is indeed a separate character in this play.

[Jutro będzie padać | BTL](#)

Another performance, from the festival hosts, BIALYSTOK PUPPET THEATRE, was without puppets in the traditional sense of the word, but with a very interesting concept of THE METAMORPHOSIS (direction, set design Marcin Bikowski) based on the most famous work of Franz Kafka. Out of the chaos that the director very thoughtfully created on stage, out of threads, out of objects, a strange creature is born, which is not a direct illustration of Kafka's work but a modern interpretation of the title of Francisco Goya's cycle of prints "The Sleep of the Mind Creates Monsters". I don't know if we can call the monsters created by the director, who is also the set designer, puppets, but, for sure, what we saw has nothing to do with any system of puppets that Korolev wrote about. Perhaps it should be considered an object theater, but in any case, the performance sounded modern, interesting and unusual.

[Przemiana | BTL](#)

The performance of HIC SUN DRACONES by the International independent theater group DIVADLO CONTINUO was no less visually and emotionally exciting. The performance has no linear plot, no puppets but a human body, plastic, visual effects and incredible imagination of the creators. It is a poem read to the audience in the language of physical theater, with elements of absurdity, grotesque and magic. Parts of human bodies are used to create bizarre creatures, the actors' legs, arms, heads and bodies act separately, but in the next scene, new images are created from the individual parts.

[Continuo Theatre - HIC SUNT DRACONES 2020 trailer - YouTube](#)

We received very similar emotional impressions from watching two more performances, and after that we no longer had the question of where the puppet was. These performances were a real highlight of the festival: BODY CONCERT by LONE WOLF TRIBLE [BODY CONCERT: Leg Duet | Lone Wolf Tribe, NYC Performance Company](#) AVATARA by ILIVA COMPANY LUSIONARY ROCKAZ COMPANY & DUDA PAIVA COMPANY. [Illusionary Rockaz Company \(IRC\) - AVATARA](#) The first of these two performances is a mono performance by Kevin Augustine - a hymn to the human body. The body of the actor himself and hypertrophied large puppets - body parts, such as a giant arm, leg, eye, heart, tell us without a word about pain and suffering, about birth, life and death of a person through plastic. The performance is minimalist in form, but very expressive in content. In my personal opinion, Kevin Augustine's acting is the best performance at the festival. At the same time, Duda Paiva's AVATARA surprises with a combination of exquisite choreography and fantastic work of the performers with a puppet and even with several puppets at the same time. Actually, this is the signature style of maestro Duda Paiva.

It is worth noting that the program of the Bialystok festival consisted of two parts: performances by professional companies and student performances, a presentation of theater schools. It was incredibly interesting to see the differences between the curricula of European theater schools and Ukrainian theater schools. Of course, the student works could not be as large-scale as the works of professional groups, but watching the student performances gives us some optimism that puppetry has a good future.

The only purely puppet show at the festival was WHO IS AFRAID OF MRS. D? by THE STANISLAV WYSPIANSKI NATIONAL ACADEMY OF THEATER ARTS IN KRAKOW, BRANCH CAMPUS IN WROCLAW. It may not have been a revelation in the latest theatrical aesthetics, but the excellent puppetry performed by the young actors was really convincing. We are all so used to seeing an actor alongside a puppet, and sometimes instead of a puppet, that the existence of only a puppet on stage with a hidden actor looks like real magic and causes the audience to be genuinely surprised.

MATILDA FATUR impressed the audience with her acting skills, presenting her solo performance ACADEMY DIMITRI SWITZELAND. All the means of expression are electronic piano, double bass, mask, wonderful voice, plastic and unsurpassed charisma of the actress. WHERE IS THE BEAT? is a simple story of human existence in society, which the actress masterfully presents to the audience in the genre of stand-up.

[Where is the beat? "Where is the beat?" - trailer \(Matilda Fatur\) on Vimeo](#)

It was very interesting to see the reinterpretation of Shakespeare's monologues, miniatures STUTTCASE 1+2 with different puppets performed by students of the STATE UNIVERSITY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ART FIGURENTHEATRE DEPARTMENT from Stuttgart.

The format of the student shows did not always involve presentations of finished performances, sometimes they were just sketches, sketches for future works, and it was also very interesting to watch this work process, but one of these works really impressed. The performance "20 DEN" by THE ALEKSANDR ZELWEROWICH NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DRAMATIC ART SN WARSAW, BRANCH CAMPUS IN BIALOSTOK played solo by the young actress JULIA FIDELUS is a tragicomic autobiographical story of the actress's relationship with her late mother. On the stage we see only a bathtub, a lot of stockings, a puppet of her mother made of the same stockings and a wonderful actress who holds the audience's attention for almost an hour, making

them laugh and cry. We had the opportunity to see this performance again at the festival in Bielsk Biala and to experience the whole range of emotions that the actress generously shares with the audience.

KYIV NATIONAL KARPENKO-KARY THEATER, CINEMA AND TELEVISION UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF PUPPET THEATER ART presented at this festival the performance VERTEP. HOPENESS, a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Ukrainian folk theater VERTEP. This performance combines the classic biblical story of the birth of Jesus Christ with the current events of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The story of the Savior gives us hope that any Herod (of course, the audience immediately guessed who the modern King Herod is) will be defeated and that the star of happiness will shine over Ukraine, just as it did over the Vertep. The audience received our performance very warmly, and we immediately received several invitations to other festivals. At the end of the performance, a very interesting seminar was held on the topic "Ukrainian Vertep. Traditions and Modernity".

[Трейлер «Вертеп. Надія»](#)

In general, I would like to note the very high level of training of students in Bialystok, as well as the high culture of the Polish puppet theater in general. The festival had a fantastically kind and creative atmosphere, created by students, teachers of the Academy and especially by the unsurpassed Festival's Artistic Director Marta Rau.

We saw even less puppets than in Bialystok at the 24 INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF PUPPET ART BABKARSKA BYCTRICA, which took place from October 01 to 06, 2024 in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia. The motto of this year's festival was FREEDOM IS ART. We saw in the festival program performances that were close to circus art and purely dramatic, etc. It was all the more valuable to see a puppet, especially if the actor is a master of puppetry.

The solo performance of the festival hosts PUPPET THEATER AT THE CROSSROADS, called KAMIL, based on a wonderful play by Polish playwright MARTA GUSNIEWSKA, told us about a dog that was left with a stranger for several days. The young and very attractive MATUS HOLLY told us a gentle and touching story. He worked so subtly and skillfully with the puppet in an open technique that, despite all the charisma of the actor himself, we wanted to watch the puppet.

[КАМИЛЬ – Бабкарска Быстрица](#)

The puppeteers from PUPPET THEATER ZHILINA showed us a light, funny performance with a beautiful scenography. The performance by ROBINSON.KA did not reveal anything fundamentally new to us, but it was staged and acted very competently and was very well received by the audience.

[Robinson.ka – Bábkové divadlo Žilina](#)

A real artistic romp was the performance of PUPPET THEATRE KOSICE from Slovakia, called NO. The actors told the children about children in a playful way, namely about what happens at home when children are left alone. There were no classical puppets in this performance but there was an object theater, improvised puppets and a very temperamental performance by the actors.

[B. Mazúch: NIE! - Bábkové divadlo v Košiciach](#)

Separately, I would like to talk about two performances, one in the Czech Republic and one in Slovakia, which were staged based on the same literary material, namely the book *The End of the Red Man* by Svetlana Aleksievich, a Nobel Prize winner in literature. I am not going to analyze the artistic value of these performances; I will only talk about the meanings. The first play by the Czech SPITFIRE COMPANY, *THE LAST OF THE SOVIETS*, showed us the disgusting and deceitfulness of the Soviet system through food. The second play based on the same book by the festival hosts, *THE SECONDHAND TIMES. THE END OF THE RED MEN* told about the horror and criminality of the totalitarian regime, which both the Czech Republic and Slovakia experienced to the fullest extent. But... The book, which was written in 2015, really condemns what the current post-Soviet space has been suffering from for more than 70 years. And it seems to have been cured, everything is over and left behind. Only the current Russian aggression against Ukraine has shown that this totalitarianism has not disappeared, that it continues to destroy everything around it, and that the message that both plays send us about how it was really terrible but it all ended with the fall of the Soviet Union, everything is in the past, is completely wrong. Totalitarianism, modern fascism, has not disappeared, the Ukrainian people are heroically fighting it right now and Europe is under the illusion that this is not their war, that it will not affect Europe. No, it will, fascism has already come very close to European borders, and sometimes it is already fighting for power in some European countries. And the failure to understand this factor, which these two quite talented performances showed us, may lead to the return of everything, which the Czech and Slovak directors of Aleksievich's work condemned, in the very near future.

[Spitfire Company | The Last of the Soviets | Official Trailer](#)
[ČASY ZO SECOND HANDU. KONIEC ČERVENÉHO ČLOVEKA - trailer](#)

And to finish the story about the Slovak festival, I want to tell you about the best performance in my subjective opinion - a plastic play without words by Czech artist ANDREY LYGA *THE FAIRYTALE FOR THE BRAVE*. There is no traditional puppet in this performance, there is the actor's body, which he owns perfectly, there is a wonderful soundtrack and there is a piece of clay that the actor turns into a mask, transforms it, gets captured by it, fights, wins and loses again. A non-verbal story about overcoming oneself, one's fears and doubts. In general, the BABKARSKA BYCTRICA festival left a very pleasant impression and I already want to return to the cozy Slovak town among the mountains.

["Pohádka pro odvážné" teaser](#)

After driving less than two hundred kilometers, we arrived in the picturesque Polish town of Biała Biała for the XXX. INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF PUPPET ART organized by the local theater BANIALUKA, which took place from October 06 to 11, 2024. Unfortunately, we were able to enjoy the festival program for only three days, and there was really something to enjoy. The idea of the festival is a puppet as a subject, not an object of a stage performance. The festival's website states that despite the concern about the puppet as a matter that has to be animated, both puppets and animators should be part of creative research and experiments, but they also require the skill of the puppeteer. It was this skill that we were able to enjoy.

The very next day after our arrival, we saw the performance that impressed me the most. ANYWHERE by the French theater company THÉÂTRE DE L'ENTROUVERT surprises and fascinates from the first seconds. This is a study of water, all its states, from the solid ice from which the doll is made, to the liquid state of water itself, and to steam. It is a fantastic existence of the actress on stage, her interaction with the puppet, and the incredibly difficult technical control of the puppet on very long strings. As Marek Waszkel noted in his review of the performance, it is a

poetic essay or visual poetry. An exquisite ice doll (before each performance, the artists fill silicone molds with water and freeze the doll) gradually becomes transparent under the influence of temperature in front of the audience and then begins to melt. This is how Oedipus gradually dies in the arms of his daughter Antigone. The play is inspired by the novel Oedipus Rex by Henry Bauhaus. Oedipus's sin is washed away by the rain that falls right on the stage and the doll, which has almost melted, disappears into the fog. The fantastic concept of the play by ELISE VIGNERON surprises with its unusualness, and the acting performance by ELISE VIGNERON, HELENE BARREAU, MARKBLASHFORD with its skill.

[Anywhere](#)

The play by the Spanish theater company ZERO EN CONDUSTA LA PHAZZ tells us about how a growing up person creates his own fears, creates his own monsters. Can this performance be called a modern ballet with puppets and masks, or is it a puppet theater with choreography? In any case, the actors' wonderful synchronized plasticity and impeccable mask work surprise and fascinate. The hero of the play is not played by one actor; everyone takes turns going through this image, passing on not only the mask but also the plasticity of the hero to each other. It is a play without words, in which everything is absolutely clear to the audience. Upon my return from the festival, I learned that this play, directed by JULIETA GASCON, won the Grand Prix at another Polish international festival, LALKA TEZ CLOWIEK in Warsaw. So bravo, Spaniards!

[La Phazz by Zero en Conducta](#)

HAMLET ON THE ROAD by the Czech DIVADLO RADOST from Brno is a reinterpretation of the most famous tragedy in the style of DARK CABARET. Live performance of music and songs, a traveling theater van filling the large stage of the drama TEATR POLSKY, large rod puppets, Hamlet in the form of Kaszparek, all of this refers the audience to the traditions of Czech folk theater. This was the largest performance of the festival with a wonderful set design by PAVEL HUBICHKA, bright, incendiary music by TOMASZ LEWANDOWSKI and exquisite staging by JOANNA ZDRADA.

[HAMLET ON THE ROAD](#)

And the last performance I would like to mention is the one by SYN TEATR WOLNOSC from Bialystok, Poland. A somewhat absurd plot, in which we guess the myth of the prodigal son, was told to us by three wonderful actors, a fantastic acting ensemble consisting of KAROL SMACZNY, MATEUSZ SMACZNY and MARCIN TOMKIEL, plus musician MICHAL GORCZYNSKI, who accompanies the stage action live. This performance did not have a single director or set designer, everything we saw on stage was created by the actors together, which may be why there was a feeling that the action was born improvisationally, here and now. This play, as it turned out, was already well known to Polish audiences, as it had already been awarded the main prize at the PESTKA Festival of Avant-Garde Theater.

[Syn | BTL](#)

What conclusions can I draw after watching the performances of the three festivals? The aesthetics of European puppetry is very different from the traditions of Ukrainian puppetry. This is neither good nor bad; it is a statement that we have something to share with European puppeteers and something to learn from them. First of all, we should learn to tell stories non-verbally, we saw a lot of performances without words or with a minimum of text. We saw a lot of performances that did not have a linear plot, a lot of combinations of different genres: plastic theater, choreography, vocals. We saw many performances with live music, and this is a great trend. We saw very few performances with interesting, imaginative scenography, and, in my opinion, the fact that scenography is disappearing in performances is not a good trend. We saw unusual puppetry techniques. But the main thing that is especially valuable for us is that puppet theater has no boundaries, that anything can be a puppet: a shadow, an object, a human body, light, sound, different materials and textures of materials. And even if we can't always see a traditional puppet in performances, let our art develop further towards mixing different genres, let the theater have everything, as long as it is highly artistic, metaphorical, and figurative.

Mikhail Urytskyi