

Defining the stage director and teaching theater directing¹

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Figure 1 - *Faustina*. Original play, scenario and staging: Compagnie Kattas (Norway). Photo: Tormod Lindgren.



Figure 2 - *The Foal*. Carte Blanche Geneve. Compagnie Irina Niculescu. Photo: Sabine Barde.

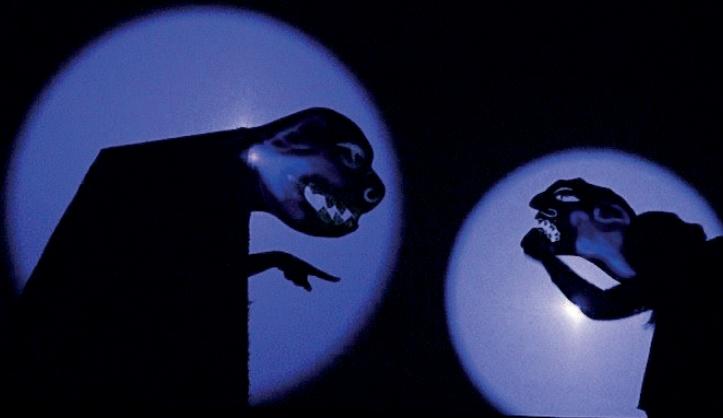


Figure 3 - *The Firebird*. Targoviste, Romania, 2017. Director: Irina Niculescu. Photo: Maria Stefanescu.

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Abstract: A provocation reflecting on puppet theatre directing, the director's tools, teaching and training philosophy.

Keywords: Theatre directing. Puppetry. Teaching. Creative process.

The theatrical context; my roots

I believe that theatre training including director's training in contemporary puppetry has to evolve in order to be able to respond to the artists' needs and give them the tools and the guidance to accomplish the theatre they want to create. I am a theatre director. I tell stories about the human soul. My shows express and share with the public my reflections on life; my joy, my questioning, my fears and utopias. I invite poets, writers, painters and sculptors to accompany me in these adventures. For me, the puppet has a tragi-comic essence, because it is always linked to the visible or invisible hands and body of the manipulator. It is a metaphor for the human condition. The act of manipulation and the interdependence of the puppeteer and the puppet contribute to the double effect of innocence and irreverence that the puppet exerts on us with so much charm. The puppet has an extraordinary power of evocation. It exists on the fragile border between the animate and the inanimate. It leads us into a fiction that becomes more real than reality.

Create, teach

As a young director, I explored in depth the essence of different types of puppets and their specific dramaturgy. I sought to discover what makes the charm of the puppet, its mystery and strength, and what is the connection between each genre of Puppet Theater and

its privileged dramatic territory. My theatrical adventure began in the mid-seventies.

I belong to the generation of creators who brought the puppet out of the castelet and placed it in the open space next to the puppeteer. This change has been essential in the theater revival; it generated an exuberant creative energy. Another approach to the design of the space and subsequently, of lighting, another look at the ratio of proportions. Raw material and building materials have been rediscovered and chosen for their dramatic potential. The relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer became suddenly a bearer of new meanings that had to be defined. Artists started to explore new theatrical possibilities playing with expressive objects, materials, and shapes. This creative breath stimulated the imagination and enriched the means of expression. Another approach to writing for theatre, another look at staging, and performing multiplied the dramaturgical forms.

To cope with the new demands, the directors changed the status of the puppeteer, who became an open stage performer mastering multiple skills such as acting, dance, and music, a variety of traditional techniques as well as the ability to invent new puppets, new techniques and technologies. *A unique professional training method has never really existed.* It has been the director who influenced the changes in puppetry training because he/she needed performers, designers, writers, and the technical support capable to help accomplish his/her vision. I will mention only a few of the directors who contributed to open the borders of puppet theatre and influenced several generations of artists: *Yves Joly*, French artist who was a great poet and innovator of puppet theatre, maybe the first artist who used hands and objects as characters, *Philippe Genty*, another French artist who started with puppet cabaret shows and later changed completely his poetic perspective combining a diversity of puppetry forms with dancers and brute materials; in his work the image became the main significant element; *Henk Boerwinkel*, with his miniature puppets and existential reveries, **Josef Krofta**

whose philosophical thinking and playfulness led him to explore in depth the relation between the puppet and the puppeteer giving it a significant role; he used space as a metaphor and he was an inspiring and provoking director; *Peter Schumann* who used the poetry of brute materials, reinvented thematic pageantry, and whose *Bread and Puppet Circus* gathered in one weekend over twenty thousand people; *Ilka Schönbein*, who is diving into the deepest waters of human existence and whose images are unique. And many other artists you certainly know, who nourished each other's work and marked our imaginary profoundly.

The status of the puppet

In the midst of this tumult the puppet also underwent many changes of status and appearance. It moved from the figurative representations to objects of utilitarian inspiration, to various materials chosen for their theatrical qualities, to hand held masks combined with the body, to mention only a few forms.

In 2008, at my first meeting with the students of the Contemporary Puppet Theater Training Program at the University of Quebec in Montreal (DESS), a student asked me “what are ‘puppets’ and ‘puppetry’ nowadays?”. An essential question, because it pointed to the multitude of contemporary forms, produced by an overflowing, almost obsessive inventiveness, that sometimes forgets the quality of the puppet as metaphor and it deprives it of its substance. I was surprised by the relevance of this question. Of course, a single definition is not possible. So, I answered her what puppets and Puppet Theater meant to me.

International meetings on training in the arts of puppetry

This question along with questions related to the diversity of the training structures – long term, short term, formal and alternative - inspired the idea of organizing together with the UNIMA Training commission, a series of international meetings on training

in the arts of puppetry, in order to address them with colleagues from different countries and cultural regions of the world.

No sooner said than done!

After discussing the definition of “puppet” and “puppetry” in 2015, the pedagogy and the links between traditional and contemporary puppet theater in 2017, the third international meeting, will try to examine different aspects of the current notion of directing:

- How to define the director? Because its functions differ and are not definitive.
- How to teach staging? What staging? For what kind of theater?
- What could be the appropriate pedagogy for a constantly evolving puppet theater? It should be known that today the puppet is born of a profusion of contemporary forms, produced with an overflowing inventiveness: how should we approach staging and how teach it?

Is “puppet theatre directing” a special category of theatre directing?

I don't think so!!! The theatre director is a conceptual artist: an architect and a poet. Our work is to build live performances, which express important ideas about life, about us, and our world. We are all seeking the secret and mysterious forces that rule theater. We are always drawn by two forces: inspiration and mastery. Our means of expression are not different from actors' theatre; if we use puppets, shadow puppetry, masks or animated objects, we have to give them a theatrical identity and dramaturgical function. We always need an important story to tell. *Adolphe Appia* laid the foundations of modern theatre practice in the first part of the 20th century. He stated that the director must work experimentally and as much as he can, he must play with his scenic materials (COLE; CHINOY, 1963).



Figure 4 - Irina Niculescu. Conference: *Defining the stage director and teaching theater directing*. 3rd PRO-VOCATION, 2019, UDESC. Photo: Jerusa Mary.

I studied directing at the Academy of Theatre Arts in Prague D.A.M.U - at the Department of Puppetry called today “Puppetry and Alternative Theatre”. Our curriculum was the curriculum of theatre directing. Puppetry came on top of the studies of dramaturgy, theatre aesthetics, history, fine arts, music, acting, improvisation, mask theatre and so on. It was an intensive four-year program, an in-depth program, which I consider still valuable. But that program was not covering all the contemporary needs and expectations of the young directors and designers. It was marked by rules and patterns. As students, some of us had other visions about working with the actors puppeteers and we had different ways to start a creative process. Nevertheless, it was a time to accumulate knowledge and learn about ourselves. I experimented extensively with my colleagues.

Going home I founded an experimental laboratory in Tandarica Theatre in Bucharest. This is where I invented myself as a director.

What does a theatre director need to know in order to use puppets as an important means of expression?

One of the most important jobs is to explore the theatrical essence of each type of puppet, both traditional and contemporary, its dynamics, the impact of the ratio between the puppet and the human being, and the dramatic potential in its relationship with the space. To discover the unique emotional effect of each kind of puppet on the public.

To unleash the puppet's dramatic strength and let it surprise the spectators.

Professional training

The diversity of artistic concepts determined the necessity of a variety of training formats: university programs with diplomas, independent theater schools, workshops, master classes, and training within theater companies. Each type of training points to a particular vision of theater, a certain conception of puppetry and Puppet Theater and corresponds to a certain philosophy of education.

What are the objectives of the different types of training programs? Whom do we want to teach? What are the challenges of the current programs, our successes and failures, our doubts, our questioning? How do we define puppetry and Puppet Theater today?

As artists, we may address these questions through the act of making theatre.

As pedagogues we have to formulate clear answers, which enable us to have a clear teaching philosophy and methodology. Of course, in theatre the answers cannot be definitive. Theatre, like the other arts, is in permanently evolving, in an intimate relation with the social, economic, and philosophical movements of the times.

Does the theatre director have tools he can transmit?

Definitely. But he has to have a clear vision of what he wants to transmit, to whom, how, for what goal, and to be open to adapt

to the students while he is still guiding them.

Early in my theatre journey I was invited to teach directing and performing in puppet theatre. First as an assistant professor at the Institute of Theatre and Cinematographic Arts (IATC, today The National University of Theatre and cinematographic Arts/U.N.A.T.C.), where I worked for four years. Later on I created syllabi and taught in many countries of Europe, USA, Canada, Argentina, Taiwan, India...in universities, theatre schools, alternative programs, and workshops. When I started teaching, I already had my own experience in different creative processes and I believed in the importance of this diversity.

I consider myself more of a “thinking educator” than a pedagogue. Why? My main goal is to work on the development of the concept of staging. It is less a matter of teaching a truth than of transmitting the means to affirm one. The important thing is to introduce students to the means that will enable them to express their subjectivity through theatre. Of course, I formulated my personal teaching philosophy and way of transmitting the director’s tools. But I base my teaching on the movement and not on the stability of values. I combine training and creation. In addition to the indispensable technical approach, I propose a perspective of self-realization, a way of being. But this process remains unacknowledged and the pupil continues to form himself by decoding it, which takes time. Without the support of authoritarian values, I invite the students to find and build their own way step by step.

Though I wouldn’t call it a method, because I am adapting it to each new group of students, their past experience and their search. Each group is a new challenge.

If Stanislavski was saying in the beginning of the 20th century: “there is no stage director who can produce a piece without first finding the directing idea” (COLE; CHINOY, 1963), this statement expresses only one small part of the broad diversity of creative processes of today. Theater must provide a philosophical reflection of the world, create a collective moment of entertainment,

reflection and celebration; it must gather people in a specific event, where there is magic.

What kind of stage director training are we planning for the future?

What training philosophy/philosophies while teaching stage directing for a theatre addressing the contemporary public for whom the “digital magic” is a common toy?

What is the director’s tool box in contemporary theatre?

Is the search for meaning one of the tools?

How do we transmit the tools?

What techniques to teach? What media?

Why puppets if puppets at all?

What are the challenges we face today while teaching directing?

All these and more are questions I would like and hope to debate together with the friends and colleagues at the conference during the six days in Florianopolis.



Figure 5 - *Faustina*. Original play, scenario and staging: Compagnie Kattas, Norway. Photo: Tormod Lindgren.

ADDENDUM: Brief incursion in the history of staging

What is a stage director? Historians say that his role appeared by necessity and changed along the time.

In **1550**, *Leone de Sommi (1525 – 1590)*, most remembered for having written the first ever treatise on the art of stage direction, which defines a precise methodology of play production, from the selection of a text through its performance. This work, entitled *Four Dialogues on Scenic Representation (Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche)*

- the actors must follow the director's indications
- actor's play: truthfulness
- costumes: historical fidelity (accuracy)
- lighting: first suggestions of "psychological" atmosphere

1750 - 1850 The director becomes an autocrat

- the priority of the show and acting before the text
- organized rehearsals
- organized groups of actors
- creative contribution made by the person in charge of the production

The actors and the writers take care of the staging.

Some famous names: David Garrick, Goethe (The Theater of the Weimar Court), John Philips Kemble, Charles Kean, Friedrich Schröder, Samuel Phelps, Konrad Elk

The Duke of Saxony Meiningen, 1826 – 1914, considered to have established the function and the profession of director established also the "director's theatre". The director must visualize the entire piece, give it a unity, express what he calls "the soul of the piece", profess discipline, organize the process of production.

Konstantin Stanislavski: 1863 – 1938

The movement of realistic naturalistic theater has transformed the director into a central figure in the creation and re-examination of theatrical art. It is the director who brought the idea of theater art. The visionaries of theatrical art and staging: *Appia, Craig, Meyerhold, Copeau, Piscator, Brecht...* If the "realists" have discovered

the director as a necessity, the “rebels” have proclaimed him the “Messiah” of a new theatrical synthesis.

Adolphe Appia, 1862 - 1928

“How can we live art instead of contemplating art?” (COLE; CHINOY, 1963)

Appia has transformed theater into a “supreme union of all the arts”. “The director must be like a conductor, his effect must be magnetic, like that of a conductor.” (COLE; CHINOY, 1963).

Gordon Craig, 1872 - 1966

Craig encouraged experimentation and research.

The art of theater is neither the performance of the actor nor a play, nor a scene nor a dance, it consists of all these elements. The theater of the future will be a theater of visions, not a theater of declarations and epigrams ... an art that says less and shows more than all the other arts; an art that is simple to understand for all, through their senses and feelings, an art that is born of movement, movement that is the very symbol of life (COLE; CHINOY, 1963).

Jacques Copeau (1879 – 1949)

The physical structure of the theater can elevate and enhance the intellectual structure of the play. Copeau had “the first modern theater” built as:

- a unique and permanent architectural space
- a bare stage as a place of play
- the space of the stage has to be in direct relation with the public: he removed the ramp of lights and the proscenium
- Theater can stay alive only if it remains in the studio in a permanent research process.

The theatre director has been named along the time:

Gardener of spirits, doctor of feelings/sensations, cobbler of situations, king of the theatre and servant of the stage, touchstone of the public, theatre alchemist, etc.

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