

University of Theatre and Film Arts

Doctoral School

The Spectator of Puppet Theatre

From Interactive Puppetry to Participatory Puppet Theatre

Theses of doctoral dissertation

Viktória Végvári

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Supervisor:

Dóra Gimesi DLA

In my work as a drama educator I have always been most interested in how the well-known types of activities of Hungarian drama education (preparatory and/or processing activities, discussions related to performances) can reinvent more as performative and artistic events, that not only help the spectator to understand but also to experience the dilemmas and situations met in these activities (and in the performances).

I am looking for the forms and techniques that offer an artistic way of participation and the opportunity for artistic reactions for the participators.

As a drama educator working in puppet theatre, I research those methods and procedures that (re)interpret and reposition the role of the spectator in theatrical performance. In my practical creative work, I find that these procedures are strongly determined by the language and the special reception of the puppet theatre performance, so the first step in developing a future methodology could be historical research, in which I looked for the tradition of these procedures.

The need to directly influence the spectator is an important element 20th century Hungarian puppetry, the period I am studying. This expectation is also rooted in the position of puppet theatre: it is considered as much a pedagogical institution as an artistic one. In the double clench of pedagogy and politics, puppet theatre loses its wild, transgressive, unauthoritative traits (Peter Schumann) - the interactive tricks of participatory dramaturgy serve to 'domesticate' the genre.

I believe that this historical context can have a profound influence on theatre pedagogy, and at the same time inspire it. In the context of creating a theatre education program, it is possible to explore the changes in the role of an artist or a performance, or how the self-definition of an institution or its relationship with its audience is reinterpreted.

The history of Hungarian puppetry in the 20th century was fundamentally determined and dominated by the operation and aesthetics of the State Puppet Theatre. The children's performances of the Puppet Theatre – as the institution grew to a national scope from the early 1960s – were the first encounter of several generations with theatre, and Dezső Szilágyi's puppet aesthetics have influenced the way puppeteers think about the genre to present day.

There was no alternative to this puppet theatre aesthetic in Hungary, and the puppet aesthetic system that can be reconstructed from the theatre's performances and Szilágyi's writings is not only singular, but its influence is still inescapable for contemporary puppetry.

Szilágyi's puppet aesthetics may not be particularly original or inventive, but its overview is nevertheless inevitable for my research, since his texts about puppet theatre's aesthetic focus on the spectator, and he defined its pedagogical specificity as one of the main functions of puppet theatre.

In my thesis, I reconstruct three performances of the State Puppet Theatre, which represent the gestures of Dezső Szilágyi's aesthetics to address the audience directly, and at the same time show the contradictory relationship to the tradition of Hungarian puppetry.

I have chosen performances for analysis that are relevant to the pedagogy of puppet theatre, and that shows a historical forerunner of phenomena that I study today, such as the so-called interactive children's performance (*Hansel and Gretel*, 1958), applied puppet theatre (*KRESZ*, 1974), or the problem of puppet performances for adults (*Act Without Words I.*, 1966).

In my analysis, I give particular importance to the notes in the scripts on interactivity; the meaning of the introductory text explaining the play or the 'guest book' of the performance as a source for documenting audience expectations and reactions.

Based on the performance reconstructions, it can also be concluded that the puppet genre is particularly suitable for conveying pedagogical - or in our case, socio-political - goals. Puppet theatre practitioners themselves are keen to point to the educational and pedagogical usefulness of the puppet in order to prove its legitimacy. The target audience for this pedagogical purpose is, evidently, children - the puppet as a medium of choice legitimizes pop cultural genres such as crime and war films, which are chosen for manipulation. The primary means of impact is also the possibility of emotional identification with the puppet characters (may it be a likable animal character or a superhero). In puppet theatre, the 'horrors' of Grimm's fairy tales, an air raid, or a traffic accident can be shown: in addition to the almost obligatory tension-relieving happy ending in children's theatre, adults are reassured by the knowledge that the puppet can never actually be hurt or killed.

However, all such arguments are invalid if the audience consists of adults - which is indispensable for the emancipation of the genre. Dezső Szilágyi's answer to this dilemma is to acknowledge that adult puppetry can only be an unconventional art form and is therefore suitable for experimenting with contemporary forms. For the adult spectator, the philosophical nature of the puppet can be primary, and the 'thoughtful puppet theatre' that Szilágyi refers to can reflect on the existential dilemmas of modern people.

The appearance of contemporary Western authors is, however, an ideologically delicate field - to guide the audience's thoughts in the right direction (or rather to ward off possible political attacks), a theatrical solution is offered that can also be considered traditional and addresses the audience directly: the presenter's explanatory texts.

The studied methods, that address the audience directly, are therefore different in their functions and techniques, but they have one thing in common, and that is the need for control. Whether they serve theatrical effects, pedagogy, or double-speak, they do not presuppose or allow any real opening up to the audience, the intervention in the world of performance, or the gesture of ceding creative power to the spectator is unthinkable.

The second section of my thesis is a kind of response to my historical investigations, in which I present and document a series of participatory games that we have created, in partial connection with the performances of the Budapest Puppet Theatre, as a theatre pedagogical program entitled *Cruel Games*.

The *Cruel Games* is a joint creation with designer-director Károly Hoffer. It is a participatory game series in which we invite adult spectators to create and think together with the tools of puppet theatre. Each piece is strongly inspired by the history of the State Puppet Theatre and is connected to its significant creators, building bridges to the forgotten or the wished-to-be-forgotten past. The *Us and Them*, the *Forbidden Games*, and the *Beckett-game* are each an attempt to make our audiences creative participants through the tools of puppet theatre.