



# Sutradhar

A UNIMA India Publication

Note from the Editor

Tradition and Transformation: Leather Puppetry in Karnataka.....	3
An Interview with Margareta Niculescu.....	7
Charleville Mezieres-The Mecca For Puppeteers.....	10
THE WINDOW - Looking In, Looking Out.....	14
Different Approaches to Iranian Puppetry.....	18
Topic.....	22

# A Note from the Editor

Delhi has seen a fair amount of puppetry this year in Festivals and exhibitions and visiting performers.

Of particular interest was a very special exhibition mounted to display a beautiful collection of 75 traditional shadow puppets from Karnataka, Andhra and Kerala at Sanskriti, Anand Gram and an exhibition of contemporary puppets from Delhi mounted by Unima India at the India International Center.

IGNCA and SNA, jointly held a seminar: 'Issues in Contemporary Expression and Practices', a dialogue around tradition and modern forms of puppetry.

Two avant garde contemporary puppet productions were presented to Delhi audiences. (Alice in Wonderland, object theatre by Tram Theatre and Life in Progress by Kat Katha). Both were well received which shows a growing maturity in the audience. The annual Ishara Festival continues to create awareness about different forms of puppetry.

This issue also takes us to Charleville Mezieres the capital of the Puppetry World.

Is collaboration really honest? Can it be done 'cross culturally', is the subject discussed in 'Windows' an article by Jennifer Pfeiffer.

Miguel Arreche single-mindedly worked day and night with his team to create a beautiful museum dedicated to the Puppetry Arts-TOPIC in Tolosa-Spain. We were sorry to lose him suddenly to a fatal stroke. It is indeed a deep loss to the world of Puppet Arts. Idoya takes us on a tour of TOPIC in her article.

In this issue we also pay homage to the invaluable contribution to the world of Puppet Arts by diva of Puppetry- Margareta Niculescu.

- We take inspiration from her vision and commitment and through Sutradhar, attempt to provide a space:
- To make the puppetry arts better known
- To diffuse ideas, creations and innovations
- To bring the past into the present
- To present the profiles of the visionaries and contributors who stimulate and sustain this art

**Ranjana Pandey**

**President**

**Unima-India**

# 1 Tradition and Transformation: Leather Puppetry in Karnataka

By Vidyun Sabhaney

Bhimavva and her family (living in Moornal, Koppal district of Karnataka) have the distinction - one that she had no small part in creating - of being the only troupe to still practice the 'old' style of Togalu Gombeyatta. We met in January 2013 when my collaborator Shohei Emura and I undertook a study of this leather puppetry tradition. As part of the study, we interviewed several puppeteers living and practising across Karnataka. Amongst them, eighty-something Bhimavva stood apart. Her life's natural course has made her witness to changes in the tradition which the current generation can only allude to. She is not unaware of the importance of this experience - indeed, one of the most passionate conversations that we had with her was on the subject of memory, and its importance to the practice of puppeteers. While she began discussing memory with us at a functional level (the critical ability to recall narrative details), she quickly stressed the need for stronger collective memory of the history of the form itself.

Accounts from both puppeteers and researchers suggest that the practice of leather puppetry in Karnataka began churning some thirty years ago - resulting in a significant shift in its style of performance. The 'old' style of performance is known as jamkatbaavli, a Marathi word that refers directly to composite nature of the image painted on puppets used in this style. These puppets are characterised by their lack of movable parts (for example, movable

hands and legs). Instead, great emphasis is placed on the posture and action of the character. The command of the puppet by the puppeteer is also largely restricted to what is manageable by one hand - for example, from right to left or front to back. This results in a slow, lilting style of performance.

Compare this to the new style, which is appropriately known as haathfiruthalibaavli. This style of performance, currently in vogue, is highly animated. Here, both the arms and the legs of the puppet have joints - resulting in an entirely new range of movements. The scenic quality of the old puppets has been traded in for the possibility

of humanoid movement - a shift in preference that Bhimavva, amongst others, attributes to the proliferation of cinema and television.

This shift has changed performance roles - specifically, for female members of the troupe. In the jamkatbaavli style, the male head of the family is the sole performer controlling the puppets - the stage fits only him, whilst the rest of the troupe sits just ahead of the audience, supporting with music, song

Accounts from both puppeteers and researchers suggest that the practice of leather puppetry in Karnataka began churning some thirty years ago - resulting in a significant shift in its style of performance.

and dialogue. From time-to-time he is assisted by a son or nephew, who is under training to take over his role.

To contrast, the new style requires more hands to operate its puppets; the introduction of movable parts meant that a performer could efficiently handle only one puppet at a time. As a result, the role of women in the performance has changed. Their role has expanded from being singers to that of controlling the puppets as well.

Amongst puppeteers, this change is perceived as having varying significance. According to Bhimavva,

women had not performed along-side their husbands and sons for practical reasons - that the stage could not accommodate more than one or two people at a time. The use of oil-lamps had also made crowding of the stage dangerous. Now, with electric lighting, it is no longer so - and hence, she feels, these adjustments are made possible on a practical level. Gunduraju, on the other hand, says that women were previously not allowed into the performance space because it was believed that menses made them impure. By this account, the expanded role of women

**Togalu Gombeyatta has historically dealt with content that its practitioners refer to as puranic (a general phrase alluding to stories from epics) but since the 1990s it has begun to develop performances commissioned by the government and development-sector organisations.**



Bhimava



indicates an attitudinal shift within the community, as well.

Togalu Gombeyatta, like most other storytelling traditions in India, is a patrilineal practice. The primary performer in a troupe is the male head of the family. The assets of the family (in this case, the puppets and the territories within which they are allowed to perform) are passed down from father to son - if a puppeteer has more than one son, then these assets are split amongst them. In this context, one can perceive more clearly that while the role of female puppeteers has certainly expanded with the development of the haathfiruthalibaavli performance style, it is not indicative of their involvement in the direction of performances and development of new content.

Togalu Gombeyatta has historically dealt with content that its practitioners refer to as puranic (a general phrase alluding to stories from epics) but since the 1990s it has begun to develop

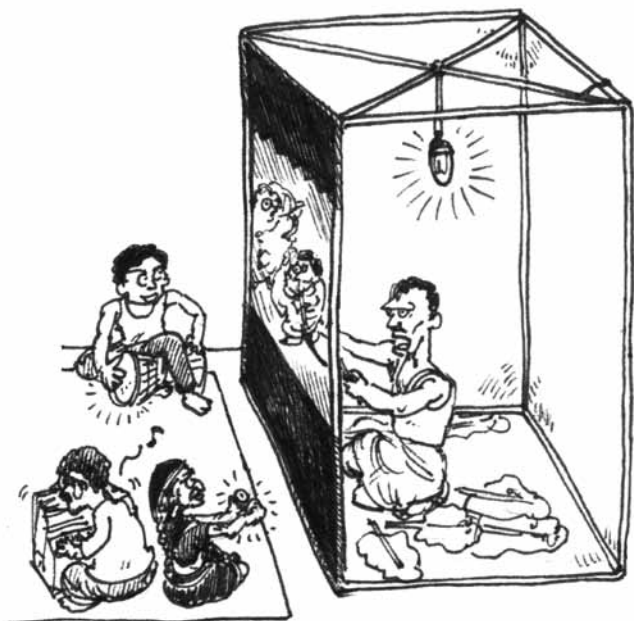
performances commissioned by the government and development-sector organisations. The subject matter usually has a strong social message that intends to raise awareness and bring about a change in social behaviour or attitude - for example, shows on subjects like HIV/AIDS and Polio. Here, the form is used as a development tool. For most puppeteers, getting these projects is dependent on the entrepreneurial, networking and ideation capacity of the head puppeteer, and the skill of his troupe. As a result, this option is available only to a limited few and several find themselves caught in a bind between struggling with the tradition and leaving it in favour of more lucrative job opportunities. Most choose the latter.

When thinking about the transition that Togalu Gombeyatta will undergo as a result of this, it is important to remember that issues of skill and entrepreneurial ability could be addressed through capacity-building workshops - however, some practitioners feel that the key problem is really a



change in the relationship between the puppeteer and his audience. Whereas earlier the puppeteer was seen to have a dual role as an entertainer and a source of information and knowledge about the world, today it is no longer so; there now exist alternate and contemporary sources for both entertainment and education.

The introduction of haathfiruthalibaavli has created the option of a contemporary visual language. However, the form has been unable to simultaneously



identify strong contemporary content. Whilst it is not desirable to compare traditional storytelling forms, one can look to specific settlements of Bengali patachitrakars as examples of storytellers who have successfully and repeatedly found contemporary

content, as well as new markets to support it. Patachitrakars from Naya, in particular, are known for developing scrolls on subjects like - but certainly not limited to - the 9/11 tragedy and the 2004 Tsunami. Though experimentation has been a part of the practice of patachitra of decades, active pursuit of it by specific groups in recent years has created new and exciting opportunities for them. Could Togalu Gombeyatta undergo a similar re-vitalisation? What kind of content could make the form sustainable again? What kind of formal changes would be needed? When considering these questions, it is important to refer to practitioners like Bhimavva who have experienced the form at a high, seen it undergo changes in their lifetime and have actively sought to intervene for or against them.

**By Vidyun Sabhaney**  
(Based on research by Vidyun Sabhaney and Shohei Emura in 2012)

**Image Credits**

**Illustrations: Shohei Emura,**

**Photographs Courtesy: Vidyun Sabhaney**

**Featured puppets from the collections of Ramaiah (Mandeya) and Gunduraju (Hassan)**

# 2 | An Interview with Margareta Niculescu

By Ranjana Pandey

**On a visit to Charleville Mezieres, I had the opportunity to meet and chat at length with Margareta Niculescu.**

Amidst sips of coffee and bites of the most delicious local patisserie, Margareta took me down the pages of history.

How did she, a Rumanian puppeteer, come to be a doyen of Puppetry, the Director of L'Institut Internationale de la Marionette in 1985? How did she come to love France and live in France?

She was elected to Unima's International body and to its Publication Commission. She served in different positions in Unima

Internationale, but always with the same zeal, for the cause of Puppetry from 1957 to 2004. She was President of Unima Internationale, 2000 to 2004. She also served as the founding editor of E Pur Si Mouve, an annual publication and also of the review PUK, an annual publication of the International Institut de la Marionette.

She gave an impetus to the development of the field of

Puppetry in Education. Her wide experience and deep passion infected and impressed many worldwide.

The Worldwide Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts bears testimony to her diverse contributions. The heavy volume is peppered with references and cross references to her contribution to the work of many leading puppeteers of the 20th century. It would not be unfair to say that the world of contemporary

puppetry would have been much poorer had Margareta not been such a formidable force.

In the first volume of E Pur Si Muove (2002), Margareta, the founding editor, barely keeps her own excitement down when she writes:



Christophe Loiseau

“Puppetry is presently an art seething with excitement which arouses the convergent interests of an ever increasing public and artists from all disciplines.

Within the framework of this art the experience of the masters and the experiments of innovators mingle and are mutually enriched.”

Indeed this is exactly how she contributed masterfully,

her innovations and aesthetics to numerous productions.

“New forms of expressions emerge, while bygone practices are discovered and reappraised, brought into the light of day. Simultaneously opera, dance, theatre, music are increasingly inclined to borrow its figures, its visual and dramatic codes, in fact, even summon it onto their stages.” She wrote triumphantly.

In our discussion she explained:

“Puppetry being indisputably symbolic of a multidisciplinary approach, occupies a focal point in this decisive moment in history of the performing arts where frontiers are becoming less distinct and furthermore represent a point of reference amidst numerous contemporary practices.”

In her journey she had to address several questions: How to sustain these transformations in the best possible way? How to establish a link between the analysis of the contemporary nature of the puppet theatre and this creative profusion? How to give a sense to these new aesthetic vocabularies which throw the traditional criteria of criticism into disarray?

Her leadership and vision played a unique role. She came to France in 1984 and remained there, making her home in this sleepy, little-known town in Northern France, Charleville Mezieres. She was one of 70,000 inhabitants of this quiet place on the banks of the

Meuse. But she stood out with her feisty nature and strong Romanian accent, which she carries till today. She tickled their curiosity.

It began with Jacques Felix, another very special person and a citizen of Charleville. He would organize the International Puppet Festivals (in 1961) which would shake up the sleepy little town every year. In 1972 the city became the venue for an International Festival and the Unima Congress as well. Gradually the city of Charleville Mezieres became every puppeteer’s mecca.

For Margareta it was clear that Puppetry had to move out of the shadow of Theatre and stop being the poor sibling...In this endeavour, she had powerful and enlightened team mates: Jacques Felix and Henryk Jurkowski. The challenge was to change and expand the definition of Puppetry: to move away from the traditional craft and folk art, which somehow diminished the art and did not acknowledge the tremendous power and possibilities of Puppetry as a performance art.

The way forward was to build a proper structured training program-a degree course.

Margareta had had professional training from Bucharest and had wide experience. She had worked and performed in a variety of arenas, theatres, production houses. Her work made waves with its



innovations, wherever she went: at Sofia, Bucharest, Oslo, Turku, Sevilla, Brussels, to name just a few. She had dared to change the aesthetics of puppetry.

She was the natural choice for this task and in 1987 - ESNAM (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et de la Marionnette) was established in Charleville Mezieres and Margareta was its Director. It was nothing short of a coup. The Ministry of Culture, Government of France, agreed to fund the establishment of this unique institution!

A three-year, multi-disciplinary, degree course was established, offering an opportunity to students from all disciplines and all nations to “delimit themselves”.

The important emphasis was to be placed on culture studies:

“But you have to know who you are- it is very important” she explained emphatically in between sips of coffee. The syllabus comprised of: history of culture, exposure to cutting edge technology, scenography, dramaturgy, study of texts, aesthetics, and all that is needed to create a performance. It was a dream come true.

Henryk Jurkowski, the well-known Polish dramaturge,

Brunella Eruli, Alain Recoing, were important team mates in setting up the Ecole.

Margareta pulled in her contacts and brought the best talents from all over the world. Everyone was agog at these phenomena.

A “Centre de Documentation”, a fabulous library also took shape gradually. Today students come

from all over the world to do research and study. ESNAM has given the Puppet Arts a space indisputably among the best in the world.

Sitting in Margareta’s front room, chatting with her, I felt privileged. Margareta

has been awarded and decorated many times by the French Government, the Romanian Government and many, many others for her distinguished career and contribution to the modern aesthetics of Puppetry as it stands today.

The passion still smoulders as she talks about the Puppet Arts. As I left her simple home, I realized that Margareta’s lifelong contribution to Puppet Arts has created a very valuable legacy for all Contemporary Puppeteers.

Thank You Margareta!

**The challenge was to change and expand the definition of Puppetry: to move away from the traditional craft and folk art, which somehow diminished the art and did not acknowledge the tremendous power and possibilities of Puppetry as a performance art.**

# 3 | CHARLEVILLE MEZIERES- THE MECCA FOR PUPPETEERS

By Anurupa Roy

Charleville-Mezieres, the capital of the province of Ardennes in Champagne in France is a typical European regional capital, with a total population of 70,000. The town has a little station, one high school,

**This town is the centre of some of the most important puppetry institutions on this planet.**

a court, a post office, a lazy river running through it, a famous 18th century poet to boast of (and of course his home is a museum),

a historical city centre with cobbled streets, cafes and quaint shops with delightful windows.

There is however one big exception. This town is the centre of some of the most important puppetry institutions on this planet. These include The International Institute of Puppetry (Institut Internationale de la Marionette), the International School of Puppetry, ESNAM-Ecole Internationale de la Marionette, the headquarters of the International Union of Puppeteers UNIMA- Union Internationale de la Marionette and it is the host of one of the largest International Puppet Festival. It has thus rightfully been dubbed the World Capital of Puppetry.

But it is not by mere accident or pure co-incidence that such a place exists. It is the convergence of the



It has thus rightfully been dubbed the World Capital of Puppetry.

vision of puppeteers like Jacque Felix and Margareta Niculescu: the founders of these institutions, and the continued support

of art lovers in the regional ministry of culture as well as of the people of this town. Margareta in one of her articles talks of her conversations with the regional ministry and how it was not just a provider of financial support but a major stake holder in ESNAM. Not only did the ministry participate in all aspects of running the school but also in building the vision for this institute.

### The 'UNIMA FESTIVAL MONDIAL de THEATRES de MARIONNETTES'

The festival has been in existence since 1961.

The thoughts of the festival president would give the reader an idea of the vision behind this festival.

'...it is our duty to prepare the festival for a future which is worthy of its challenges, worthy of the demands of its artists, worthy of the fidelity of its audience, now that puppetry has finally achieved international recognition as major art form.' Jean-Luc Felix.

Truly this festival lives up to its ambition in sheer size and scale.



I once stayed in Charleville for eight weeks as a researcher-in-residence at the Institute during its non-festival time. The town was dead as a doornail on weekends with not a living soul in the streets on a Sunday.

And then I saw it again during the festival which was a different experience altogether. Although it is difficult to describe, I shall give it a try. The festival is attended by artists from across the globe. This year the festival saw greats like Phillippe Genty, Duda Paiva, Neville Tranter and many others.

There were 50 shows in the festival. There were 100 designated outdoor performance spaces. In addition there were numerous street shows. Every shop window, street corner and restaurant had a display of puppets. The town square or Place Ducale would have 10 street performances running at any given time during the day. Besides there were small pitched tents that had mushroomed across the town where caravan and tent shows were playing. If you happened to be crossing the street absentmindedly a giant puppet bird seated on a small scooter would honk suddenly as he drove around the town with the traffic. Once I was scared out of my wits as a huge ghost appeared out of nowhere and from within it came six tall, monster-men. These were masked actors on stilts! They had suddenly transformed a regular street into a fantastical space. If you are planning a trip to Charleville make sure it is at Festival time. It will be an unforgettable experience.



Please visit:

Institut International de la Marionette

Villa d' Aubilly, the Residency for Researchers and creators

The Library- (which has an exhaustive collection of books and videos of puppet theatre from around the world.)

<http://www.marionette.com/en/IIM/Historical>

<http://www.marionette.com/en/Esnam/Presentation>

<http://www.marionette.com/en/Edition/Catalogue->  
(IIM Publishing, publishes mammoth researches and academic books, several journals, periodicals and newsletters focusing entirely on puppetry)



# 4 THE WINDOW – Looking In, Looking Out

By Jennifer Pfeiffer



I undertook a formal research project working with a traditional Indian puppeteer, A. Selvaraja of Chennai in 2010. My interest in cross-cultural work goes back many years, beginning with collaborations with contemporary Japanese dancers and training in physical performance styles. These experiences outside of puppetry were a turning point. Coming to understand how to generate, control and manipulate energy and to have more body awareness, and locate centres of balance and core energy, was to automatically understand much more about the puppet. I came to realise that matters of the finer

points of technique, especially those that plant the puppet's consciousness firmly in the head, was not the only approach and this was further confirmed by listening to Yakshagana puppeteer, Bhaskar Kogga Kamath talk in 2002 about inhabiting the puppet in dance. Looking at how human communication actually works is to recognise how much we convey tacitly through our embodied expression, often unconsciously and this could even be culturally specific. This was a starting point in a desire for deeper understanding of the efficacy of puppets as a human communicative instrument.

However, the question that I have set for myself is one that I've been asked in the past, but have not yet addressed. Why did I choose to work with a traditional puppeteer with all the challenges that it presented, instead of a contemporary puppeteer, which would still have constituted a cultural exchange?

I've had an interest in the traditional performers and their situation through my long involvement with the UNIMA Asia-Pacific Commission. Yet I found in conversation with peers in Australia, and with European and American UNIMA members that attitudes prevailed that seemed to present what could be described as the persistence of a colonial sensibility. In this I recognised that 'the west' is still in some need of education and awareness. That there are some equally problematic attitudes in the region itself is also apparent. A tradition may be part of a national heritage, but it is neither a possession, nor is it a pure, eternal or undeviating expression that must be protected from pollution.

I support the UNESCO International Conventions for Intangible Cultural Heritage which recognises, that traditions are embodied within the puppeteers. Their well-being is what can allow their puppetry practices to continue. Shifting or changing the status of the puppeteer, and/or allowing the development of parallel practices using their skills may be solutions worth trying. It sounds simple, but it is complicated. Hence as an advocate on the Asia-Pacific Commission, placed in a leadership role, I felt that as a westerner,

my acquiring knowledge from a traditional puppeteer about his life and associated challenges would not only make me better equipped to identify needs, understand aspirations and assist, but also place me in a more advantageous position for bridging this knowledge divide and to raise consciousness. The ultimate aim would be to provide some solidarity with our fellow puppeteers, no matter whether they are uneducated or disadvantaged which is also not something to be presumed.

So the project fulfilled several goals, and was a pragmatic decision. It allowed me to look at the communicative properties of puppets through cultural difference, a difference that was as broad as I could imagine, and to learn more about a traditional puppeteer and his life. I welcome the opportunity to work with contemporary puppeteers in the future, which would add further to the research. This project provides a foundation for a long-term practice-research plan.



It is critical to emphasise that the project had nothing to do with a fascination for an 'exotic Other', a cultural appropriation to re-energise an exhausted imagination, or overstepping boundaries to re-colonise through culture.

Neither was it a question of giving a voice to a marginalised puppeteer. It was simply about wanting to have a performative conversation to see what we had in common through our puppetry. I set us both a task of making a new performance about this conversation, our experiences together and our struggle for understanding. I sought a work that was not literal,

but communicated metaphorically with loose intentional threads that used the skills, styles and material we already possessed, and not attempting fusion but to let things sit alongside, or even collide

together. After a time we worked on small new sequences that did hybridise our work, influenced by the contemporary world and our shared experiences in our temporary residence in Ballarat.

Selvaraja applied his puppetry ability, developed for playing traditional Tolu Bommالاتum performances, to new and contemporary work. He had previously participated in educative performances about AIDS

**In the doing, and the making, we learned from each other through an intensive process of being and working together.**





awareness, and it was not his first time outside of India, a reason for inviting him to participate in this research. What he made of the experience in the long-term, I am unable to say without follow-up. In the broad picture, he had an experience that he would not have had access to otherwise. I can say that together we created a multi-layered performance, *The Window*, which utilised multiple styles of puppet and technique. In the doing, and the making, we learned from each other through an intensive process of being and working together. This comprised of excursions outside the studio: looking at wildlife; landscape; at aboriginal myth; historical sites; and local art galleries, where we learned together of the region of Ballarat, our temporary home. When the Diaspora Indian community in Australia came in contact with *The Window*, there were interesting and diverse responses. For some, Selvaraja's puppetry was attached to nostalgic childhood remembrances that had no relevance to modern life. At times there was a tension between a philosophical sentiment (in the texts and epic stories rather than the puppeteer), and reinforcement of his low social status.

Our performance became a metaphor for our communicative process, which gradually enabled us to understand one another

Selvaraja shared oral accounts of his history, but was not confident with his English language. Our interpreters were not from puppetry or art backgrounds. While they were competent for administrative housekeeping purposes, our performative conversation remained unsatisfactory. I had to be mindful, of not speaking too fast, too long, or being too complex. Our language barriers kept our exchanges simple, but proved to be effective for our working method.

Our performance became a metaphor for our communicative process, which gradually enabled us to understand one another better through our constant contact with each other, learning the nuances of our embodied expressions.

*The Window* became an opportunity, unforeseen, just as the Japanese techniques, to advance the understanding of the scope of puppets through a deeper understanding of the range of human communicative power, the tacit ways in which we interrelate with each other, beyond language.

Ours is still, as yet, an unfinished story.

**Jennifer Pfeiffer is a puppeteer, a PHD candidate at the Victoria College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.**

**[jenpfei@gmail.com](mailto:jenpfei@gmail.com)**

# 5 Different Approaches to Iranian Puppetry

By Salma Mohseni Ardehali

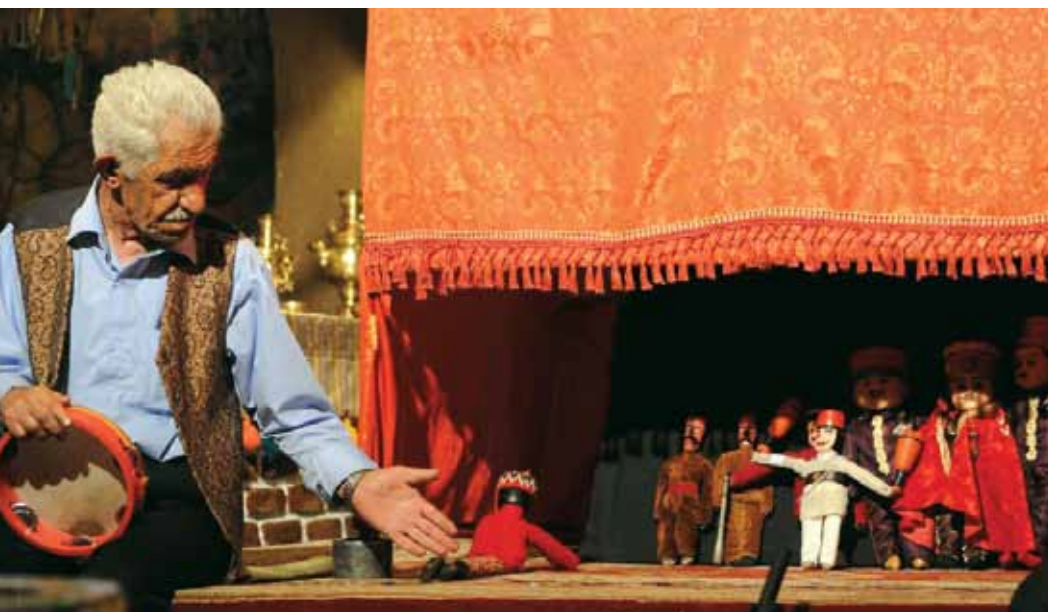
The use of figurines or statuettes in Iran probably goes back to ancient times of pre-Islamic Persia. In the ancient cult of Mithras, an Indo-Iranian religion practiced in the 14th century BC, masks and probably dolls were used in initiation ceremonies. For instance there was a tradition called “Booka Baranah” (rain puppet) in Kurdistan: children went from house to house through the village during a drought, singing, praying and entering homes to collect offerings (food, money or grain). There is also “Teke” (the Goat), in Azerbaijan, which is a ritual to welcome spring at Nowrouz (New Year). The first written reference to puppetry of Iran goes back to the 11th century. The poetry of Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) and Fariduddin Attar of Nishapur (1145-1220) contains many metaphorical references to string and

The first written reference to puppetry of Iran goes back to the 11th century. The poetry of Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) and Fariduddin Attar of Nishapur (1145-1220) contains many metaphorical references to string and shadow puppet shows.

shadow puppet shows.

Several types of traditional puppet performance still exist in Iran. Such as: Kheimeh Shab Bazi [Shah Salim Bazi]-Iranian string puppetry), Jiji Viji, Panj, Pahlavan Kachal [Bald Hero]: (three types of Iranian hand puppets), Bibi jan, arousak posht e-pardeh and Haji va Mobarak (Haji and Mobarak). The main hero of these Puppet plays is a puppet named Mobarak. Like many traditional art forms around the world, these Iranian puppet shows were very popular and appreciated by people of all ages. The traditional puppeteers endeavored to expose the political, social and economic conditions of the society in their shows and keep up with contemporary issues.

According to some documentary evidence, during the Safavid (1502-1736) and Qajar (1796-1925) eras, artists had a protected status and were organized in guild-like societies which defended their rights. By the time of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), Iranian intellectuals reacted against traditional forms and, instead of





reforming them, pushed them completely aside. The kheimeh shab bazi was thereby marginalized and other forms gradually became almost obsolete. Nowadays, these forms of puppetry are relegated to the museums, festivals and occasional ceremonies.

#### Contemporary Period

During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), a new window opened when international troupes were invited and Iranian artists toured around the world. Theatre artists were introduced and inspired by the art of modern puppetry. In 1970, the Ministry of Culture and the Arts created a department

dedicated to puppet theatre and invited some Iranian and International puppet artists to train a new generation of puppeteers. The Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA, Kanoon) in 1975, organized a first international festival of puppet theatre.

In 1979, the first permanent venue for children theatre was established by Behrooz Gharibpour in IIDCYA. The second international festival of puppet theatre was held in 1989, this time under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Since then this festival has been held every two years and attracts many artists from Iran and abroad. In 1989, during the International puppet festival of Tehran, Iran joined UNIMA internationale with the support Ms. Meher R. Contractor (an Indian Puppeteer), the president of UNIMA at that time and established its national center under the name of Mobarak UNIMA. The UNIMA national center and a biennial international puppet festival catalysed international collaboration. Degree courses in Puppetry were introduced in three different art universities of the



country (BA from 1972 and MA from 2010). Today a new generation of puppeteers is being trained.

It is because of all these steps that a new wave of puppetry is visible in Iran.

The 1990's were a turning point in the development of puppetry of Iran. Numerous books were translated and authored. Many puppet artists were now interested in creating performances for adults.

Traditional forms are practiced by both masters and scholars of traditional puppetry. They remain faithful to the old form, reviving these shows and performing them nationally

and internationally. But unfortunately their audience is restricted to museums, festivals, exhibitions, and ceremonies.

**This group of puppeteers creates and performs almost exclusively for adult audiences. Furthermore, they use the puppet - this metaphorical object - as a means of expression to overcome the political and social limitations.**

Non-traditional forms are divided into three different approaches:

- P u p p e t theatre for children: During the 80's and early 90's, puppet theatre for children was almost the only avatar of Puppetry. Many brilliant works were created at that

time. But gradually the viewpoints changed and puppetry for adults began to flourish. Puppet theatre for children is still alive and tries to



reinvent itself. Although puppetry is sometimes recognized as an art form for children, there is little enthusiasm for this sort of puppetry now.

- Modern and experimental approaches: The younger generation of puppeteers (graduated from professional degree courses in puppetry) are inspired by modern and post-modern streams of puppet theatre from Europe. These artists try to explore all techniques, styles and methods of puppetry and use either international classical and modern plays or ancient Iranian literature to enrich their shows. Most of these artists are well known internationally as they are very successful in communicating with any kind of audience around the world. This group of puppeteers creates and performs almost exclusively for adult audiences. Furthermore, they use the puppet - this metaphorical object - as a means of expression to overcome the political and social limitations.
- Sumptuous marionette opera: Iranian marionette opera is not a traditional puppetry form but it takes advantage of Iranian classical literature and traditional music. Aran Puppet Theatre Company (the company which practices this style), started working from 2004 under the direction and management of "Behrooz Gharibpour". This company has performed six marionette operas so far and has toured within Iran and many countries around the world.

The six operas are: Rostam and Sohrab (2004), Macbeth (by Verdi, 2007), Ashoura (2009), Rumi (2010), Hafez (2012) and Leili & Majnoon (2014). The shows are suitable for adults and young adults. They are based on rich classical Iranian literature and poems.

- In conclusion, the prolific contemporary puppet theatre of Iran is indebted to the cultural richness of the literature, poetry and traditional performing arts of the country. The new generation of puppeteers has emerged partially from the golden age of the puppet theatre for children of the recent past. Today, in this fantastic world and among all the trappings of the modern life, I feel that we should support the traditional art forms, reconnect with our roots and adapt them to the contemporary world. Each above-mentioned approach must keep on traversing its own path, and our precious heritage needs to be preserved as well.

**Salma Mohseni Ardehali**

**Iranian Manipulator, Puppet Designer, Director and Puppet scholar.**

**Board member of Mobarak UNIMA from 2009 until present.**

**Email Address: [salma.mohseni@gmail.com](mailto:salma.mohseni@gmail.com)**

**Weblog: [www.puppet-art.blogfa.com](http://www.puppet-art.blogfa.com),**

**[www.puppetart.webs.com](http://www.puppetart.webs.com)**

# 6 TOPIC

By Idoya Otegui



The CIT, Center of Initiatives of Tolosa, is a non-profitable Association with forty-six years of history.

TOPIC is a natural consequence of the International Puppet Festival of Tolosa, 'Titirijai' that in 2012 celebrated its 30th anniversary.

It all began with Miguel Arreche and Idoya Otegui. They were convinced that there should be a Center dedicated to all facets of puppet theatre: preservation, research creation and promotion of the fantastic world of puppets.

Even after twenty-three years of hard work it is still a work in progress. It has been an arduous and difficult task in which Miguel Arreche and Idoya Otegui, with the tireless help of Enkarni Genua and Manolo Gomez worked indefatigably. There were moments of despair as it has been very difficult to get together all the different institutions: Tolosa's Municipality, Government of the Province of Gipuzkoa, Basque Government, Ministry of Culture of Spain and a Savings Bank, but finally we managed to bring them all together and all of them agreed

to put up the necessary money to construct the building and ultimately, on 27th November 2009, TOPIC International Center for Puppetry Arts of Tolosa was open to the public.

This is a unique project: the only Comprehensive Center Puppet in Europe which has a 250-seater theatre, a suitable space to create puppet shows, a museum, a hall for temporary exhibitions, and a digitized documentation center accessible via internet. Additionally, there exists dedicated space for teaching puppetry to children, to teachers and professionals. A small residential facility for artists, researchers or teachers has been provided.

In its short life, TOPIC has acquired an impressive collection of films, photographs, posters and publications of the puppet arts making it a pioneer center in Europe.

Since its opening, twelve exhibitions have been held. Noteworthy are two exhibitions: Chinese Shadows and Latin American puppets.

Until now the Museum has had more than 67,000 visitors. The Museum was designed by a very well-known and several times prizewinner, Catalan architect, Dany Freixes, who has also worked as



puppeteer with Joan Baixas. TOPIC's Museum has a collection of over 1800 pieces from all over the world. We also have a very important collection of Indian Puppets, acquired thanks to the help of Dadi Pudumjee. In fact the relationship between CIT and Indian Puppetry is very close. The Titirijai Festival, in 2004, hosted a 'Window to Indian Puppetry' which included performances and a complete exhibition of Indian puppetry. The exhibition was curated by Dadi Pudumjee, designed by Neeraj Sahai and was made possible thanks to the important support of the Saanget Natak Akademy and the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts.

TOPIC loans its collection of puppets and is open to collaborations with other countries. Some of its successful collaborations have been with Korea, China, Cuba and India.

The pedagogical aspect of puppetry is of great importance for us because children are our future. We also conduct specific workshops and visits to the Museum for people with visual, hearing or mental disabilities.

We have designed many teacher training programmes carried out by request of the Ministry of Education of the Basque Government.



In our endeavour to include all sections of society we hold special workshops for teenagers and senior citizens. So we have started an intergenerational project together with schools from San Sebastian and Tolosa to bring the puppet as a therapeutic tool for Senior Residences.

There have also been four summer schools for professionals. The 'Creation Residencies' in TOPIC have resulted in nine different productions. We currently are working on a project to create an opera for children, whose premiere is scheduled for 2015.

**36,000 spectators have watched, 209 performances of 115 different shows from 89 companies at TOPIC theatre.**



Future Projects of interest to India: Indian Tradition of Orality exhibition - organized in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National center for the Arts. This exhibition will be set up in the National Drama Center in Madrid (June) and in the TOPIC of Tolosa (October 2014-March 2015)

TOPIC has much to contribute to the world of puppetry and has been so successful because of its team of hardworking and dedicated volunteers and collaborators.



## Notice Board

Design [www.digitamedia.in](http://www.digitamedia.in)

Puppet Schools and courses around the world

<http://www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/schools/index.html>

Museum of Puppetry and Puppetry collections across the world

<http://www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/exhibits/>

Researchers-in-Residence , programs for puppetry. Deutches Forum for puppet theatre in Bochum-Germany

[http://www.fidena.de/root/researcher-in-residence/mn\\_55](http://www.fidena.de/root/researcher-in-residence/mn_55)

Sangeet Natak Akademi

<http://www.sangeetnatak.org>

The Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts

[www.ignca.nic.in](http://www.ignca.nic.in)

For further details contact

[pandeyranjana@gmail.com](mailto:pandeyranjana@gmail.com)

[unimaindia@gmail.com](mailto:unimaindia@gmail.com)

[royanurupa@gmail.com](mailto:royanurupa@gmail.com)

Cover Photo

“NAGHALI” (a traditional Theatre form from Iran) in a Trans Modern Performance for Puppets by Dr Hamidreza Ardalan - 2013