



Sutradhar

A Unima Puppeteers Trust (India) Publication

A Note from the Editor	02
Some Observations on Film and Puppetry	03
An Unusual Film Festival : Puppet O Scope	15
Dying Art, Living Artist	28
A Documentary Filmmaker's Perspective	33

1

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



There is a curious connection between film and puppetry. This edition of Sutradhar is dedicated to exploring this connection between two most powerful media - The Puppet and Film.

In New Delhi (India) this February, there was an unusual Film Festival. A festival of films on/by/of puppetry.

How unusual I thought...till I found out how many of them were floating about the planet!!! It set me thinking and being both a film director, tv producer and puppeteer I thought it could, should be explored. There are many variations that come to mind. The Puppet acting in a film. A performance- filmed. A performance made for film. A film about Puppets and Puppetry. A documentation on video or film. A film which uses puppets and puppetry etc. And there may be many more variations that I have missed out. Bradford Clark, in his article, has given a comprehensive overview, historical and otherwise.

Certainly there is an emerging genre- the Puppet Film- a genre encouraged by the Jim Henson Foundation. The creative are fascinating short films made by young emerging puppeteers.

There are of course an enormous number of films/performances filmed and distributed by USSR and Japan in the late 1970-90's in India. Exquisitely made puppets, beautiful sets, sensitively crafted films kept the magic of puppetry alive in cities where there were no Puppet Theatres (like New Delhi in the 70's).

Post Pandemic, the Sutradhar has not yet regained its rhythm. The last issue was published in January/February (delayed by a few months), and this issue is delayed too!!)

Ranjana Pandey

Editor

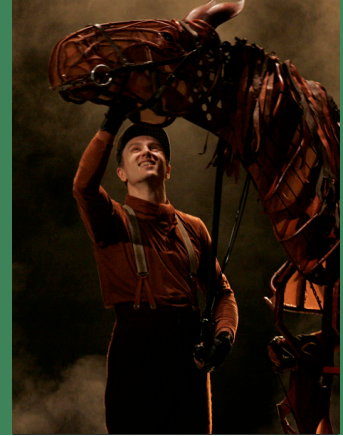
2

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON FILM AND PUPPETRY

By Bradford Clark

Professor, Theatre and Film

Bowling Green State University, Ohio USA



These are just a few observations about the presence of puppetry in film (including video for television and streaming). The subject is vast, and my perspectives are primarily limited to films from the United States, although the miracle of the internet has made media from other parts of the world much more accessible than in the past. The term “puppet film,” of course, encompasses many different kinds of genres, and I will attempt to look at each of them individually.

In The Beginning: Parallels Between Shadow Puppetry And The Origins Of Film

As puppetry predated film by millennia, it was natural that puppetry would have a presence in the emerging medium. Scholar C. W. Ceram, in his book *Archaeology of the Cinema* (1965), sees affinities (although not direct technical relationships) between the visual language of shadow plays and that of early film. An example might include how a movement flows across a screen. If a character enters from the right side of the screen (from the audience’s view) and exits on the left, they can again enter on the right (possibly with a new background). It is understood that that we are viewing a continuous action (especially useful in chase scenes, or when an arrow has been launched). And as characters and set pieces are pulled away from the screen and disappear, we understand that we are entering a scene transition, thus foreshadowing the language of cinematic editing. None of these could have been taken for granted in the early years of film; the language was still being created, and there was little in the live (human) theatre that paralleled it, though we can also look at the magic lantern and optical animation devices for precedents. And of course, both shadow theatre (featuring both puppets and humans) and film endeavor to present sequential dramatic actions on two-dimensional screens.

Film faces real challenges when representing live performances. For some of us, the three-dimensional, tactile reality of a live puppet performance simply cannot be matched by a filmed representation of a stage performance (or even stop-motion animated puppetry, which I will discuss below). In contrast, a filmed live stadium concert, featuring close-ups of the performers, may actually provide a more intimate experience than might be obtained when sitting far away from the stage and watching on a projection screen (although the shared audience energy needs to be considered). Stage puppetry tends to be presented in more intimate venues to begin with, and much of the illusion comes from NOT being so close that one notices if mouths are not moving, facial features are not changing, and control rods and strings are obviously present.

For puppetry artists who wish their work to be seen by a wider audience (both for personal satisfaction and the pragmatic need for professional exposure), there is no question that film has its attractions. Years of work might go into a production that is seen by a small number of audience members (not at all unusual during the pandemic, even once things began to open up again). The video of the performance may potentially be seen by many more. Stage performers and companies, of course, need to factor in whether or not increased media visibility will drive live-performance ticket sales, or actually suppress them (a considerable concern in an age where phones dominate media distribution and users may not value live events to the same degree as past generations).

Filmed Puppet Stage Performances

A puppet film may be as simple as a documentation of a staged performance, utilizing a fixed camera and little to no editing

or transitions. In the silent era, this included short films such as the Lumiere Brothers' *The Merry Skeleton* (France, 1898), featuring a classic "break-apart" skeleton act, and *Professor Henry Bailey's Punch & Judy Show* (UK, 1901). On the other end of the spectrum, Japan's National Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) has regularly filmed performances of the National Puppet Theatre of Japan (the Bunraku), releasing many on DVDs. Full plays (which can run for many hours) are rarely presented during a single season at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka, and so these sets may contain multiple scenes filmed over a period of decades. As a result, one may watch famous performers become younger and older, then younger again as scene follows scene. Various video media and now streaming have allowed many full performances from China, Taiwan, and Indonesia to become available as well.

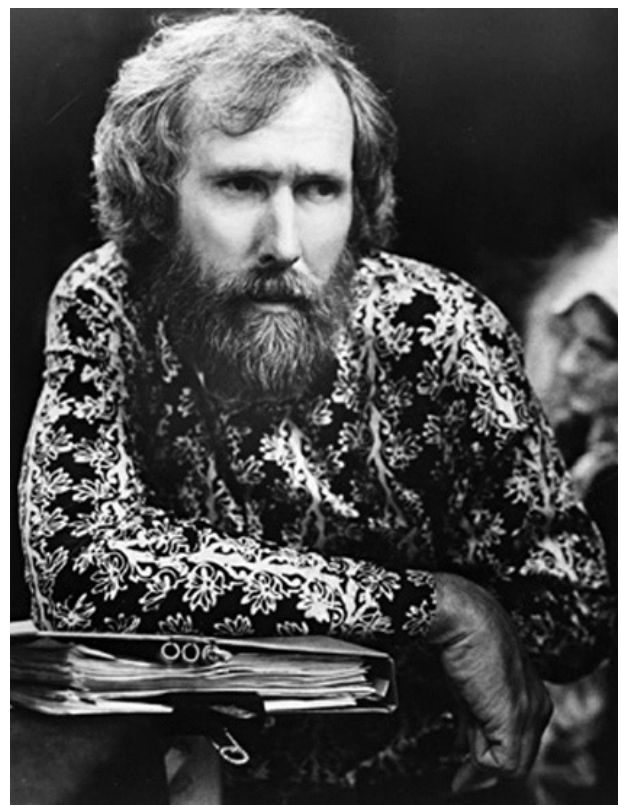
The most effectively filmed version of a stage performance (though perhaps less strictly accurate as documentation) adds the interpretive vocabulary of film language: close-ups, long shots, edits, fade-ins, fade-outs, moving camera shots. It may even take a traditional play and stage it within a real-world environment, as Midori Kurisaki did by filming *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (Japan, 1981) outdoors within the environs of Kyoto. Several of Sergei Obraztsov's stage productions were filmed and broadcast on Soviet television, providing a record of his classic shows such as *The Unusual Concert* (USSR, 1972).

In the United States, Heather Henson has been a producer and champion of independent creator-driven live-action puppet films, which often use the full film language vocabulary. Her *Handmade Puppet Dreams* touring series has been seen in many venues, and was streamed online when

the world went into the 2020 pandemic-fueled lockdown. An extraordinary amount of puppetry content (professional and amateur, traditional and contemporary) went online during the pandemic. Although a development of tragic circumstance around the world, the visibility of online puppetry did attest to the importance of film in its distribution.

Cinematic Puppetry

Television brought filmed puppetry into the home - first essentially as broadcast stage performances, but then as puppetry conceived exclusively for the television camera. Soft puppets with camera-friendly textures and colors became signature features of Jim Henson's work. These were joined by moving mouths and eyes that focused on the camera lens (and therefore the viewer at home), not off into the middle



Jim Henson 1986



distance. Jim Henson and his collaborators' research and development of video and film techniques allowed them to build upon previous efforts, leading to breakthroughs in both animatronic (robotic) technology and animated characters created through now-common Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI).

Strings (Denmark et al, 2004), Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* (USA, 1982), and *The Legend of the Sacred Stone* (Taiwan, 2000) are specifically conceived of as cinema, using film language and special-effect technologies in ways that would not be effective on stage and in front of a live audience. None of these live-action (not animated) films have human characters; the film worlds are completely realized as puppet spaces. Jim Henson, of course, was also a master of having his puppets perform alongside of human actors in naturalistic environments. This approach can be seen in films such as *The Muppet Movie* (USA, 1979) and his later fantasies such as *Labyrinth* (USA, 1986) and *The Storyteller* (USA, 1986).

But puppets and performers both on-and-off camera, working in tandem, have provided some of the most memorable characters in otherwise live (human) action films. Rick Baker's extraterrestrial creatures in the *Men in Black* (USA, 1997) and its sequels incorporated full-body costumes with puppeteered elements, as well as conventionally manipulated figures. Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (USA, 1986) featured Hoggle, a character portrayed by an actor in costume. Hoggle wore an animatronic head with radio controlled facial features and speaking ability, constituting a collaboration between body performer and puppet performer.

While it's easy to think of the animatronic figures of Stan Winston and the Jim Henson Creature Shop as robotic creatures outside of the world of puppetry, that would be a mistake. For the most part, these are figures controlled live on set by puppet performers through direct mechanical systems (cable, rod, string) or remotely controlled servo motors. But other systems may augment their performances with other kinds of control. Early examples included the pre-recorded servo motor-controlled lip synchronization system of Gerry Anderson (the 1960s *Thunderbirds* series and films) and the Henson Performance Control System introduced by the Jim Henson Company in 1989 (which was followed by later Henson systems). But even a set of pre-recorded actions needs a human actor or programmer who understands the nuances of performance.

While CGI has largely taken over the roles of mechanical puppets and stop-motion animation in fantasy films, there has recently been a renaissance of live puppetry on film. A recent book by scholar Collette Searls, *A Galaxy of Things: The Power of Puppets and Masks in Star Wars and Beyond*, examines the use of puppetry within the *Star Wars* films, which made extensive use of puppetry in the original trilogy. The most recent *Star Wars* films and streaming series have again chosen to perform many of their creatures live, with Grogu (aka "Baby Yoda") in *The Mandalorian* streaming series (2019) being the best-known puppet character. Digital imagery and green-screen techniques now allow puppet performers to work in full view of the camera and to then be erased from the final film, meaning puppets can be controlled in a much more direct manner than would have been possible in the pre-CGI era.

Puppetry Themes In Films

Lotte Reiniger's *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (Germany, 1926), while almost entirely animated frame-by-frame (some lighting effects appear to be done live "in camera" while the puppet on the screen stays still), draws from shadow puppet techniques and iconography to create an amazingly sophisticated and imaginative feature film - one that predated Disney's 1937 *Snow White* by about 11 years!



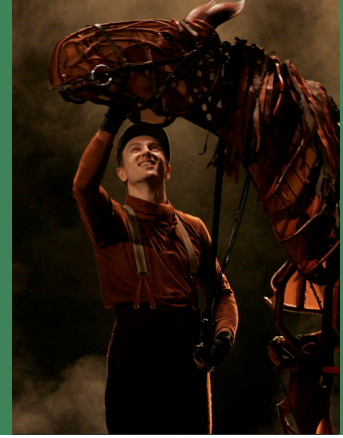
Lotte Reiniger 1939

Kenji Mizoguchi's *Osaka Elegy* (Japan, 1936), *Kathputli* (India, 1957), the Chinese historical film *To Live* (PRC, 1994), and the USA's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) use puppetry and the lives of puppet performers as thematic material (often paralleling the plot of the film with the events of a performed puppetry play). While such films often only feature short performance clips, those can actually be of extraordinary importance, since master performers are often invited to perform those sequences. Such segments can be the only available records of their performances.

Double Suicide (1969) and *Dolls* (2002) include Bunraku elements, but are primarily live actor adaptations of two of Chikamatsu's classic puppet plays. Jan Svankmajer's characteristically surreal *Faust* (1994) combines elements of live Czech traditional puppetry (for which the Faust legend is a core text), puppet animation, and live actor footage set in contemporary Prague. Although noted primarily as an animation director, live puppetry appears in Svankmajer's 1966 *Rakvičkárna* (released in the USA as *Punch and Judy*) and he performed in Emil Radok's 1958 film *Johanes Doktor Faust*, which features cinematic elements that would later be similar to those of Svankmajer's work as director.

Puppetry Documentaries

Documentaries have been invaluable in the preservation of puppetry performances. In the United States, Edward S. Curtis' 1914 "documentary" *In the Land of the War Canoes* (as it is now known) offers a record of articulated mask performances by the Kwakwaka'wakw Native-American people; I believe it has been used as a resource for preservation of performance traditions within the contemporary community. While not a documentary in the contemporary sense, the film is considered



to be an important record of masked ceremonies. (The film is a fictionalized story that represents practices that by 1914 were either largely suppressed or otherwise completely misrepresented as historically accurate.)

Jim Henson presents The World of Puppetry (USA, 1985) featured performance footage and conversations with six important puppet performers. These are still some of the best English-language profiles of important figures such as Albrecht Roser, Richard Bradshaw, and Philippe Genty. Jim Henson's genuine curiosity and respect for his subjects makes this a very special documentary series, and in the pre-YouTube era, an important introduction to the work of these artists. Henson remains the United States' best-known puppet performer even decades after his passing, and he himself has been the subject of several documentaries.



Jan Svankmajer

Professional puppetry in the United States is primarily seen as an aspect of popular culture, though there is occasional recognition of it as an expressive art form for individual artists as well. While in many countries traditional puppetry is often seen as an important component of traditional religion or local culture, that is not true in the United States. We lack, therefore, the amount of scholarly attention to American puppetry that one finds in places such as Indonesia, India, China, and Japan. (Unfortunately, scholarly attention doesn't easily translate to financial support, and that is an entirely different issue).

While we may appreciate the beauty of an artistically pleasing performance, we often do not consider how a performance tradition may serve an entire community. It's been my observation that an amateur performance group, if composed of a serious community of members intent on giving the best possible experience to their audience, is actually much more likely to create a positive sense of local community than a more widely recognized performance that takes place far, far away. Few Americans have the opportunity to see a Broadway musical in New York, and even touring productions, although more accessible, are expensive to see. But almost everyone has seen a school production of a famous play, or even performed in it. And that experience can change lives.

Scholars have not always been willing to give the "subjects" of their documentation a voice. While I certainly believe in the importance of objective (though often flawed) scholarship, I also believe communities should be given the opportunity to offer their own stories as they see them.

For this reason, one of my favorite puppetry documentaries (full disclosure - I say so on the DVD cover!) is Tony De Nonno's *It's all One Family: Knock on Wood* (USA, 1982), which profiles Mike Manteo of the Manteo Marionettes, a multi-generational family of Sicilian puppeteers who emigrated to the USA by way of Argentina. The film features performance clips and workshop activities, but I especially appreciate Mike Manteo's storytelling and discussion of how puppetry functioned within the Italian immigrant community.

Other films have taken this culturally contextualized approach as well, documenting personal observations by community members and artists. These include films from India such as *Borrowed Fire: The Shadow Puppets of Kerala* (India, c2000), *In the Shadow of Time: Ravana Chhaya* (India, 2017), and *The Yakshagana Puppets* (India, 2014). Once again, internet distribution (when authorized!) has provided a great service as filmmakers and national film archives recognize the importance of preserving what are often endangered traditions in some form, then make that available to audiences around the world. India's Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT) is to be commended for providing international YouTube viewers with many hours of puppetry documentaries and performances. The significance of such online resources has rarely been acknowledged (although Matthew Cohen has written about the importance of video access to Indonesian wayang kulit performances). Academia privileges the written word, and print publication is dependent upon the tastes of editors, yet directors provide primary resources (as do serious online writers) when they film performances and interview artists. A cinematic record of a unique performance or

a local puppetry tradition that has never been documented in print (at least not in English) can thus become accessible to the world community.

While I have primarily discussed films that focus upon performances and their historical context, documentaries also provide an important means to document manipulation techniques of masters (as can be seen in the excellent Taiwanese lecture/ demonstration series by Chen Hsi-Huang) or puppet construction methods (such as Adam Kreutinger's many puppet-making videos that show the process of creating soft-sculpture figures). Production values vary between sophisticated, well-lit cinematography to locked-off cell-phone footage, but it all serves as documentation, and therefore of great importance to the field.

Special Effects Puppetry

Special effects puppetry has been used throughout the history of film, including the work of George Méliès and his flying bats in *The Haunted Castle* (France, 1896) and the dragon Fáfnir in Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* (Germany, 1924), his adaptation of Wagner's opera. The first cinematic representation of *Frankenstein* (USA, 1910) features a brief puppet sequence as the Creature comes to life. Even the silent *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (USA, 1925) features tiny cheering articulated spectators during the chariot race scene!

Film has a huge advantage over the stage in this particular realm. An action sequence lasting only a few seconds on the screen may in fact be put together from multiple shots, each utilizing a completely different technique to create the impression of a single event. The 1993 film *Jurassic Park* (USA, 1993), largely publicized for its groundbreaking use of computer animation



Claire McDowell in *Ben-Hur* (1925)

(CGI), actually only featured brief moments of digital imagery, with much of that concentrated at the end of the film. Most shots of the actual dinosaurs were created in collaboration with the Stan Winston Studios, who also provided a puppet for the robotic version of *The Terminator* (1984). Winston utilized traditional puppet techniques and giant robotic figures.

Quickly edited insert shots allow only parts of a character to be seen at a time, creating the impression of a full characterization.

Even when traditional puppetry is represented, as in the string puppetry of *Being John Malkovich* (USA, 1999), figures may be restrung or

otherwise altered between shots so as to allow them to do multiple actions that no one puppet could do in a single take. In certain shots, an actor in a suit and mask may even play the puppet character, as in Henson's *The Dark Crystal* (USA, 1982) and some of the Edgar Bergen / Charlie McCarthy ventriloquism films of the 1930s.

Stunts featuring animals, especially horses, may in fact be performed by partial life-sized puppets shown in closeup. This can be seen in the film version of *War Horse* (USA, 2011), which was based upon the Morpurgo novel. The naturalistic film also borrowed elements from the stage adaptation - which featured stylized, *larger* than life-sized horses produced by South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company.

Interestingly enough, puppeteers sometimes perform on set during filming to provide reference footage, but are then digitally removed along with their puppet. This was the case with performer Phillip Huber on *Oz the Great and Powerful* (2013). Puppets provide focus and interaction for actors during filming, as well as accurate lighting reference footage for the animators, who then create the digital puppet to be seen in the finished film. Simple cut-outs or costume body-extensions may be used on-set to establish eye-lines or to meet the needs of digital motion-capture technologies. (The raw on-set footage of such sequences can be wonderfully entertaining!).

Stop Motion Animation

Stop-motion animation utilizes puppet figures in a way that is again specific to film, but momentary live action insert shots may augment the capabilities of the stop motion figure. While the hero of the original *King Kong* (1933) spent most of his screen time in the form of a stop-

motion animated puppet, insert shots included a giant articulated face and a mechanical arm. *The New Gulliver* (USSR, 1935) occasionally uses mechanical figures to simplify the process of combining a live action actor and animated characters. The legendary Czech animation director Jiri Trnka started with live puppet theatre, and his films (like others in Central and Eastern Europe) have a stylized aspect that can now be seen in more recent films. While CGI has certainly largely replaced the use of stop-motion special effects animation in film, studios such as Laika (*Kubo and the Two Strings*, 2016) and directors such as Tim Burton (*The Nightmare*

Before Christmas, 1993), Wes Anderson (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*, 2009), and Guillermo De Toro (*Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio*, 2022) have kept puppet animation in the public eye.

In many ways, I believe that contemporary CGI now satisfies many of the appetites to led to the popularity of puppet animation in earlier times. stop-motion puppetry, when filmed well, feels sculptural and tactile, and allows us to appreciate the beauty of detailed craftsmanship. (The 3D version of puppet-animated version of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was especially satisfying in this regard). High-end CGI animation



An original urRu used in the Jim Henson film, The Dark Crystal. Jim Henson exhibition at the Museum of American History. September 2006.



War Horse, Sydney 2013

can almost seem the same; the technology has come to the point where viewers are very aware of the textures of surfaces - even the weave of a woolen sweater on an animated character. In a way, stop-motion puppetry has never been more popular, but in a strictly digital realm. (In response to the average viewer's inability to tell the difference, Laika often includes behind-the-scenes footage at the end of their films in order to prove that actual sculpted stop-motion puppets were used in production).

Puppetry And The Stage - A Language Shared

Contemporary puppet performances often combine elements of both film and live performance, as do other forms of live performance. Film may extend the stage space through the projection of moving backgrounds or atmospheric effects. Puppetry segments may be pre-taped and be used as transitions or even to interact with characters performed live. The Netherlands group Hotel Modern, in their stage performance of *Kamp* (c2005), depicts a day in the life of a Nazi concentration camp by means of tiny matchstick puppets inhabiting a model of Auschwitz. The tiny figures are far too small to be seen by a normal audience, so a vital part

of the performance is the live projected video-feed that follows them throughout the day. The conceptualization of the piece, while performed live, is utterly cinematic. Shadowlight Puppet Company, under the direction of Larry Reed (who has collaborated with Balinese *dalang* I Wayan Wija), has long combined traditional and cutting-edge *wayang listrik* shadow techniques with a cinematic sensibility. Hamid Rahmanian's *Feathers of Fire: A Persian Epic* (2019) is another

example of the fusion of theatre and film in a live performance.

Some puppet films have been subsequently adapted to the stage, such as Kichihiko Kawamoto's 1982-1984 television serialization of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. And stage productions use puppet technology to bring films to live theatre. These include adaptations of the animated *My Neighbor Totoro* (Japan, 1988) and



King Kong Fay Wray 1933



Montreal Comiccon 2016, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

Spirited Away (Japan, 2001), as well as *The Life of Pi* (USA, 2012), which uses a puppet tiger in place of the film's CGI animal. World-wide, of course, the best-known (and most successful) adaptation



Julie Taymor at Opening Ceremony of the Tokyo International Film Festival, 2022

is Julie Taymor's 1997 Broadway version of Disney's animated film *The Lion King* (USA, 1994).

A 2012 project in Malaysia, in an effort to attract younger audiences, has combined the efforts of founders Tin Toy Chuo (designer) and Teh Take Huat as well as *wayang kulit malaysia* shadow puppet dalang Muhammad Dain to produce a wonderfully inventive adaptation of the original *Star Wars* film. *Peperangan Bintang* is performed with gamelan accompaniment, and their Fusion Wayang Kulit collective has gone on to create individual puppets of other international cultural icons. In the United States, Jim Henson's musical version of *Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas* (1977) has played off-Broadway. And Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts, with which I have been associated, has produced a close adaptation of the perennial television classic *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* (USA, 1964) and revives it during the holiday season. In each of these cases, and many others besides, puppet artists may very well be looking back to the origins of cinematic language and asking film to return the favor.



Hermey the elf and Rudolph

Further Reading

Bacon, Matt. *No Strings Attached: The Inside Story of Jim Henson's Creature Shop*. Macmillan, 1997.

Ceram, C.W. *Archaeology of the Cinema*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965.

Duncan, Jody. *The Winston Effect: The Art and History of Stan Winston Studio*. Titan Books, 2008.

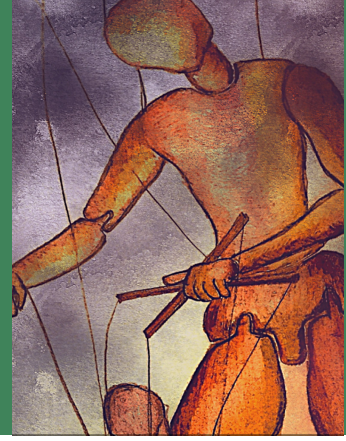
Harryhausen, Ray. *A Century of Stop Motion Animation*. Watson - Guphill, 2008.

Searls, Colette. *A Galaxy of Things: The Power of Puppets and Masks in Star Wars and Beyond*. Routledge, 2023.

Prof. Clark has designed over fifty scenic designs for professional and academic theatre productions (drama, dance, opera, puppetry) and costumes for several productions, as well. Companies include the Center for Puppetry Arts (Atlanta, GA), Stage One (Louisville, KY), Shakespeare Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz, CA), Tandy Beal and Company (Santa Cruz, CA), Cherry Creek Theatre (Mankato, MN), and the Russian Drama Theatre (Chuboksary, Republic of Chuvashia, Russia).

AN UNUSUAL FILM FESTIVAL: PUPPET O SCOPE

A Conversation with Maneesh Pachiaru
& Anurupa Roy



Gleaned from conversations with Anurupa Roy and Maneesh Pachiaru, the two main players in *Katkatha Arts Film Festival*.

Puppet O Scope

11 Participating Countries

55 Entries

21 Final Selections

6 Curators

2 Juries - Student Jury and Expert Jury

8 Discussions at Festival

4 Workshops

8 Filmmakers present

Exhibition participants: 3 traditional, 3 veteran & *Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust*

75 Global and National Supporters

Supported by the *India International Center* and through crowdfunding

For the first time in India a standalone platform for “puppet films” was created. An entire Film Festival was planned around this concept. This was *Puppet O Scope*, a film festival held in New Delhi in the *India International Centre*. It was organised and conceptualised by *Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust*.

“In a nutshell, the objective of this interesting venture was to introduce to “ordinary people”, the concept of puppet films for the first time.”

Anurupa:

I think the timing was very critical because of COVID during which time everybody had moved to the digital space in a very big way. And we know that a lot of things were being created digitally. So this was a good moment to explore what had happened to puppetry digitally and what was the possibility for puppetry within this. Puppetry is essentially a live medium, a folk medium, where an audience needs to be present to give energy back to the puppeteer.

What happens to puppet theater when it becomes a film or digital medium? Will it become an animation? Does it not?

These were some of the questions we were asking as puppeteers.

We were also looking at the question of talking about critical issues in Indian puppetry. So the **documentary selection**, for instance, was all about the state of puppet theater, especially traditional puppet theater. What are the struggles? The question was, **how do documentaries then start becoming representative of the puppeteers themselves, rather than being the interpretations of the filmmaker?**

So I think one of the inspirational and critical features of the festival were the discourses within puppetry. *Sutradhar Magazine* publishes discourses. We do talks. But I think discourse builds much more strongly through film more than anything else. Films reach people quickly, they reach a large number of people.

About Katkatha

The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust is a Delhi-based puppet theatre company that began in 1998. Since then creating a rigorous training system for puppeteers has been a key focus for the group. In absence of a puppet school or courses to train professional puppeteers in India, Katkatha conducts intensive short courses and workshops in puppet techniques and supports interns who learn by following the work of the company. The focus is to train the next generation of professional puppeteers, create a discourse around puppetry and also build a network of puppeteers.

About the Festival

India's first International puppet film festival with 21 films from 11 countries that hero the puppet. These will be in 3 categories: children's Films, documentaries and fiction. The festival will also give a platform to filmmakers and puppeteers to present their work and vision through discussions and workshops.

PUPPETOSCOPE ALSO INCLUDES:

- An exhibition of puppets that looks at the journey of moving pictures from traditional shadow puppets to illusion toys to puppets in animation, along with sets of puppet shoots and puppets that have been filmed. This interactive and informative exhibition is for all ages.

For queries - 9560425347, 7382225424

 katkathapuppet@gmail.com



PuppetOs


INDIA'S FIRST INTERNATIONAL PUPPET



INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  where ideas grow

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS
INDIE

Event Date:
Venue: C
India International Ce


    @katkathapuppetry

scope

PUPPET FILM FESTIVAL



February 3rd - 5th February, 2023
 C D Deshmukh Auditorium
 Centre, Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi

 - katkatha.org

WORKSHOPS

VENUE: ANNEXE OF INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, MAX MUELLER MARG, LODHI ESTATE, NEW DELHI

FOR CHILDREN

Series of Interactive Workshops

31st JANUARY 2023

- SHADOW PLAY WITH ASHA
for grade 5th-6th
Time slot : 10.00 am to 11.15 am
- DRAMATIC DIORAMAS WITH UMESH
for grade 5th
Time Slot : 11:30 am to 12:45 pm

1st FEBRUARY 2023

- PUPPETS-CREATURES LAB WITH MANEESH
for grade 4+
Time slot : 10:00 am to 11:15 am
- GLOVE PUPPETRY WITH SHAMEEM
for grade 6th
Time slot : 11:30 am to 12:45 pm

2nd FEBRUARY 2023

- PAPER THEATRE WITH ANURUPA ROY
for grade 7+
Time slot : 10:00 am to 11:15 am
- STORYTELLING LEC-DEM SESSION
WITH GUNDURAJU JI
for grades 6th to 8th
Time slot : 11:30 am to 12:45 pm

OPEN CALL

AN INTERACTIVE SERIES OF
WORKSHOPS

- MASK & MOVEMENTS
(A Workshop with Avinash Kumar)
FOR AGE 16+
- 2nd Feb 2023, Thursday
3:00 pm to 6:00 pm
- STORY TELLING WITH PUPPETS :
Modern and Traditional
(A Masterclass with Ranjana Pandey &
Gunduraju ji)
FOR AGE 18+
- 3rd Feb 2023, FRIDAY
3:00 pm to 5:00 pm
- CINEMATIC OBJECT THEATRE
(A Workshop with Choiti Ghosh)
FOR AGE 18+
- 4th Feb 2023, Saturday
10:30 am to 12:00 pm
- ABNORMAL PUPPETRY
(A Masterclass with Varun Narain)
FOR AGE 16+
- 4th Feb 2023, Saturday
3:00 pm to 6:00 pm
- 5th Feb 2023, Sunday
11:30 am to 01:30 pm

FOR TEACHERS

A workshop by master puppeteer Ms. Anurupa Roy for school teachers (especially for the primary section). The workshop is focused on "Puppetry in Classrooms".

Date : 1st Feb 2023


Time : 02:30 pm to 05:00 pm

<https://forms.gle/MYJiHbMUvTzeH3zM7>

CONTACT DETAILS

WEBSITE : WWW.KATKATHA.ORG

 puppetoscope@gmail.com

 katkathapuppet@gmail.com

 @katkathapuppetry

 @katkathapuppetry

 @katkathapuppet

 @katkathapuppetry

EXHIBITION

VENUE: ANNEXE OF INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, MAX MUELLER MARG, LODHI ESTATE, NEW DELHI

An exhibition of puppets that looks at the journey of moving pictures from traditional shadow puppets to illusion toys to puppets in animation, along with sets of puppet shoots and puppets that have been filmed. This interactive and informative exhibition is for all ages. *From 31st Jan to 5th Feb at Annexe of IIC.*

An interactive exhibition of puppets used in films and exploring the connection between shadow puppetry and animation.

The exhibition includes

- Traditional leather shadow puppets from the collection of Master puppeteer Shri Gunduraju ji from Karnataka's *Togalu Gombeyatta* tradition.
- Traditional leather shadow puppets from the collection of Master puppeteer Shri Lakshaman Pulavar from Kerala's *Tholpavakoothu* tradition.
- Traditional leather shadow puppets from the collection of Master puppeteer Shri S. Chidambara Rao Sinde from Andhra Pradesh's *Tholu Bommalattam* tradition.
- Puppets used in the film *Haider* (2014), created by Dadi D. Pudumjee and Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust.
- Puppets by veteran puppeteer Ranjana Pandey, creator of *Khullam khulla* (1998-2002).
- Puppets from The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust.



FRIDAY, 3rd FEB 2019

THE HEADS

(Duration 14 mins)

Director : Gejza Dezorz

Slovakia

Time slot : 10:30 am to 12:30 pm

THE NIGHTINGALE

(Duration 14 mins)

Director : Varun Narain

India

Time slot : 10:30 am to 12:30 pm

IN THE DEEP DARK WOOD, THERE LIVED AN OGRE

(Duration 10 mins)

Director : Freddie Levin

United States

Time slot : 10:30 am to 12:30 pm

THE GIRL IN THE PINK FROCK

(Duration 10 mins)

Director : Anurupa Roy

India

Time slot : 10:30 am to 12:30 pm

YOU DO IT!

(Duration 39 mins)

Director : Ilan Savir

Israel

Time slot : 02:30 pm to 04:00 pm

WOOL

(Duration 19 mins)

Director : Stoyan Radoslavov,

Damian W.Gorczyan

Germany

Time slot : 04:00 pm to 05:00 pm

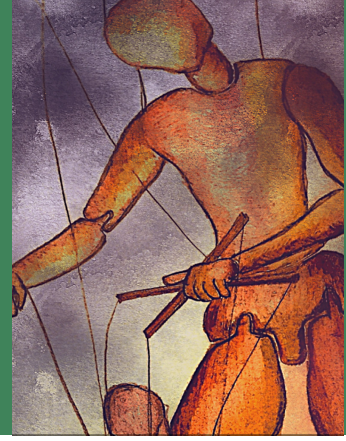
ANNETTE

(Duration 2 hr 21 mins)

Director : Leos Carax

France

Time slot : 06:30 pm to 09:00 pm



2023

SATURDAY, 4th FEB 2023

SUNDAY, 5th FEB 2023

CHILDREN

THE INCREDIBLE TALE OF ROBOT BOY
 (Duration 37 mins)
 Director : Sue Buckmaster
 United Kingdom
 Time slot : 10:30 am to 11:45 am

CHILDREN

KHIDKIYAAN (WINDOWS)
 (Duration 49 mins)
 Director : Choiti Ghosh
 India
 Time slot : 10:30 am to 12:00 pm

CHILDREN

CHILDREN

DELUSIONS: BETWEEN WATER AND VOID
 (Duration 15 mins)
 Director : Daniele R Viola, Leonardo P
 Ferreira, Ana Carolina C Malcher
 Brazil
 Time slot : 11:45 am to 01:30 pm

FICTION

GODHULI
 (Duration 6 mins)
 Director : Ranjana Pandey
 India
 Time slot : 12:00 pm to 01:00 pm

CHILDREN

CHILDREN

RED RIDER
 (Duration 15 mins)
 Director : Emma Fisher-Owen, Ivan Fisher-
 Owen
 Ireland
 Time slot : 11:45 am to 01:30 pm

FICTION

THE MILL AT CALDER'S END
 (Duration 14 mins)
 Director : Kevin Mcturk
 United States
 Time slot : 01:00 pm to 01:30 pm

FICTION

CHILDREN

THE WORM
 (Duration 43 mins)
 Director : Tea Kovse
 Slovenia
 Time slot : 03:30 pm to 04:30 pm

FICTION

THE HAUNTED SWORDSMAN
 (Duration 15 mins)
 Director : Kevin Mcturk
 United States
 Time slot : 01:00 pm to 01:30 pm

FICTION

DOCUMENTARY

JUDITH'S WOOD
 (Duration 15 mins)
 Director : Laura Gasperi
 Italy
 Time slot : 04:30 pm to 05:30 pm

DOCUMENTARY

SUKAL - THE PUPPET HIMSELF
 (Duration 40 mins)
 Director : Shilbhadra Datta
 India
 Time slot : 02:30 pm to 04:30 pm

DOCUMENTARY

DOCUMENTARY

A BIRD IN PASSAGE
 (Duration 11 mins)
 Director : Manish Sachdeva
 India
 Time slot : 04:30 pm to 05:30 pm

DOCUMENTARY

MY TOGALU GOMBAYATTA JOURNAL
 (Duration 32 mins)
 Director : Shankhajeet De
 India
 Time slot : 04:30 pm to 06:00 pm

DOCUMENTARY

FICTION

BACKSTAGE
 (Duration 01 hr 25 mins)
 Director : Lipika S Darai
 India
 Time slot : 06:00 pm to 08:00 pm

DOCUMENTARY

THE BELOVED
 (Duration 1 hr 30 mins)
 Director : Paulo Balardim
 Brazil
 Time slot : 06:30 pm to 08:00 pm

FICTION

The fiction category films

The idea was to inspire both filmmakers and puppeteers in India to raise the bar in the quality of their puppetry. For example, we got films by American puppeteer/filmmaker Kevin Turk, which was funded by the Henson Foundation. And you see the level of puppetry is really, really high. So how do we create that aspiration among Indian puppeteers and Indian filmmakers to look at this alternate media as a qualitative media too? And to create a meeting point of puppetry and films.

What also we wanted to communicate, essentially with the festival of Films, like you said, Maneesh is, of course, diversity.

So puppetry is a medium, film is a medium. But puppets in film are a completely different medium because it's not like live puppetry and it's not like filming actors. Your scope of what film and the definition of what film is also changes. I think we wanted to communicate that this kind of collaboration between media is very critical in the era that we are going into. This kind of cross-pollination is very interesting. And I think we have a third medium here.



What were the organisational milestones?

Maneesh:

It was important to understand the different criteria for selection which similar festivals had adopted, general rules, basic format, guidelines for entries, selection, certification etc.

From Canada: IPUF (International Puppet Underground Festival, running since the last 5 years), Europe has many such festivals. Miraj Siddique guided us how to begin with a single platform for free, eventually we created our PuppetOscope festival platform Filmfreeway.com with guidance. But yes I need some more research.

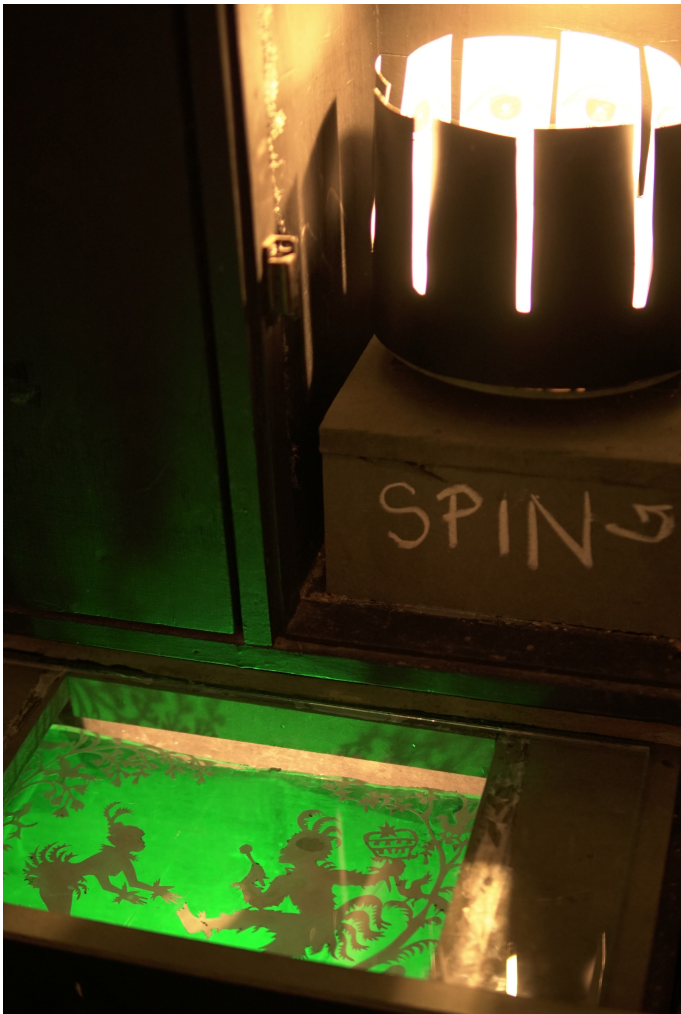
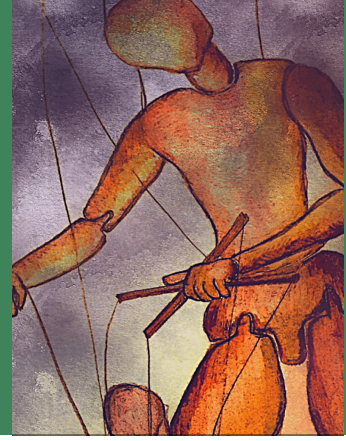
How many festivals there are, I don't know. But there would be a minimum of 20-25 festivals in the world. All of these festivals have a film component and a live puppetry festival.

I think East Europe has many festivals, such as in Warsaw, Lutz Puppet and Film Festivals. Typically the Puppet Festivals have performances and a special segment for films too. Student puppet films are also showcased in Festivals in Serbia and Croatia. At Charleville too, there's always a puppet film segment.

The Puppet School in Connecticut in the US encourages "puppet based films" as a part of the training. So naturally the Student work has many films and they are showcased in the festivals. Israel has the Holon Puppet Theater Festival which also has a puppet film segment. I think it depends largely on the focus that the country has traditionally and historically on puppetry and animation.

Anurupa:

So because animation was largely born in East Europe and the line between puppeteers and animators was quite blurred, there's a focus on puppetry and animation film festivals. That's why it started there and I think in more recent times



America has a lot of focus on puppetry films. I think the particular reason for this is that since the 1930s there's a history of animation and puppetry originating from the same source. A lot of puppeteers started working with animation like Ladislav Starewich who worked with objects, in his case insects and film, or Jan Swankmayer who worked in clay, materials, dolls etc.

In India there's a history as well because Raghunath Goswami in Calcutta, was an animator who worked with puppets. There's a pretty longish history that India has with television puppetry as well, right from Jee-sahab that

Ranjana Pandey did on Doordarshan, a breakfast show with a Puppet Host! And then we had Sanchit Ghosh's Potli Baba ki which was co directed by Gulzar and we had Ranjana Pandey's puppetry television program for children, khullam-khulla and some of the films she made. Dadi Pudumjee collaborated with mainstream commercial cinema's Suryaprakash Rao to create "A Bellyful Of Dreams" and also created and played puppets with his team on a song as a part of Vishal Bharadwaj's "Haider".

Then the Jamia department, MCRC department had puppetry thanks to Ranjana Pandey and Varun Narain. So I think there's a history of puppetry on Film, Television and Animation, in India as well which a lot of people don't know about. That became, I think, very important for us while presenting this festival because while we wanted to look at other festivals across the world we also wanted to give a representation to what has happened in India. There are pioneers who worked on puppets and digital media and film. And we wanted to underline it.

A Festival with a Difference/ More than just a festival of films

The critical aspect is we were looking for what is the Indian voice in puppet films?

Anurupa:

It was not a mere festival, it was a platform for discussions, exchanging views, sharing history... talk about practices, roots, communities...

There was a representation of the journey of Indian puppetry and film, Indian puppetry and television, and now Indian puppetry and digitization.

And I think for us, it is not so much of being a film festival where you show a bunch of films, but



it was curated in a way that the entire section on fiction, for example, focussed on young filmmakers.

Our student representation was very small. But the idea was to inspire young people from film and animation schools to look at possibilities in film and animation using puppets because we know that it features in their syllabus.

The other was to get a lot of children to watch films -like we used to. In the nineties there were a lot of children's films featuring puppets that used to come from Russia and Japan.They influenced and informed many of the contemporary puppeteers. A lot of us became puppeteers because of that exposure.

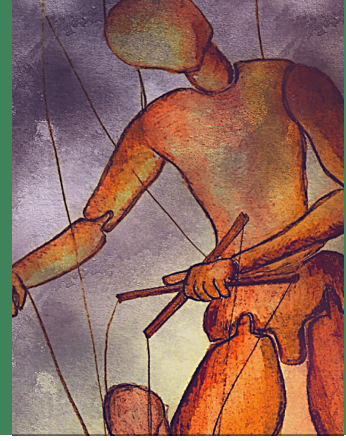
And I think one of the key and the most successful parts of PuppetOscope and what sets it apart is that we managed to get this Indian section on Indian documentaries. And I think the Indian

forms in India? Why are they necessary? What is the space that they fill in the discourse of Indian heritage, the Intangible culture of India.

So I think that's what is very critical about puppetOscope. For me, it was not only about the film, it's about the discussions that happened around the film. It's about the conversations.

It's about the question and answers during the informal chats that people continued after the sessions, over a cup of tea at the canteen or in the garden. And that way IIC became a very good space and lent itself perfectly to an "adda" .

I think the exhibition was very important. It concretised the three dimensional aspect of puppets, acted in films,films that created awareness, and outreach. It contrasted in the same space the different aesthetics of the traditional shadows and the sculptural forms. The diversity and layering was there for all to experience.



Working with veteran puppeteers like Varun Narain, Objectist like Choiti Ghosh and puppet choreographer Avinash Kumar. It was the perfect setting for their workshops too.

The takeaway is that young audiences understood that Puppetry is not just one narrow stream or just “ Kathputli”. Going by the feedback, this was an eye opener for the participants, onlookers, visitors, participants and even the filmmakers themselves.

All this made it a very unusual and different experience for all the participants

What were the challenges ?

I think I would only say the biggest challenge has been audience-building. And I think the biggest challenge is not now, it's in the future.

If we want to continue to do this festival, that's the biggest challenge because we are going to have to sustain funding.

We don't have any funding. We even tried crowd funding. We were very lucky that people, our previous audiences funded us, our friends funded us, people came through for us. But I don't know if that's possible. Year after year, number one.

Number two, I think, we need to keep expanding the pool from which we were drawing films to keep getting films, good quality films. That's going to be a challenge. Both funding and expanding an audience is going to be a challenge.

While we learnt and managed the curation, the judgment parameters, getting teams together, finding parameters for curation, But in end we have 7 films in each categories, which 21 in total participation from 11 countries.

To look beyond Childrens Category was a rich experience. There is a wealth of films which made the selection exciting. We were able to offer a



great selection.

Children's puppet film and Another category which have the films for youth and adult audience that can be Fiction, Fantasy, etc. We already have one clear and distinct category that is



Documentaries, because it deals with history, with puppetry, with puppeteer, with practices, with their habitat and journey, etc.

At no point was it a single persons work. It was collaborative and teamwork. Right from the consultation with judges etc.

Katkatha's 25 years of networking and outreach stood us in good stead, the International connections and goodwill built over the years (largely by Anurupa) opened doors.

The two challenges we will have to overcome next time:

Financing and getting an audience.

I think the first is always beginner's luck, the first time is novelty. We managed it quite successfully but I think in the future we have something so we have something to build upon.

Organising: It really took time. If we look back, it took us TWO YEARS from gestating the idea, to flesh out the concept, research, to the paperwork and putting the entire festival on the ground. It began in July 2021 and discussions started with planning events for Katkatha's 25th anniversary in 2023. It went through many phases: finding a name for the festival, putting out a call for the entries, national, International, making prototype reels - promos, finding a venue, timing - which month of the year, and essential paperworks, etc.

This was a collaborative effort of the eight core team members.

Publicity: this was a challenge. We could maximally push it online platforms and social media through our networks. To do anything else meant resources and funds which we did not have. We understood later how we could hire PR agency or partner to promote the event, there the options to have the paid publicity... And it was learning by doing only for us

So quite naturally because of these factors, the fall out was a thin audience.

The India International Centre (the well established venue) has a film club. We were counting on their members to show up for the films. That did not happen. The team had to do lots of last minute outreach to schools and aggressive posting online. The outcome of all our efforts was very modest.

And successes?

I think one of our biggest successes was our volunteer team. Having young people and specially University students on board is very important. Building their critical appreciation is critical and getting their feedback can be a beacon for the future. We had such a wonderful volunteer team. They made the festival a big success. I think that was because we chanced upon them, they came to us. I think, investment for us for the future. And the other thing that happened is we had our visiting puppeteers. So that community which was watching films every day and traveling in and was giving feedback, was present for all the events, was walking around with their puppets, like Jagannatha Singha and Tandra Kundu from Bardhawan, West Bengal, like Sajeesh Pullavar from Kerala, Subhashish Neogi from Chandigarh.

All the discussions were big successes not



because we solved the big challenges that puppetry faces today but because they were heard by a new set of people outside of our silo. The thing is to continue to do those, raise enough money next time and to crowdfund and also try and find some funding sources so that we can invite more people. Because the most fun was when all the puppeteers got together and discussed a film or an audience member walked up to Puran Bhat or Gunduraju after the films. And I think it's a festival where you have to focus on this kind of audience and discourse. And that's going to be a bit of a challenge.

We can go to a funder and say, look at what we managed. Now you should fund it. And I think the lessons learned have been to have more coordination, a bigger team of volunteers, start earlier. The team did really well. But there is always room for growth and learning.

What is the future of such a venture in India?

We can explore different models. It can be both online and offline. It can be on a shared platform. And I think we have to think of some online aspect of this festival as well so that it has its offline online. Both I would say that's the lessons that I have learned.

We can think of a definite season, after two years. PuppetOscope is happening. Simultaneously happens in 4 or 5 major cities (North, East, West, South) of the country. We can make it a satellite festival which goes to smaller towns. Our volunteers and puppeteer participants who came from different cities felt that such a festival will definitely draw crowds in their home towns.

Maybe we can collaborate with other Puppet theatre festivals already existing in India.



So, not only India, I guess may be abroad too, certain sets of films from India is being screened at certain festival in collaboration abroad too. For example in Bali, we can collaborate with traditional puppeteers and filmmakers too. It can even happen online.

Many more collaborations are possible. .

What could be the impact on the puppetry community and the film community?

For Puppeteers it can be an exciting option to use film to express their creativity. It is a door to some horror, some sci-fi, possibilities are endless. let's explore the medium in that genre too.

The Film Community has a stereotypical understanding of Puppetry in India. Bollywood has and the advertising world has used puppets in a

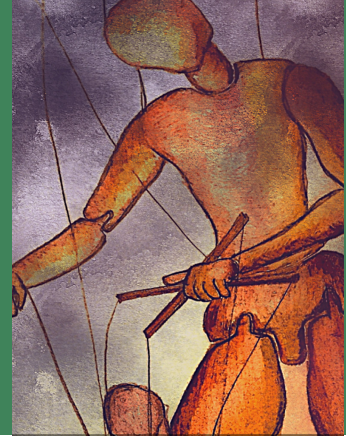
very tangential way. The categories that people are familiar with - "Animation". **Stop motion , claymation , and maybe some puppet based TV show for children.**

A Third Genre

It is a lack of exposure to any other alternative form in India. So as we said earlier, a third genre- the Puppet Film will have to create a space and identity, a following. That will be a huge contribution for a Festival like ours.

A new genre may become popular, new collaborations may come for puppeteers. I think people may start challenging some norms about the way films are made and the way puppetry is looked at.





It has to become something of a movement for this to happen.

That will take time. I don't think much will happen with one festival. But I think **what this festival clearly did** is- it opened some conversation about tradition and heritage, intangible heritage and I think culture policy. Puppeteers felt heard. Puranji and Gunduraju ji felt that people listened to them. They were able to voice their concerns. It opened some questions which impacted everybody. It impacts the film community, puppet community. A platform other than the usual theater/puppet performance audience. That was very important.

The documentary films highlighted the need to have very deep conversations between the filmmaker and the artist. Both have to step outside their silos as equals, not as the documentary filmmaker's lens presenting "a folk puppeteer". This is an aspect of tension in the documentary films. However, I feel artistic films are the space to explore this tension to create something new. Because there is a danger in the documentary, of the filmmaker becoming the sole storyteller and they decide how they are representing the puppeteer. So hopefully one of the conversations that will emerge from the film festival is **whose documentary is it and what is being documented and who is it representing and who is listening to the story?**

And hopefully the festival will then become an equalizer in the power status between the filmmaker and the puppeteer.

URL link for festival booklet : [Puppetoscope Booklet Final.pdf](#)

URL link for festival reel : [PuppetOscope | Katkatha's First International Puppet Film Festival in India | 25 years of Katkatha](#)

Anurupa Roy is the director of the PuppetOscope festival. She is a puppeteer, puppet theatre director & puppet designer. She is the Founder & Managing Trustee of The Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust and has directed over 25 puppet performances for Katkatha, TIE Company and NSD. Roy is a recipient of the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar 2007, National Award for contribution to puppet theatre by the Ministry of Culture, Sangeet Kala Kendra's Aditya Birla Kalakiran Puraskar 2016, META for Best Director and Best Production for Mahabharata 2017 and the Shankar Nag Award for Theatre in 2017.

Maneesh Pachiaru is a Puppeteer and Theatre Practitioner from Chandigarh, and one of the founding members of the Satvik Art Society in Chandigarh (estd. in 2013). He did his Internship (2015-16) and has been associated with Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, New Delhi since 2017. Pachiaru is an alumnus of the UNIMA-India Foundation Course for Puppeteers (2018-19). He worked freelance in various projects and productions as an actor, stagecraft designer, puppeteer, puppet-builder, and is currently a research scholar at the Central University of Hyderabad.

4

DYING ART, LIVING ARTIST

By Lipika Singh Darai

While growing up in a small town in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, I used to go for cultural programmes which showcased folk art performances in annual Puja Mandaps or in fairs during the time of festivities. 20 years prior to today, the boom of inexpensive plastic products in the numerous stalls in those fairs had caught my eye. Noticing, with raised eyebrows, the use of “florescent coloured plastic material” in many of the folk dance performers’ costumes is something I strongly remember. And that is when I also noticed how people responded towards folk art and the artists. The response was an amalgamation of the popular idea of how folk dances used to be or should be, grumblings against the authenticity of the dance forms and a sense of distance from the people who performed. What I gleaned from those experiences was the common response of people towards folk art performances. I am sure that someone else in the crowd must have experienced the same with a different perspective.

I thought, I was more than just an audience, as I belong to an Adivasi community called Ho and I had witnessed my community people dancing during festivities in their own spaces, houses, courtyards, farms, forests, etc. At that time, I didn’t understand tradition much or anything around cultural identity. I just thought the dance was brought to a stage from their own accustomed spaces and the people were performing in front of an audience to entertain them, without context. I was probably like many others in the crowd, who felt the same. But we as the audience to the performances, we all catered to the “response”, I had noticed.

20 years later as a filmmaker, while researching on Kandhei Nacha, the puppet dance form,

(puppetry) of Odisha, I attended a lot of folk dance festivals organised by NGOs and private, government or semi-government organisations. I realised that “the response” towards the art forms has already found some words to fall back on. “Dying Art”, this phrase resonated in every speech while addressing the performances and the artists. This time, my response was a little more than a raised eyebrow. I was in a journey of making a documentary film on puppetry, folk dance form or puppet theatre of Odisha, which was already considered as a “dying art form”. In Odisha, Kandhei Nacha (Kandhei: Puppet, Nacha: Dance) always depended on the audience, as the artists performed to earn their living. They travelled from village to village to perform. It used to be interactive, unlike in the present. Now they mostly perform on a stage of an auditorium for sponsored programmes.

During one of those festivals of dying art forms in the capital city of Bhubaneswar, I came to know about an old Puppeteer called Maguni Charana Kuanr. A rod puppeteer, who had hundreds of wooden puppets. Though I had spent all my childhood in Odisha, I had never seen any sort of puppet dance ever from this region. I had only watched popular string puppet dance from Rajasthan and shadow puppetry from Kerala on TV. A rod puppeteer! In Odisha! The idea of a puppeteer having hundreds of handmade wooden puppets was mesmerizing enough for me to look for him and visit him immediately. I didn’t have his number or address, but the first auto I got after reaching his town took me directly to his house. He was indeed popular. Just like him, his home was warm and humble, housing his makeshift wooden furniture workshop which had the big wooden boxes carrying his own handmade puppets. He had lost his wife by then. He lived with his puppets,



his son's family, and daughter. The moment the boxes opened, the puppeteer in him came alive. He manipulated two puppets weighing about 4 kilos each with his two hands, singing some lines from Ramayana. He held a rod which was attached to the body of the puppet and pulled with his fingers the strings that were attached to the hands of the puppet. He made it look so easy. So easy that at 75, he didn't look anything close to an old puppeteer. The puppets looked content. His hands were life to them. He was life to "Bhagia", a much celebrated drunkard puppet he had given birth to. It was more than 50 years of longstanding collaboration. He is the only one in Odisha who has kept his show going with the

same competence till today.

Maguni is not a traditional puppeteer. Rod puppetry used to be performed by the Jhara community of Keonjhar district. Maguni learned and improvised it from them at a time when their tradition was nearing an end. He had to initially face social obstruction for embracing an artform of a community apparently lower than his in the caste system. Through him, I came across three more forms of puppetry whose performers were also from marginalised communities – hand or gloves puppetry, string puppetry and shadow puppetry.





I tried meeting the artists, or tried to watch their performances in some festivals. One day post a performance in Cuttack, the former capital of Odisha, I met Abhay Singh, a 60 years old hand puppeteer. While other members of his group were packing up, we got some time to talk. Apparently it is the only puppetry form which can still be considered as traditional. His father did it. His grandfather did it to earn their living. He does it, but his children are not into it. They belong to the snake charmers community and used to live a nomadic life. In our conversation, habitually he would come back to mentioning his two puppets, Radha and Krishna. It was late in the night. They had a plan to spend the night at the bus stop to catch an early morning ride to their place, a hamlet of makeshift houses of 80 families in Kendrapada.

Later I got introduced to a researcher, Gouranga Charan Das, a professor in Odia who in his journey of doing a PHD on puppetry forms of Odisha, had turned into a shadow puppeteer himself. He was in the process of building a puppet museum far from the city near the village Odasa, where he had met Kathinanda Das, a traditional shadow puppeteer. The shadow puppetry of Odisha, known as Ravana Chhaya, was once performed by the Bhata Community. It went through a massive reform due to the State Govt's interference at the time in 80's when Late Kathinanda Das, a puppeteer who begged for alms in villages and showed shadow puppetry, was awarded by the President of India; this brought the artform to public and state attention. The group from Odasa village, which is considered as a traditional group and which performs with newly designed puppets, and the researcher Gouranga's puppet group, which has more scholarly awareness of how much improvisation in traditional performances is reasonable, both live under constant pressure of justifying their identities. These two groups are the only groups performing shadow puppetry at this point.

I came to know about villages in Ganjam district that had more than 40 troupes of string puppeteers. Now the groups are almost dead. Puppets are in boxes, sleeping. Ganjam also has



a tradition of animal mask dance, which involves larger-than-life masks of animals and sometimes human figures. One afternoon, I met a String Puppeteer called Dandapani Badatya. He sang about how Sita ran to catch a two headed deer, a demon in disguise from the epic “Ramayana”. He sang after almost 25 years. The song was simple but he would sing it as if he had, at some point, actually seen the deer. In a makeshift set-up, on a terrace with one more puppeteer, Chaitanya Behera, who still is an active performer, showed us a small scene with a few string puppets. And soon when the night approached, he started narrating some scenes vocally without a fumble or a mistake till he got tired and breathless. He talked about Rama, Sita, Ravana and other characters just like he would discuss about people he knew very well. He treasured his days as a puppeteer without any doubt.

In Odisha, puppeteers mostly performed narratives from the mythological epics. Rod, String and Shadow puppetry mostly had renditions of Ramayana while hand puppeteers sang Radha and Krishna stories. I was not particularly fond of any of the epics. I liked being with the puppeteers who credited their puppets for everything they were.

I wanted to make a film on the puppeteers. I wanted to document an art form which was

not well documented. But through it, I also wanted to understand the sense of death of the art form which everyone I met could sense but couldn't articulate. Most of them would be inclined towards saying something philosophical or sentimental. “Art cannot die. An artist never dies. We all are puppets.” I also couldn't put it in words. Some performances had gone through the roughness of time and stopped making sense in some way. Most of the artists couldn't survive the dejection caused by the declining audience, demand, funds or patronage. Some improvised to accommodate government programmes such as Swachh Barat Abhiyan, or some sort of awareness campaigns. When I witnessed some of the artists performing, I was in their immediate audience, and I directly felt my presence in the performance; not even for a single moment, did I feel it wasn't making sense. The puppets, their existence, everything made sense. But that wasn't enough for the consumption of a mass audience. I proposed my idea of making a film on the puppeteers to some funders. Many of them didn't find anything exciting or purposeful in the story, as at no point my film would bring any sort of sympathy towards the artists I knew. People believed sympathy would work. A promise for wholesome entertainment in the film using the stories of the puppeteers that can be consumed





by at least a few categories of audience would work. I am not sure if at all the sense of loss is relevant to anyone in any context . In the journey of making the film, I documented the lives of the puppeteers who probably are the last generation performers. I listened to dreams at the end of their journeys. I met puppeteers who had lost their puppets. I saw puppets without their masters.



Lipika made a feature documentary film called **BACKSTAGE** about puppetry in Odisha. It took her years to research, to follow the puppeteers, film them and their performances, and edit the film. The filming started in 2017 with the world premier in 2021 at the **39th Asolo Art Film Festival**, Italy, in their Feature Competition. The film was also invited by the puppet museum of Taiwan for **19th Yunlin International Puppet Theatre Festival**. It was shown in the US in Tasveer film festival and was screened at festivals in India including in the Indian panorama of **IFFI '21** and at the international competition in **MIFF '22**. It is a seminal work, important for puppetry in India. The film documents, with compassion, a vanishing world with all its complexities. In 2023 it was featured in the **PuppetOScope film festival** organised by **Katkatha Puppet Art Trust**.

Lipika is a filmmaker and editor based in Odisha, India. Her work has been shown at various international and national film festivals. She has received 4 National Film Awards (2012-2017) presented by the President of India.

5

A DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER'S PERSPECTIVE

Interview of Lipika Darai By Ranjana Pandey



SUTRADHAR

Lipika is a film director and editor from Odisha. In the month of February 2023 her 85 min long documentary film - "Backstage" produced by the Films Division of India was shown in PuppetOscope film festival in the India International Centre, New Delhi. She attended the festival and talked to the audience after the showing. On meeting her I felt that I needed to get to know her better. She had already written the above article. I interviewed her on Google Meet.



How did you convince Films Division to fund a film on "Puppetry"?

My project got selected for pitching on the basis of a written proposal on the subject. After two extensive affirmative pitching sessions it was on hold for more than eight months. Suddenly I was called again to do a final pitch for which I had made a required pitching video in no time and presented it. It was a completely new jury board

and from my pitch video they assumed that I would end up making a predictable documentary on a folk art form like the ones they often get to watch. But somehow filmmaker Jabbar Patel, one of the juries, was convinced by my interaction and the potential of my research material - Something clicked. I got the project. It was a heavy task, dealing with a heavy producer. As on paper I was strictly asked to make a narrative

documentary. So many factors have been at play in making this film.

What did you want to say with this film?

Simply, I wanted to show what I saw and experienced. I had met some amazing puppeteers and there was no substantial audio visual documentation or documentary on them at that time. Hence, I thought as a practicing filmmaker from Odisha I must make a film which can be useful in understanding puppetry and puppeteers of Odisha in future. In making this film for Films Division, I thought at least there will be an audience, a future, a library, a circulation... The film will have a hand in keeping this dying art alive in the memory of people. Creatively I was not particularly on a quest of anything specific. My experience through the process of engaging with the artists should reflect in the film was probably the initial core expectation from the film.

How did you come to meet Puppeteers and think them film worthy?

It was serendipity... I got to know about Rod Puppeteer Maguni Charan Kuanr from a senior journalist, Shyamhari Chakra, while having a discussion about dying art forms in Odisha. After that, out of curiosity, me and my then partner Indraneel Lahiri made personal efforts to meet Puppeteer Maguni. I made an instant connection with him. Then we got in touch with contemporary Shadow puppeteer and Odia Professor Gouranga Charan Dash. Following his and Maguni's lead I met other puppeteers. A heartfelt connection that I could establish with all the puppeteers I met was nurtured over time. There is a sense of comfort that came about among the puppeteers and my team, especially me. Being Odia, speaking the language and being part of the ecosystem of Odisha helped build this

connection. In 2013 Indraneel got a one year long fellowship from National Folklore Support Centre to document the puppetry communities of Odisha and I assisted him. Rod puppeteer Maguni was the assigned resource person for the entire work and that's how I got to know him closely. In the process of documentation work the idea of film germinated and then got materialised with the help of the Films Division fund. I started making the film in 2017.

What sense did you make of their life, livelihood, and future?

All the puppeteers who are featured in the film are still in it because of the love and passion for their art practice.

The future of puppeteers and puppetry seems to be bleak as in my journey with the film, the puppeteers I met were the last generation puppeteers. I didn't meet many promising students or young puppeteers who could take it forward. I also hadn't met any puppeteers who survived through puppetry. Everyone had other sources of income and those who didn't have any solid resources, they suffered the most.

Shadow Puppeteer Gouranga Dash, a former Odia professor, for his Phd chose puppetry who later became a puppeteer and improvised the art form according to his aesthetic. The government's interference in the attempt of supporting the shadow puppetry of Odisha created an irreversible dent by modifying the traditional style of leather puppets into intricate designs and presentation to a great extent. Because of which the old traditional style took a back seat and eventually disappeared. Rod Puppeteer Maguni too adapted the artform from the Jhara Community and over the years



made it a ticketed-show worthy performance and performed for more than five decades. Though the interventions changed the art form, for better or worse in terms of its authenticity which will always be debatable, it also allowed it to survive for some extra miles.

There used to be a caste hierarchy at play in who practiced puppetry. If puppetry has to survive it has to step out of the caste shadow, find new context, new learner and fresh audience. It needs to be empowered for the confluence and collaboration available in urban spaces and for finding sponsors and producers who are not always Government.

All said and done, in urban state sponsored spaces, in Cuttack or in Bhubaneswar, that is where I mostly could meet the puppeteers when they were commissioned shows by SNA, ECZ,IGNCA or among some other academic, research -scholar audience. Ironic, isn't it?

What were the challenges in making this film?

There were many but filmmaking is a demanding process anyway. Our area of filming was spread across five districts. Being a woman filmmaker travelling alone for research or pre production was not very conducive in Odisha. I had to always be with a team or my partner and that would increase the budget. As we were covering four forms of puppetry and a lot of puppeteers and other artists from their teams were involved, making a filming schedule with all of them was quite challenging. Because most of them depended on different sources of livelihood and used to be occupied. That delayed the work. When the 2 hr rough-cut was made, Films Division asked me to make it to a 53 min long film which was the official length of my project. A year passed by while negotiating on the duration of

the film and then pandemic hit us. The process got delayed for 2 long years. In between my partner and I separated. Waiting to finish the film alone with long covid induced ill health was painful. What kept me going was the energy which the puppeteers instilled in the film.

What do you think the State or Civil society can do to “save Puppetry”?

To “save” Puppetry in Odisha it needs to be re-invented, re aligned with the changes in aesthetics, and social need for entertainment. For the longest time the attempt has been to bring folk art to the stage of auditoriums of towns and cities. It should be otherway too. Folk art thrives in communities. There has to be efforts in restoring the validation in the spaces they belong to.

What cinema is today, Ramlila was earlier. I recall as late as my childhood- in the 1990's there were plenty of festivals, folk celebrations, in the neighbourhood, even in my backyard. Not just Ramlila, animal mask dances, Chau etc. It had a certain sense of fluidity. The mask maker was also the puppeteer. The Ramlila actor was also the masked dancer, the Chau dancer was the rickshaw puller or the member of the king's chou team, the mask maker was the Pala artist.

This cross connection between the performance arts and crafts and livelihood is reflected in the film by the strong presence of the Pala narrative performers as well as the animal masks in the lush setting of Odisha Greens.

How did you proceed?

I watched many proscenium shows. I spoke openly, with transparency to all the puppeteers. I did not put a distance, professional film maker with equipment, tools and specialist teams. It was

informal, intimate, conversational, and slowly building up the relationship, brick by brick . I have not put in half of all my perceptions. Because it couldn't be a personal film as I was probably burdened by the pressure of making a narrative film which would also have a certain archival value . Film too has multiple cinematic languages. Like how a performance art communicates emotions, tells its stories in different ways. My presence through the film is the result of my acknowledging the centrality of my experience, my vision and my experience with these puppeteers. It was a languid affair with much coming and going over a few years.

“The film maker, especially the standalone documentary-maker is much like the puppeteer. Hooked onto the performance and its experience . Hooked to the acceptance and appreciation of the audience. Never mind if they do not earn much. The experience , fulfilment, warmth, acceptance, contact, the welcome and the recognition is what means most to them.”

Yes! I realize that I share the same passion.

How can one bring more into it? Make it as close to a lived experience, a deep sharing instead of just a film shown in a dark hall or seen on a laptop in the midst of the hurly burly of a home?

The best way is to experience a performance live. But if it is a film screening, It could be accompanied by the filmmaker expressing their engagement and perspective; illustrated by the puppet troupe's live performance of the puppets and followed finally by a question and answer session and a discussion with the audience.

Ranjana Pandey is the Managing trustee of UNIMA Puppeteers Trust-India and a councilor representing India to UNIMA - Internationale. She has trained in puppetry under Franz Jagueneau, Theatre Peruchet, Bruxelles, Theatre Toone and Theatre Tilapin, Bruxelles. She is a member of Asia Pacific Commission on Puppet Arts, the Commission for Preservation of Puppetry Heritage, the Committee for Puppetry at Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Committee of Ministry of Culture for approval of grants to Performing Arts. Ranjana is the co-founder of Jan Madhyam, a CSO working towards the Inclusion of economically disadvantaged challenged children. Presently, she is on the faculty of several Teacher Training Institutes, Trainer to Primary School Teachers and Special Educators. She teaches at the Masters program in traditional forms of communication at MCRC, Jamia Milia University, New Delhi. She has written, designed and directed several performances, and a TV serial for children: Khullam Khulla which was telecast on Doordarshan.



Notice Board

The Indra Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
www.ignca.nic.in

India Foundation for the Arts Archive
www.theifaarchive.org

Sahapedia
<https://www.sahapedia.org/>

Unima International Publications Directory
<https://www.unima.org/en/projects-and-achievements/publications-directory/>

World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts
<https://wepa.unima.org/en/>

For further details contact Ms. Padmini Rangarajan (Secretary - Unima Puppeteers Trust - India)
puppeteerstrust@gmail.com +91 9866081172 (Ms. Padmini Rangarajan) & +91 7382225424 (Maneesh Pachiaru)

Ms. Ranjana Pandey (Managing Trustee), Mr. Dadi Pudumjee & Ms. Anurupa Roy (Trustees)
Executive Committee: Sri Gunduraju (President), Ms. Padmini Rangarajan (Secretary) & Maneesh Pachiaru (Treasurer)

Photographs Courtesy: Wikipedia, Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, Lipika Darai, Unima Puppeteers Trust-India.
Cover: Lipika Singh Darai
Layout : Radha Pandey

Website: <https://www.unimapuppeteerstrust.in/> | Facebook: [UNIMA-India](https://www.facebook.com/UNIMA-India) | Instagram: [@puppeteerstrust](https://www.instagram.com/puppeteerstrust)
YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@puppeteerstrust>