



*Ulla Dengsøe among friends! The picture is from May 2013, when the festival director visited cultural center Maison Metallos during the festival BIAM in Paris. The many puppets were made by various French puppet artists. November 7 - 10 will be a puppet invasion in Silkeborg at Festival of Wonder 2013.
Photo: Festival of Wonder*

The very alive club of dead things.....

30-10-2013

Puppet theatre takes many names, shapes and forms, and though the performances do nothing to hide the fact that all is illusion, the fiction often helps to strengthen emotions and create associations beyond the realm of a human actor.

Animation theatre is growing and now touches adult audiences with its special magic and poetry. This can be seen during Denmark's largest and most international puppetry festival in November.

By: Carsten Jensen

Puppet theatre, animation theatre, object theatre, figure theatre, etc. this form of theatre has many names and includes any performance in which objects are used as a means of artistic communication - that qualifies as animation theatre.

It has been written that there is not a great tradition for adult puppetry in Danish theatre, though children's and youth theatre has been innovative in the area, but there has been a change during recent years. Small and large Danish theatres are examining all possibilities within animation theatre.

Bådteatret, led by Rolf Heim has produced adult shows, such as 'The Four Riders' and 'Grundtvig', (both in 2009), 'King Lear' (2010), 'MOJN' (2011) and 'The Odyssey'

FAKTA

- Festival of Wonder, also called Silkeborg Puppetry Festival, takes place November 7-10, 2013. Closed school performances will be shown before and after the festival.
- The festival has 86 performances for children and for adults from Portugal, France, Belgium, Holland, England, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Canada, Taiwan and Israel, as well as Denmark. Approximately 20 shows are for adults and young people. 15 are for children, all of which have been reviewed on this site.
- There is a Master Class, 5 puppet workshops for children, 5 backstage talks with participating theatres and two exhibits, one of which opened on Sep. 21 at KunstCentret Silkeborg Bad: Theatre in Movement - People and Puppets on Stage, an interactive set design exhibit for the senses.
- The festival is supported economically by Silkeborg County, Danish council of Scenic arts, as well as many funds, foreign embassies and institutions.
- See the program, ticket information, etc. at www.dukketeaterfestival.dk / www.festivalofwonder.dk

(2013). Heim also used puppets as the live actors' subconscious in the Leonard Cohen theatre concert at Århus Teater, a venue which has used imaginative puppets in several productions, for example 'The Golden compass' (2008), in which the puppets were made by Gertrud Exner and Katrine Karlsen, who also use objects in their own theatres, Teater Blik for small children and youth theatre Graense-Loes. It is in children's and youth theatre that many wonderful and successful animation shows have been produced. Especially Teater Reflektion, which also does shows for adults and Meridiano Teatret, which is almost synonymous with high quality puppet performing, but also Carte Blanche, Gruppe 38, De Røde Heste and many other children's theatres actively use puppetry, like Svanen, Danish-Czech Puppet Theatre, one of the few professional children's theatres to use the word puppet theatre in its name, and which produces marionette shows with carved wooden puppets.

The silent messenger of imagination

It is hard to talk about a renaissance of something which has not been around before, but animation theatre has gone from being in a niche to being a well-used form of theatre, also for adults, and in some instances the art form has helped to liven up stagnating theatre for adults in which 'the empty and the pointless have good working conditions', as Politiken's theater editor Monna Dithmer wrote in an article in Weekendavisen, while praising the bubbling and experimental animation theatre, with the title of 'The silent messenger og imagination', in which dead materials are given life and relevance, associations and fantasies.

Interest has increased here because of the more active use of adult oriented animation theatre from other countries, helped by Copenhagen Puppet Festival and Bornholm's Puppet Festival - but the largest, oldest and most influential festival is without a doubt in Silkeborg, where Festival of Wonder is held - and where the biennial festival takes place November 7-10, 2013 and where the flag of quality flies high.

Where are the theatre critics?

The artistic director of the festival, Ulla Dengsøe, is convinced that Festival of Wonder has played a big part in the evolution and interest for producing theatre using puppets /objects for both children and adults. She includes good Danish children's theatre puppet productions in the festival and is happy when meeting the many international theatre agents and festival organizers come to Silkeborg's festival every other year creates opportunities for performances in other countries. There are not many opportunities to show off Danish productions for youth and adults because not many are produced.

'I would like to see more new productions for adults, as well as for children, on the large scenes in Denmark. It is such an exciting medium when presented with a high level of art and quality. but it takes a long time to learn to manipulate puppets credibly, and I think that performers need to have a talent for that, just like a good musician, and I also feel that it works best when the puppeteer has created his/her own puppets', says Ulla Dengsøe, who has noticed a growing interest in animation theatre.

'There is always a lot of interest to participate in Festival of Wonder, and the Danish theatres are very happy to get an invitation. So are the exhibitors and possible Danish puppet makers. We would also appreciate more interest from Danish theatre critics, especially for our international guest performances, which could be an inspiration to Danish professionals and to a large Danish audience.

We invite the critics from the larger Danish newspapers to our opening and to the festival but it seems that although they might be interested, it must be easier for them to hop on a bicycle and ride around the corner in Copenhagen than to travel to the provinces', says Ulla Dengsøe about a problem which is often discussed in the theatre world.

'It is not just a problem for the provinces. The mutual inspiration should be possible', says Ulla, who misses the presence of the national papers, but realizes that the festival is often mentioned in international theatre articles.

Adult performances sell out first

There are possibilities for new experiences at Festival of Wonder, which presents 86 performances from Portugal, France, Belgium, Holland, England, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Canada, Taiwan and Israel - as well as Denmark. Of these there are ca. 20 for adults and young people. There is also a Master Class, five puppetry workshops for children, five Backstage Talks with the participation of theatres and two exhibits. Of course there is a lot of theatre shop talk in all sorts of languages.

Ulla Dengsøe tells that participants of the Master Class are both Danish and international puppet artists, just as groups of Danish visual artist have begun to visit the festival year after year.

The international productions draw the biggest crowds and their tickets are sold out first. This is because it would otherwise be impossible to see these shows in Denmark.

The international performances are all viewed and chosen by the festival's artistic director, who travels around the world during the two years between festivals in Silkeborg.

'The profile of our festival is to show international high quality guest performances, never before seen in Denmark. That is why we keep our eyes on the international tendencies developing within this type of theatre', says Ulla Dengsøe, who has such a great knowledge of puppetry and has such a large network, it is not difficult to locate the most sensational shows.

An international position

'I receive invitations to international festivals and then decide if there are any shows which might be of interest to Festival of Wonder. On the other hand we never invite someone because of a DVD or other link to films or videos. The films can be an inspiration but I have to see all of the productions I invite.

It can be very costly to invite an expensive show after seeing a film or listening to someone else's opinion, if the production does not meet standards or fails with the audience. It is much cheaper to travel and to see the shows in person.

At the same time, I use my network, which is necessary in working internationally,' says Ulla Dengsøe, who has just recently, after many requests, decided to join the committee of international festival directors of UNIMA, the international puppetry organization.

I made the decision partly because I already have good cooperation with the present committee, and I believe that we can inspire each other professionally in our work with international festivals. On a personal level, I love the outlook, inspiration and teamwork in international work.

I have only participated in two meetings so I do not have a lot of experience, but. I can mention that we are planning an international conference for artistic directors of festivals, where we will invite experts to speak.'

No thanks to awards juries

On the other hand Ulla is emphatic in her 'no' to sit in the many juries at international festivals, in which many awards are handed out - for best show, best actor, audience favorite, etc.

'My opinion is that the audience always hands out the best award. Besides, we do not want the feeling of insecurity and possibly competition caused by awards. We want Festival of Wonder to be a meeting place where everybody gathers as equals, for example in our cafes, to discuss performances, talk shop, network, etc. We want a free and open atmosphere.'

It may be cultural, but awards for various artistic presentations are not given at Danish festivals. 'This phenomena exists in the former Eastern Europe and other places. I have often experienced it and discussed it, and found that some of the festivals in which I was asked to sit on a jury decided later to do away with awards. Artistic directors of the most respected festivals choose productions because of their quality, not because they have won awards here and there', says Ulla Dengsøe.

A puppetry town

The festival in Silkeborg has probably reached the limit of what it can handle concerning economy vs. quality and good venues. Ulla Dengsøe always looks forward to filling the town with theatre, theatre people and audiences.

'Our goal is not to be bigger and bigger, but to be a festival with the highest level of quality, always attempting to reach new limits within the art form. In 2013 all sorts of venues are in use in the Silkeborg area. During the festival we are a puppetry town, a huge logistical job, but that is what we want, and I am so happy when colleagues and international theatres tell me, "I met someone on the street whom I have wanted to talk to or haven't seen in a long time",' says the festival's leader.

The children of the town are also considered. Much of the festival is closed between November 4-11 performances are held for the schools in Silkeborg County. By now the children have become used to the festival's international atmosphere.

'All of the Silkeborg schools present puppet theatre, mostly in Danish, but once the children learn English we can present those shows. I appreciate international productions without language but the show must also be very good. We do not choose shows with a language the children do not understand. If possible, in a few cases, we might use simultaneous translation. Many theatres suggest a written translation but I do not think that is a good idea, since puppetry is a visual art form. The children would miss too many images and lose the

thread of the story. That goes as well for the international children's productions we show for the general public,' says Ulla Dengsøe.

Besides the shows there are puppetry workshops and films for children and young people, and new this year, an interactive exhibit at KunstCentret Silkeborg Bad with Theatre Forman Brothers from Czech Republic. This is an exhibit Ulla Dengsøe is so pleased with, and so are the thousands of guests who have visited since the opening on September 21, 2013, and who leave the exhibit wearing big smiles.

The huge interest for the exhibit has helped to raise the audience numbers for the festival and Ulla Dengsøe assumes that the number of guests will be 14,000 or more when Festival of Wonder 2013 is over.

dk13 teateravisen foromtale engelsk.doc