

Getting educated at ESNAM: the choice of puppetry in an art school¹

Lucile Bodson

Institut International de la Marionnette - Charleville-Mézières
(France)

Abstract: The Ecole Nationale Supérieure des arts de la Marionnette was created in 1987 by Margareta Niculescu in Charleville-Mézières, at the heart of the Institut International de la Marionnette. Resourceful educational methods renewed both initial and professional training alike as artists were invited to come and teach and convey their knowledge. A balance between learning fundamentals (construction, dramatic acting, manipulation, body and movement, voice) and artistic workshops directed towards personal and collective projects structures a 3-year curriculum. The School's move into new premises, thus allowing for an increase in the 3-year cycle rhythm, and the forthcoming creation of a new puppeteer-actor diploma situate this training and this trade in the development and recognition of puppetry arts in France.

Keywords: Resourceful educational methods. Learning fundamentals. Initial training. Puppeteer-actor. Trade.

The choice of an Art School - The pedagogical outline of an art school is inseparable from the need to consider the general state of creation in its specific field and its evolution. A training centre cut off from this consideration would be doomed to fossilization. As regards theatre,

¹ Article translated from French into English by Mary Sharp.

in the last several decades few forms have experienced an evolution – it is tempting to say a revolution – comparable to puppet theatre.

Since its creation by Margareta Niculescu in 1987, the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette (ESNAM) has distinguished itself through educational methods that reconsider the fundamentals of passing on knowledge of a traditional art. The first schools dedicated to this art appeared in Eastern Europe and from the point of view of training, were based on the strong tradition of a popular art that provided the solid foundation necessary for the creation of a show and aimed for excellence in manipulation through the practice of numerous exercises and a high level of training in performance. Actual staging was a final year specialisation reserved for certain students. Construction and scenography constituted a specific study path.

When she created this training centre, Margareta Niculescu infused it with new and inventive educational methods. Her own personal experience and observations were the basis for their conception. In a text² retracing her career as producer and stage director for the Tandarica Theatre³, she bears witness to the positive effect on the work performed by permanent actors and technical crews alike in the company of the different stage directors with whom they had the opportunity to collaborate; during contact with singular artistic worlds, methods would be revisited each time and this would in turn trigger questioning and new acquisitions, enriching their career and giving them new methods or broadening their prior knowledge.

When asked in 1985 to give thought to approaches for training, and right from her beginnings as director of the Institut International de la Marionnette - IIM in Charleville-Mézières, Margareta Niculescu drew on her experience to conceive of an educational programme combining the transmission of knowledge and basic hands-on training overseen by artists. Vocational courses led by important French and foreign professionals attracted a good number of young artists to Charleville-Mézières. Then in 1987 she implemented some ambitious choices and required the initial training for ESNAM to revolve around creation, thus favouring the vision of a multidisciplinary art.

Following her and with the same dynamics, the team taking over

² *On the path of experimentation in Passeurs et complices – Passing it on*. Bilingual work, La Main qui parle Collection. Joint publication Entretiens and IIM – 2009.

³ Margareta Niculescu, producer and director for the Tandarica Theatre of Bucharest (Romania) until 1986, directed the Institut International de la Marionnette and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette from 1982 to 1999.

directorship of the Institut International de la Marionnette and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure in 2003 pursued this path with a will to conceive training in the ever-moving context of contemporary artistic creation.

A fundamental part of the pedagogy at ESNAM is based on the “artistic immersion” assigned to students during courses on staging directed by recognized artists, whether they are puppeteers, stage directors, authors... These creators contribute the essential of what they are made of, their art, their universe, and their creative relationship to the world, but equally – and this is a crucial aspect for developing personalities – their convictions and personal commitments in a profession.

Often reserved or sometimes opposed to the very principle of a school, most of these artists respond positively to the invitation given them and frequently prove to be enthusiastic about this encounter with budding artists. The students, for their part, are introduced to unique worlds in real-life work situations, get an approach to the creative process and in short, take part in the process of structuring a project in order to see it through to the end. During the end-of-course presentations one sees to what extent the new techniques or universes discovered while working with an artist are integrated and then rendered in a form now belonging to the young artist. In this way, each of the students, through impregnation, forges a personal expression and constructs his or her itinerary.

Balance is vital between pedagogy based on individual projects, where students are put in real-life working situations, and technical teaching. Different subject matters are associated to make up the puppeteer-actor programme, which implies a parallel double training: the practice of dramatic performance, giving an important place to voice work, and manipulation exercise based on the different techniques. Techniques for delegating the performance to an object must be developed in a sustained and conscience relationship to the body and to movement in relation to space.

Approaches to theatrical writing, especially in the company of contemporary authors, equally constitute a guiding principle during the training period. Questions concerning dramaturgy, whether they be textual, visual or generated by on-stage composition are at the core of the School’s curriculum.

The last of the options is based upon the teaching of plastic arts and construction right from the first week of the training programme. This establishes that, in order to incarnate scenic presence the puppeteer’s singularity also lies in his or her essential relationship with a puppet, an object or a material.

Since the creation of the School the instructors have often been different from one class to the next. Some have developed specific teachings stemming from their experience with the students and constitute a corpus of fundamental acquisitions in their field (movement, voice, construction...).

At the same time, reflection on contemporary writings and particularly the concept of a programme allowing students to approach staging can be seen to be deepening and getting consolidated with the passing years. From this standpoint, training in contemporary image technologies, present already, is bound to develop. More than the mastery of tools sometimes too sophisticated and rapidly evolving, it is a matter of nourishing the student's consideration of image composition and the mastery of its potential in service of the artistic intention.

Permanent dynamics

The directorship at the Institut International de la Marionnette and at ESNAM has today changed with the arrival of a recognized educator, Eloi Recoing – an arrival coinciding with the opening of the School's 10th three-year cycle at the end of 2014. It will be up to him from now on to develop the School's orientations and to conceive education based on his experience and personal observations.

ESNAM has also embarked upon a process of evolution and is facing up to the challenges of its development. Since its creation, it has taken on only one class of students at a time for the three-year cycle of studies leading to the realization of a graduation project and a diploma; it is now committed in the short-term (2016-17) to the doubling of its three-year classes and to the beginning of a three-year cycle every two years.

In order to manage the expansion of the student body and to develop continuing education, new buildings are under construction: the future ESNAM will open its doors at the end of 2016 in the centre of Charleville-Mézières, reinforcing the already strong bond between the city and its art School. Imagining this Puppetry Arts School with architects, the teaching staff and the institutional contractor represents in itself an utterly exceptional experience that enriches reflection even more on our artistic domain: the versatility or the specificities of different spaces suitable sometimes for solo exercises and sometimes for collective work must be thought out and intelligently articulated to provide a utilisation responding to long-term needs...

As regards the recruitment of new students, for ten years or so

ESNAM has been able to rely on different pre-professional training programmes allowing candidates to acquire a level of education better suited to entry into a school of higher education in the arts. These programmes include refresher courses in plastic arts (drawing and sculpture, knowledge of materials, construction...), acting and manipulation. Today's candidates are better trained upon their arrival at the School.

A School with a grip on the realities of a profession

A sign of the times, the professional life awaiting students after graduation has been incorporated into the preoccupations of the School even more than before. Connections with the profession, in the broad sense of the term – with theatrical companies and distribution networks alike – are permanent. The student work presentations that punctuate the three years of study right up to the final projects are an opportunity for the future artists to meet those who will be led to take them on for a creative production, hire them to lead workshops with different groups or programme their works to come. These contacts should favour engagements immediately following graduation.

In view of facilitating support and follow-up for the future professionals and allowing them to get their personal universe known, the realization of solo performances – short, light forms lasting around ten minutes – has been regularly assigned to the last four cycles of students graduating from the School. These performances have played the role of “calling card” for introducing their work. Programmers have sometimes created circuits including all the finished works of a given class during a festival or as a special event during their studies. Such experiences give the students exposure and allow them to meet diversified audiences outside the habitual framework of the Institut International de la Marionnette.

Another measure in practice since 2005 involves insertion internships from two to six months based on a personal project and offered to graduates with the support of companies. This makes it possible to get acquainted with the life of a creative team and with the numerous demands of production and distribution. These first accompanied steps give students the opportunity to face other constraints, this time in service of a company project, and to continue training in the field. Some internships lead to engagements within the company after the initial period of getting to know one another. This apprenticeship provides time for the young artist's training to deepen and for personal projects

to mature. Taking into consideration this dimension of apprenticeship (or in French, *compagnonnage*), since 2006 the Ministry of Culture has been allocating specific means to certain certified companies all over the country that have a work space. The French term refers to the benevolent mentorship of an elder. It is particularly adapted to our artistic trades, nourished by the conveyance of knowledge through exchange. The young artist can alternately work for the company and carry out a personal creative project while taking the time to mature under the right conditions.

Already established under the name of “*Ouvrier du TIM*” from 1972 to 1975 by Margareta Niculescu, within the framework of the programme Research/Experimentation the Institut International de la Marionnette has been able to contribute to the creation of projects recruiting performers and constructors among ESNAM graduates and destined to tour throughout the network of theatres in France and abroad. The latest experience was the production of *L'Histoire d'Ernesto*, adapted from a work by Marguerite Duras and staged by Sylvain Maurice, director of the Sartrouville Centre Dramatique in the Paris region. Seven young professionals were engaged after their graduation in September 2014: five weeks of rehearsals, several weeks of performances in the Paris region and all over France afforded these young artists a solid experience in an ambitious creation that had been the object of an initial collective work at the end of the second year of the School cycle. What could be more educating and enriching than continuing one's training right out of School by being engaged under the direction of a professional team? Achievements of this kind are made possible by financing shared between the company and the Institut International de la Marionnette, thanks to regional funding.

It is not always easy for young companies – coming from the School or trained in professional workshops – to find the necessary resources for a creation. If this is true from a financial standpoint, it is also the case for work conditions. An appropriate theatre space close to a workshop is necessary to carry out research and staging conjointly. Hosting of artistic residencies is made possible by the Creation/apprenticeship (“*compagnonnage*”) programme, which is another form of aid to professionalization. A grant is attributed to each company so that this period of experimentation and work is remunerated for the artists. At the end of the residency, the works in progress are presented before the students and the instructors at the School, and whenever possible, before an outside audience.

More than twenty years after the creation of ESNAM, its educational

choices are supported by the place held by its young graduate artists in the renewal of contemporary creation. This presence has established itself here at home as well as abroad, as international student recruitment accounts for a third of each graduating class.

This dimension ensures the broad reach of the initial education provided by the School and the professional training held at the Institut International de la Marionnette. The vitality of this centre for conveying know-how lies upon the permanent interplay of a series of activities in the service of reflection and knowledge.

The Resource Centre, a most excellent tool, equipped also with a unique video library and an image library, permanently welcomes practicing artists and researchers all year long: what better way to fuel the thought and action of young budding artists?

Theoretical and cultural heritage research is supported within the Research Centre (*"Pôle Recherche"*): the International Conference on Education in Puppetry Arts, taking place in September 2015 the day before the opening of the Charleville-Mézières Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnette will mark the start of a long-lasting project of reflection devoted to higher education and its evolution.

A new diploma for a recognized profession

Views on puppetry have changed in depth over the last three decades. The place accorded to puppetry arts in production and distribution networks bears witness to this. The puppet is no longer destined solely for young audiences but has conquered an adult following. Little by little, a new image has been established through reference works, the perspective of journalists following creations and new generations of artists, and through the growing interest of a fresh audience sensitive to the image and its composition.

The professional sector has been developing over the years, carried along by this generalised dynamic: we can now count nearly 200 recognized companies in puppet theatre, imagery theatre and object and animated forms theatres spread out over the entire country. Possibilities for employment for youth in training are much more substantial than when the School was created.

All these developments have been generated by a highly energetic professional sector that has joined forces to defend common projects and structural advancements. It was high time to reflect on this trade taught in this National School for Higher Education dedicated to puppetry arts.

The evolution of the current diploma (Diplôme des Métiers d'art – DMA) towards the puppeteer-actor Diplôme national supérieur professionnel (DNSP) being on the agenda, the need to develop a trade reference document brought instructors and puppeteers from different generations together for two years in an Educational Committee governed by THEMMA⁴, our professional organization and the French branch of UNIMA⁵. This document would offer an overview of the totality of areas of activity and employment that graduates would be qualified for. It was fascinating work that, as the meetings progressed, got us to search through the multiple approaches of puppet theatre and its practices so as to better determine its current reality with respect to what it comprises. Originating from a shared professional perspective and in the eye of the Ministry of Culture upon whom we depend, this diploma will take on meaning beyond the mere inventory of the skills acquired during three years of study: it will represent official recognition of an artistic sector sometimes considered as being of lesser importance as compared to textual and actors' theatre. The future of puppetry arts is in the hands of these young people taking entrance exams and declaring their attachment to puppets. Their conviction and energy endorse the collective battles being led by puppeteers since the 70s and give us unshakable faith in the future of puppetry arts.

By way of a quite temporary conclusion, I will gladly repeat the one that concluded *A School for a New Theatre*⁶, another article from *Passeurs et complices – Passing it on*, quoted above, and that served as a basis for the present article. “We know that our task is not to perpetuate but rather to help tomorrow's theatre to be born.” (BODSON, 2009, p. 259).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BODSON, Lucile; NICULESCO, Margareta; PEZIN, Patrick (Orgs.). *Passeurs et complices - Passing it on*. Obra bilingue. Coleção *La main qui parle*. Montpellier/Charleville-Mézières: Co-edição Entretemps e Institut International de la Marionnette - IIM, 2009.

⁴ Association Professionnelle des Théâtres de Marionnettes et Arts Associés. www.themaa-marionnettes.com

⁵ Puppeters International Union. www.unima.org

⁶ BODSON, Lucile. Une Ecole pour un théâtre nouveau. In: *Passeurs et complices – Passing it on*. (Op. cit.). p. 249-259.