

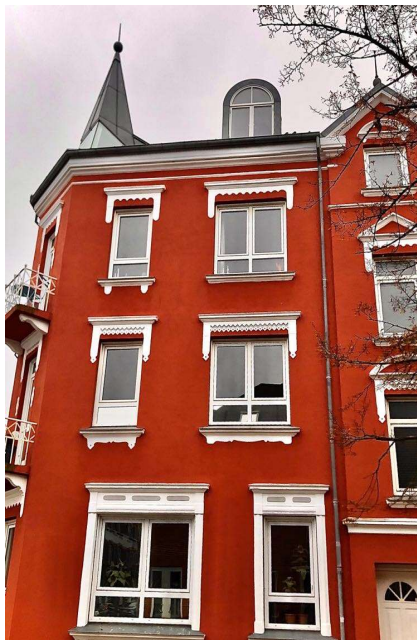
***FESTIVAL OF WONDER 2024***, Silkeborg, Denmark by Juliana Dubovská

At the beginning of November, I had the honor of attending the *FESTIVAL OF WONDER* Silkeborg, Denmark. I would like to express my gratitude to the members of UNIMA who created the UNIMAPASS project, and especially to the generous Ulla Dongsøe, founder and director of the festival who made my stay possible.

Silkeborg is a small lovely town with a center consisting of just a few streets lined with brick houses, an abundance of cozy cafés, and beautifully decorated windows without curtains. It is located by a lake, surrounded by rivers and canals, and during my stay, it was constantly shrouded in mist. It was the perfect place and time to step into the darkness of a theater hall and, together with others, and get captivated by stories and images.



Streets of Silkeborg



UNIMAPASS guests of festival

My festival experience began with a meeting of puppet theater festival organizers. Despite my initial hesitation about attending, this meeting turned out to be pivotal. It was wonderful to be among people who, despite their diverse aesthetics and approaches, share a passion for the essence of puppetry and object theater – breathing life into inanimate matter on stage. From this meeting, I gained not only valuable information about festivals but also many meaningful connections with individual organizers. Throughout the festival, networking and getting to know creators, organizers, and enthusiasts of puppet theatre became one of the most significant aspects for me.

I had the opportunity to see many performances that broadened my horizons and inspired me. On a personal level, the festival also unexpectedly confronted me with my dual identity. My journey into puppetry began in Slovakia, where I studied puppet scenography in Bratislava. Later, I settled in France, where I now live and create. Thus, the aesthetics and principles of Slovak and Czech puppetry are very close to my heart. Thanks to the festival, I had the chance to meet many

Czech creators and a few Slovak ones as well and to see their work, which remains deeply inspiring to me.

The performance *Little Red Riding Hood* by the Naive Theater of Liberec, directed by Michaela Homolová, embodied everything I love about Czech and Slovak puppetry. A traditional fairy tale with a tasteful modern twist, humor, and light-hearted acting that doesn't take itself too seriously. Beautiful and surprising scenography, dynamic staging, and contemporary music. I am thrilled to see Homolová and her theater gaining recognition at international festivals.



*Little Red Riding Hood by the Naive Theater of Liberec*

Some performances don't rely on a perfectly understandable story, yet they leave a profound impact on the viewer. It was the case for the performance *Diva* by Danish performer Sofie Krog. It was a virtuoso solo concert where she brought a surreal microcosm to life through a hypnotic mask and numerous small, amusing puppets. Dreamlike imagery unraveled into a technically flawless whole that was simultaneously humorous and full of surprises.

Another solo performer was Yael Rasooly, who presented the show *Edith and Me*, blending theater and personal confession. The performance, with aesthetics reminiscent of Neville Tranter – who was part of the creative team – worked exceptionally well thanks to Rasooly's impeccable puppet manipulation, her acting transitions between her own character and that of Edith Piaf (portrayed by the puppet), and her skillful rendition of chansons, which played a significant role in the production. Most importantly, the piece addressed a significant and sensitive topic – sexual harassment and assault. I believe it's remarkable that a performance tackling this subject is receiving such attention.

The production *Arctic Tales* by the Canadian theater *La Rueé vers l'Or* resonated with me a lot artistically. With minimalist scenography, realistic foam puppets, three performers, and one musician, they brought to life the world of hunters living in Greenland in the mid-20th century. An

excellent choice of theme, the great energy of the performers working as an ensemble, and the live sound accompaniment made this one of the highlights of the festival for me.

A very topical piece was *Babylon* by Sandglass Theater from the USA, presented as a hybrid between a recording of the stage production and a film. Created before the pandemic, the production team could not reunite to revive the performance. The piece carried a powerful statement, portraying the stories of five immigrants seeking political asylum in the USA. This painfully relevant topic struck a deeper chord, as we watched it just two days after the American presidential elections. The production was notable for its use of puppetry, dynamic scenography, and the actors' a cappella vocal performances. After the screening, the room fell silent for a long time, and many of us couldn't hold back strong emotions, which we eventually discussed in the post-show talk.

Among Danish productions, I was captivated by the intimate solo performance *Ojeblik* by Blik Theater, which used video projections and live sound produced by the performer on stage in innovative ways. Another inspiring Danish production was *Let's Do It Again* by the MY ensemble. This small-scale piece for very young audiences was set in an intimate circular space, with harmonious and simple scenography and two performers radiating calm yet playful energy. It explored the last year of a little girl's life before starting school.

Overall, the festival was truly magical for me, especially thanks to the people I had the chance to meet. From inspiring artists I got to know through their work and conversations, to festival organizers and UNIMA members who tirelessly create spaces where puppets and their creators can meet audiences and one another. My most beautiful experience was the sense of community that creates a space where miracles can still happen today. I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of it.



Ulla Dongsøe, founder and director of the festival, *Poul Andreassen* and UNIMAPASS guests.