



# Sutradhar

The UNIMA India Newsletter

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# A Note from the Editor

Welcome to Sutradhar - a Unima India e-magazine which will be brought out twice a year ; March and October.

Today Puppetry is acknowledged as a serious performance art with tremendous scope for growth and exploration.

Puppetry has been embraced by dancers, musicians, theatre directors, film- makers, actors , teachers, therapists and activists.

The sheer variety and artistic excellence of the productions in recent times has put Puppetry centre stage in New York and recently in London with highly acclaimed productions like : Gandhi, Lion King and War Horse

A cross flow of information and exposure to modern trends world- wide is imperative for the growth and resurgence of contemporary puppetry in India and the sub - continent.

Sutradhar will provide a space for discourse, dialogue and information sharing.

We seek to upscale Puppetry Arts and also bring much needed attention to the rich traditions struggling for survival today.

This e- magazine hopes to reach a maximum readership of interested people.

In time we will explore the possibility of doing a version in Hindi as well.

We would like to support and publicize the relentless efforts made by Sangeet Natak Akademi, ICCR, IGNCA, Ministry of Culture, Ishara Trust and ofcourse Unima- India.

Puppetry needs to be brought more and more to the notice of all these players and many more like State Bodies, Researchers, Academics, Institutions, Schools of Drama, Theatre, Design etc.

**Ranjana Pandey**

**President**

**Unima-India**

# 1 | The Unima India Page An Introduction

Unima India, registered in India in 1986 promotes the voluntary union of puppeteers to support sharing, growth and popularity of puppetry and quality of the performance art.

All the activities that Unima India undertakes are geared towards fulfilling these objectives.

## **Currently Unima India has 33 members**

While the members renew their membership annually, we have a vast network of supporters and well wishers in the field of puppetry who participate in every which way.

It has always been a challenge to communicate with such a diverse and geographically spread out community.

The challenges are to maintain a uniformity and regularity of communication which is possible only if a dedicated team is defined and entrusted this job as a job.

Depending on volunteers for this core activity has not been successful.

However despite the challenges Unima s work has been growing slowly.

Today there is a positive perception of this body of puppeteers which is established with certain premium cultural institutions like the India International Center, The India Habitat Centre, Dilli Haat, The Crafts Museum and the Kamla Devi Bhavan.

## **Unima India - 2010-2012**

The web site launched in 2010 was an attempt to create an information link.

The web site lived for exactly one year and we abandoned it for lack of participation from members using it and also the prohibitive cost.

We created a new format for Sutradhar - a newsletter

which had been a regular feature a few years back and there had been an interruption because of various reasons.

The support for both these activities was given by the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Today - in 2012 we are using the Internet social network Facebook by launching a Facebook Page for Unima India.

Every paying UNIMA-india member is also an administrator so that they can keep uploading their information.

Thus this page is always full of information. We have 62

members and counting, uploads of new events, posters of shows of members, pictures of shows of rehearsals etc.

The link is <http://www.facebook.com/groups/342106832490002/>.

This ploy has been very successful.

Members have been using it regularly to post information and photographs of their work, to interact with each other and to give and receive feedback and news.

In fact this lively page has been getting a lot of appreciation internationally.

This combines the benefits of both the Newsletter and the Web site, and at no cost.

**Do visit and participate!**

**Unima India, registered in India in 1986 promotes the voluntary union of puppeteers to support sharing, growth and popularity of puppetry and quality of the performance art.**

World Puppet day celebrations have been held every year and are growing in popularity.

Besides New Delhi there have been celebrations, performances, festivals in 5 other cities :

Bangalore -by Dhaatu, Anupama Hoskare

Bombay-by Meena Naik

Lucknow -by Mayur Puppets Milan Yadav

Burdwan -by Prabhitangshu Das

Agartala and Tripura also.

### Workshops for children

As part of the WPD celebrations every year we have had workshops for children on puppet making at the India International Center and at the Dilli Haat.

### The Puppet Parade at Dilli Haat

has become a fantastic crowd puller and is an annual feature on World Puppet Day. The number of Puppeteers participating with their large and giant puppets has gone up.

### Workshops for children at India International Center

It is imperative to build a future audience for puppetry

The objective was storytelling and building puppets from waste material.

Unima was invited to conduct this workshop as part of an event being organised and hosted by the India International Centre.

The workshop was based on *The Last Jungle* on this Earth by Randhir Khare

### Workshop for professional puppeteers 2010

Prof.Michael Meschke ( a well known puppeteer from Sweden) conducted a three day workshop on



dramaturgy . 34 puppeteers from 9 different states of India participated. It was partly supported by SNA, hosted by Kamla Devi Bhavan and facilitated by Unima India.

Michael Meschke gave a donation to Unima India and also gifted a scholarship to a young talented puppeteer. Shamim ( member Unima) has been selected as an awardee.

Prof. Meschke shared his experience and expertise with the Puppeteer community here.

### Workshop for professional Puppeteers

Workshop for Professional Puppeteers - 2012 at the India International Center. Many international puppeteers also participated, notably puppeteers from France,Spain,Afghanistan.

Theodora Skiptares also attended and made a donation to Unima India.

### Library

A copy of WEPA , the World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts was gifted to Unima India by Dadi Pudumjee, President Unima Internationale.

This forms a modest beginning of a Library of Puppetry Literature,Publications,Journals and videos. This is for the benefit of all Unima Members who can study, read, research and consult at leisure.

The **Library, is housed and maintained by** a member of Unima.

### Promoting new work

Young emerging puppet groups exploring a new language of puppetry were invited to perform by Unima India at the India Habitat Center.

This was a great encouragement to them and we played to full house.

Participants

Object Theatre by Train Theatre -Choiti Ghosh

String Puppetry by Kuchkuch Theatre -Shamim

Inside my Mind - a play on Alzheimers by Anand

Public interface during Ishara Festival- Unima India holds a stall and distributes information about Puppetry and Unima India;

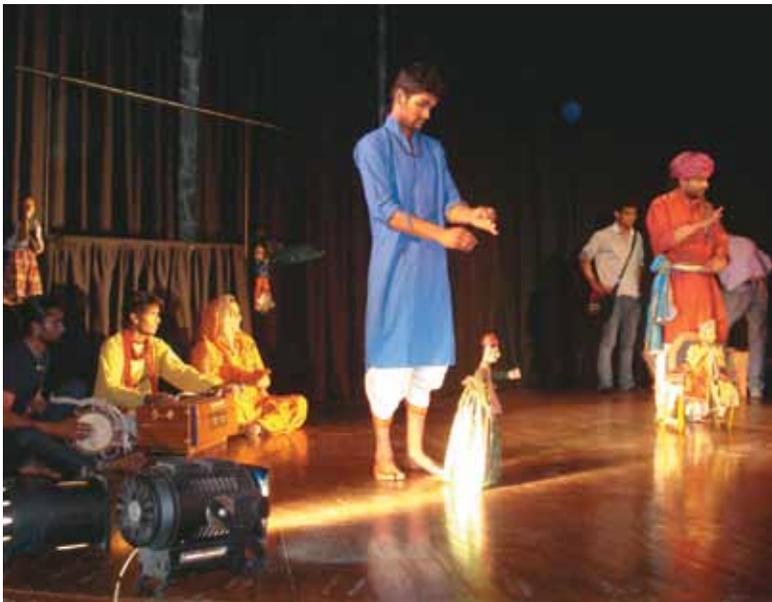


## UNIMA-India and SNA

Unima India was invited as observer and expert to Bengaluru for SNAs huge festival of Traditional Puppetry.

A report was given to them.

UNIMA-India had a wonderful association with the Sangeet Natak Akademi in organising its annual World Puppet Day celebrations. This year we took this association forward and also expand our roles to activities beyond the WPD.



At UNIMA we feel we would be able to support SNA in role of creating a climate for puppetry, create awareness and puppet-literacy amongst children investing in them as the future audience, creating opportunities and space for puppet theatre performances , encouraging young talented puppeteers etc.

## A Very Special Initiative

Keeping this goal in mind, this year UNIMA-India has started a very special initiative to support new performances by puppeteers.

UNIMA-India offered a seed grant of Rs 10,000 each to 3 puppeteers to create a new show

This was only to be a small incentive to start a new performance and will support a part of the material and production costs of a new show.

This grant has been made possible by personal donations made by puppeteers like prof. Michael Meschke and Ms. Theodora Skiptares and money raised by UNIMA-India by doing small projects with the Srinivas Mallaiah Trust Kamala Devi Chottopadhaya Museum.

Six puppeteers applied for the grant from Andhra Pradesh, Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi.

A jury of 3 eminent artists scanned the proposals and chose 3 grantees .

# 2 | Women in Indian Puppetry: Artists, Educators, Activists

By Claudia Orenstein

## Meher Rustom Contractor

One of the earliest modern women to leave her mark on this field is Meher Rustom Contractor, who died in 1992, at the age of seventy-four. Contractor's art was nurtured first by resources outside of India that helped her develop a contemporary approach to puppetry. This training served as prelude to her eventual rediscovery of and dedication to the local traditions of Andhra Pradesh. Like other women in the field, Contractor spread her talents beyond performances meant uniquely for entertainment or artistic appreciation, in her case as a pioneer in the use of puppets for education.

Contractor never expected to become a puppeteer. Starting at age sixteen, she went on full scholarship to London to study visual arts, book illustration, and fashion design, first at Cambridge and then at the Royal Drawing Society (now the Royal Academy of

Arts). When World War II broke out, she returned to India, eventually becoming the arts and crafts teacher at the Shreyas school in Ahmedabad. (She would finish her formal studies after the war was over.) It was at the Shreyas School that she first turned to puppetry in the 1950s, experimenting with using puppets as a teaching tool, a model that

a colleague had brought back from a trip abroad. In 1957, after seeing one of the school's successful puppet performances, the Czech Consul General paid for Contractor to travel to Czechoslovakia to study puppetry and arts in education. In Prague she became involved with the Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA), the international organization for puppeteers, sponsored by the UN, which was, at that time, having its first post-war meeting there. She eventually served the organization as Vice-President for three different terms. A lifetime connection with UNIMA, which acts as an international networking forum for puppeteers, gave Contractor continuous exposure to new performance models and novel ways of using puppets in educational settings.

In the 1960s, after Contractor presented her first professional shadow puppet play at Darpana Academy, *Savitri-Satyavan*, written by Mrinalini Sarabhai, Sarabhai showed her a collection of large traditional shadow puppets from Andhra Pradesh. This was Contractor's first introduction to the local form of puppetry. The *tholu bommalata* figures (literally, dance of leather shadows) -- brightly colored in shades of red, blue black, and yellow-- stand from four to six feet tall, some of the largest shadow puppets in India. A screen ten feet high and at least twelve feet in length accommodates them. The puppeteers, standing behind the screen, hold the puppets by bamboo rods tilted toward the cloth, to cast a clear image. These puppets, which in the past were sometimes made of deer leather, but today are made primarily of goatskin, have jointed shoulders, elbows, and knees, and sometimes necks, waists, and ankles as well. Contractor studied the form in depth, playing an important role in reviving the tradition, which was dying out. She used the form in her own productions and shared her knowledge of it with others through her teaching and writings. Ranjana Pandey, recalls Contractor's shadow plays, saying:

I saw two shows that were designed and directed by



her. Both of them were shadow plays. Rustom Sohrab and a children's folk tale set to music.

Both were played to recorded track.

*Her team was very youthful and professional. Darpana Academy bore her stamp.*

The puppets were very well made keeping the traditional purity of method and style.

In 1968, Contractor introduced puppetry as an area of study in Darpana Academy, becoming the Honorary Director of that department. Her work as a teacher of young artists in this context left behind an important legacy of puppeteers trained to create their own artistic performances drawing on a mixture of contemporary and traditional styles, among them Dadi Pudumjee, current President of UNIMA, Ratnamala Nori, Shri Mahipat Kavi, Bela Shodhan, and Mansingh Zalal. Dadi Pudumjee remembers how Contractor inspired her students through both her personal and professional generosity:

*Meherbhen, was a great teacher, she encouraged us to experiment with materials and themes at least what was available at the time, 1980-86. Her home was an open house for all of us, not only was she a great cook, but the Sunday Lunches at her home in Shaibag, I will never forget. My first visit to an International Puppet Festival in Charleville, France was with her ... and the Darpana troupe; this one visit opened up my vision to the world of puppetry.*

Among Contractor's other legacies are the models and practices she instituted for using puppetry in education, even helping "the Educational Research Center, Government of India to set school curriculum in fundamental and creative arts." She demonstrated the effective use of puppets for social

activism as well, with endeavors such as her family planning play *The Key to Happiness* and her Model Village Project, 1957-60, in which she used puppets "to propagate vaccination, cleanliness, use of proper medicines and childcare." Her books covering the many topics she mastered include *Creative Drama in Education and Various Types of Traditional Puppetry in India*. Contractor's son Navroze reminds us that Contractor's commitments in puppetry and elsewhere were always profoundly humanitarian:

Besides puppetry, she was deeply involved in serving destitute and battered women and women leprosy patients. Taking time off from her puppetry three days a week she would dedicate to this work. She was acutely aware of the caste system and as far as she could she took it on herself to teach lower caste children and also see that she took one of them on her international trips.

Through her professional engagements, enhanced by her skilful blending of them,

Contractor revealed to the next generations of Indian puppeteers and spectators, puppetry's many dimensions: simultaneously an innovative art form, a living cultural inheritance, and a tool for education and social action.

### Anupama Hoskere

Anupama Hoskere took an unusual route into puppetry, via engineering, and her work focuses primarily on the resurrection of dying traditions, making old forms of puppetry new again.

In the 1990s, Hoskere gave up the opportunities that degrees in engineering and computer science

Contemporary puppeteers have crossed this barrier. Many women world wide have been trail blazers and are successful professionals.

from the US usually afford, when she moved from California back to Bangalore with her husband and children and soon founded Dhattu. What began as a simple workshop on the epic tales for her children and others in the neighborhood, in order to provide them with “strength and resilience to face life,” soon incorporated puppets and grew into an impressive puppet theatre that now “showcases the grandeur of the puppet theatre tradition in Karnataka, covering rod, shadow, string and glove puppets.” Hoskere, who has also been a *bharatanatyam* performer for over thirty years (having trained with guru V S Kaushik and guru Narmada), studied puppetry with Guru M. R. Ranganatha Rao. Rao, now in his seventies, is a master of the rod tradition in Karnataka, in the *mudalpaya* style. He helped to revive this form, taking charge of the waning two-hundred-year-old family tradition passed down from his grandfather, Narasinga Rao, who “was an ‘asthana’ puppeteer at the Mysore palace.” As a dancer, Hoskere wanted to highlight the physical beauty of dance in her puppet shows, so she took the liberty of adding legs to the traditional rod puppets and borrowed from *bharatanatyam* “in terms of costuming; our music is simple as the aim is to communicate with the audience.”

Hoskere moved beyond rod puppets to save yet another traditional form, and today specializes in “the string puppetry of Karnataka belonging to the *mudalpaya* style,” a form that had almost disappeared, and which she has reconstructed “with reference to Natya Shastra and Padavalupaya styles.” From the mix of elements she describes, her shows basically follow a traditional model, blending in some practical, up-dated elements, and other additions based on her love of *bharatanatyam*:

We have adapted the present lighting techniques.

- Our lyrics have the prosody of traditional plays, our language is as is being used now. Some of our shows have dialogues in English. We have done a production in Sanskrit also.

- Our music is based on Carnatic music ragas and tala
- We use traditional instruments like the mridangam, flute and violin along with chande and key board. Sound is studio recorded.
- Costuming is mostly according to Natyashastra with very slight variation for convenience.
- We differ from the Natyashastra in using backdrops and props, which are a popular part of the Kannada Nataka Mandali theater
- Our themes are from the Epics of Ramayana, Mahabharata & Bhagavatha - we take pride in keeping the essence of the original works
- Unique feature- My dancer puppets do classical Bharatanatyam numbers.

On thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in the field of traditional puppetry, Hoskere sees mainly the positive aspects of what



she and her group have been able to accomplish in recovering a lost art.

- Advantages - The Puppet theater has almost disappeared from the Karnataka urban scenario. It has been a mammoth task to revive it. Time, patience, dedication and working with no expectation of returns has been the requirement for the revival job. We have simultaneously introduced this art to children, youth and adults in Bangalore. I cannot even imagine doing such a job without my woman's team. They are artists in the field of dance and music, have time to dedicate and have all the patience to work with children. I trained them in puppetry.

Hoskere's company is 80% women. "We also have youth and children in our team and the women

provide them with a lot of support and nurturing." What is the main disadvantage of being a woman puppeteer?

The traditional puppets are heavy. It is a new thought for a woman to be carving puppets and working with tools. All our puppets are carved out of wood. We are working on lighter puppets.

Hoskere says most of her productions highlight the women's role. Some specific stories from her repertoire, drawn from the epics, that show women's strength of character include

...the story of Harishchandra, (story from Bhagavatha) a king of the Ikshwaku dynasty who lose all his wealth. He decides to go to Kashi, which is the land owned by Lord Vishwanatha and not any human



Whether it is the Punch and Judy show or the Kathputli closer to home, Women historically played a peripheral role in traditional puppet performances.

king. There his wife Chandramathi is sold as a slave in order to pay off the debtors. Our act has the perspective of the woman at this point. There is also the sensitivity of the closeness of a couple who really are one together- their view and the world's judgement of them. Such aspects of choice, which may not necessarily be according to the popular ways of the world, but will be seen in our productions.

Other such stories are that of "young Ashtavakra who is born physically handicapped, with the father not on the scene. The mother and grandfather nurture the child. (story from Mahabharata)" and Dharmavyadha about "a house-wife/ home maker performing her duties who emerges superior to a learned scholar filled with ego (story from Mahabharata)"

What began as a desire to share the values of the Hindu epics with her children has, over time, brought Hoskere to become a central figure in Karnataka puppetry and a strong promoter of puppetry arts in general. She is currently doing a Senior Fellowship on the puppetry of Karnataka for the Ministry of Culture of the Government of India. In 2010, Dhaatu organized its first, nine-day national puppetry festival, featuring everything from "local marionettes (sutratha bombe), yakshagana (stylised marionettes), shadow puppets (both front and profile styles) and the salakhi bombe (rod manipulated puppets)." The festival allowed the people of Bangalore to

experience the richness of India's puppetry heritage by exposing them to this wide variety of traditions.

Educating people about puppetry arts in this way is another facet of working towards their preservation. But the festival also broke new ground. Perhaps in a nod to Hoskere's own engineering background, she gave a platform to a show that "uses a robotic arm (with a multi-pulley system) to maneuver traditional marionettes," designed by Dinesh NS, "who teaches electronic design technology at the Indian Institute of Science." Hoskere's many puppetry projects demonstrate that she understands that for traditional forms to survive, they must continually reconnect to their audiences and assert their contemporary relevance.

**Excerpts from an article entitled:**

**Women in Indian Puppetry : Artists, Educators, Activists - by Claudia Orenstein**

**Theatre Department, Hunter College, CUNY 605 Park Avenue New York, NY 10025**

**[corenste@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:corenste@hunter.cuny.edu)**

The article features in a book "Gender, Space and Resistance"- Women and Theatre in India



# 3 | A Mega Event On the International Stage

Chengdu, China hosts an International festival and Unima Internationale's 21st Congress - in May-June 2012.

Chengdu is a large efficient city. Not just this, it is very generous and hospitable.

It was home to 175 puppeteers from all over the world and hosted Puppet performances from many parts of the world for 7 days.

**In all there were 1200 performances, (in the district) a conference, and a three day seminar and finally the Unima Internationale's Congress.**

In all there were 1200 performances, (in the district) a conference, and a three day seminar.

The entire city of Chengdu was bedecked with publicity posters about

the Festival and the Congress.

The trouble taken over all the arrangements and the way Puppetry was showcased spoke of the commitment of the Chinese Government to Puppetry. They wanted to be a part of the world stage of Puppetry Arts.

"I believe that the close relationship between each department of Chengdu city and UNIMA China is the key of this congress and festival" says Tang Dayu, the festival coordinator and President Unima China. All of the departments did a great job.

It took a process of 4 years to culmination and a team of 500 people,

including many govt. officials and volunteers to put this mega event together so successfully.

The congress and festival definitely raised the profile of puppetry from central government to local

government in China. In the future puppetry would be more popular among the public, especially the city of Chengdu.

## An impressive exhibition

To underline its commitment, the city of Chengdu is constructing a mammoth Museum of Shadow Puppets. The museum will be ready in one year and will house the vast collection of exquisite Chinese Shadow Puppets.

Part of this collection and many others were showcased in a special exhibition mounted for the Festival. Besides shadow puppetry, many other styles of Chinese puppetry were displayed at the exhibition which was curated and designed by the Culture Department and the city of Chengdu.

The exhibition received thousands of visitors daily. The display was not only aesthetic but also interactive to suit the curiosity of children and first time visitors. There was a demonstration performance of traditional shadow puppets and a space dedicated to a demonstration of making leather shadow puppets.

Today in China there is a commitment to revival and survival of the traditions.

It is with this perspective that the exhibition was designed. It introduced visitors to the art and craft of puppet making, manipulation on a stage where children were encouraged to perform and to take part in the performance.

To understand how shadows are made and move, a very popular shadow table was provided, for people to experiment with making shadows with their hands.

## The Festival

A large cultural complex hosted many outdoor performances which proved to be a magnet to young

families especially on week-ends.

There were daily and simultaneous performances in different parts of the city as well.

“In Chengdu, we took 10 theaters and some other places in schools, parks and squares (about 30 venues). Meanwhile, in Nanchong there were 7 theaters and 3 squares & schools;

Over 100 million people attended the performances and visited the exhibition;

65 Puppet Theatres from all over the world performed in the festival.”

India was represented by Ram Das Padhyaye, his son and wife and their muppets.

They enlivened the puppet parade at the opening and closing ceremonies.

There was a competition and many awards were given away for artistic excellence, creativity, performance value etc.

The judges team worked hard before and during the festival.

### Puppetry in China today

We got a glimpse of the current Puppet scenario in China, Sichuan distt. It is known for its excellent string puppets (high quality sophisticated performances) and tradition of shadow puppets.

The festival showcased the best of both traditional and contemporary with the current trends in performance techniques, stage craft, use of sophisticated media and technology, use of recorded music and dialogue tracks.

Most admirable to an outsider ofcourse are the ‘face changing’ puppets, the calligraphist puppet, the fire throwers and the acrobat fighters....





The grace and liquidity of their movements is an aesthetic- recognizably Chinese in nature.

The most popular shows were those with universal themes.

The Chinese puppet teams displayed a very high skill level in crafting puppets as well as manipulation.

The traditional aesthetics and crafts are giving place to a more globalised visual imagery. The new styles and themes are influenced by world trends in entertainment.

The colour palette too is dictated by the invasion of acrylic and petro chemical colours rather than the earthy and limited palette of organic colours.

Fabrics too have the new fashionable range of synthetic fabrics as against the silks, brocades and rich textiles so recognizably Chinese in design and colour.

It is not surprising that Puppet theatre too reflects the cultural changes taking place world wide.

### Lessons to be learnt

A Museum dedicated to the Puppet Arts should be made in India too. In fact there is scope for making at least four museums in different parts of the country.

Every Exhibition/Museum should have interactive child friendly activities which will arouse and satiate their curiosity and make it an unforgettable experience.

In a festival the selection of shows and proper communication about them to the audience is very important so that the expectations of the audience are correct and we get an appropriate audience.

Seminars and serious dialogues have to be well advertised and placed in a more academic context.

Many of our Puppet Traditions are fading away rapidly. Documentation of these traditions and the lifestyle of the practitioners is of the utmost importance.



### Unima Internationale - the Congress

It is a non political organization where Puppeteers from Cuba and Iran can share the same platform as Israel, United States or any other country.



We are indeed proud ,that Dadi Pudumjee has been elected unanimously ,that Dadi Pudumjee has been elected unanimously for a second term as President of Unima Internationale .

Today there are 88 Unima organizations in the world

Unima has grown under the stewardship of President Dadi Pudumjee,Secretary General, Jacques Trudeau and their team.

There is a plan for energizing and catalyzing new areas of growth especially the Asia Pacific region, Africa, and Latin America.

### The Highlights

A new Commission will be established which is of interest to India - Heritage Preservation in which Documentation will be one of the important things.

The Publications Commission headed by Karen Smith is working on the translation into English and updation of the World Encyclopedia of Puppet Arts.

Some of the other Commissions are: Education and Therapy, a Commission for Women Puppeteers, Research, Training, Cultural Exchange, International Festivals etc.

Unima has also published a directory of worldwide festivals of Puppetry and a listing of Researchers of Puppet Arts.

There are many magazines, publications, web sites, facilities and networks which are run and brought out by this collective of Puppeteers.

India and its Puppeteers through Unima India can have access all of this.

In the same spirit, India should also be sharing its information and achievements in the various fields and aspects of Puppetry with the world community.

For such a large country with so many performing art traditions and puppetry traditions and puppeteers we cut a very sorry figure on the International and Regional Stage with sketchy information and negligible participation.

We should discuss how to remedy this situation, as in a global world a vigorous cross flow of information is imperative for growth and collaboration.



# 4 | In Our Neighbourhood

By Doel Trivedy

I discovered the puppets in Sri Lanka during a chance visit to the Martin Wikramasinghe Museum.

One of the literary giants of Sri Lanka, Wikramasinghe was also an anthropologist and a collector of traditional Sri Lankan artefacts. Among his collection was a variety of traditional puppets and some of the instruments that were used to create the accompanying music.

Puppetry in Sri Lanka originated in the Ambalangoda area more than 300 years ago. Ambalangoda is about 2 hours south of Colombo on the western coast of Sri Lanka.

Experts believe that there were three types of puppetry in Sri Lanka - Nool Rukada, Kotu Rukada and Nool-Koturukada. Rukada simply means puppet play. However over the years only Nool Rukada has

survived in Sri Lanka.

The puppets were life sized, very heavy and would have had multiple strings to support the weight and size. Made of wood and cloth, a puppeteer and his family would carve, paint and design the costumes.

Experts believe that there were three types of puppetry in Sri Lanka - Nool Rukada, Kotu Rukada and Nool-Koturukada. Rukada simply means puppet play. However over the years only Nool Rukada has survived in Sri Lanka.

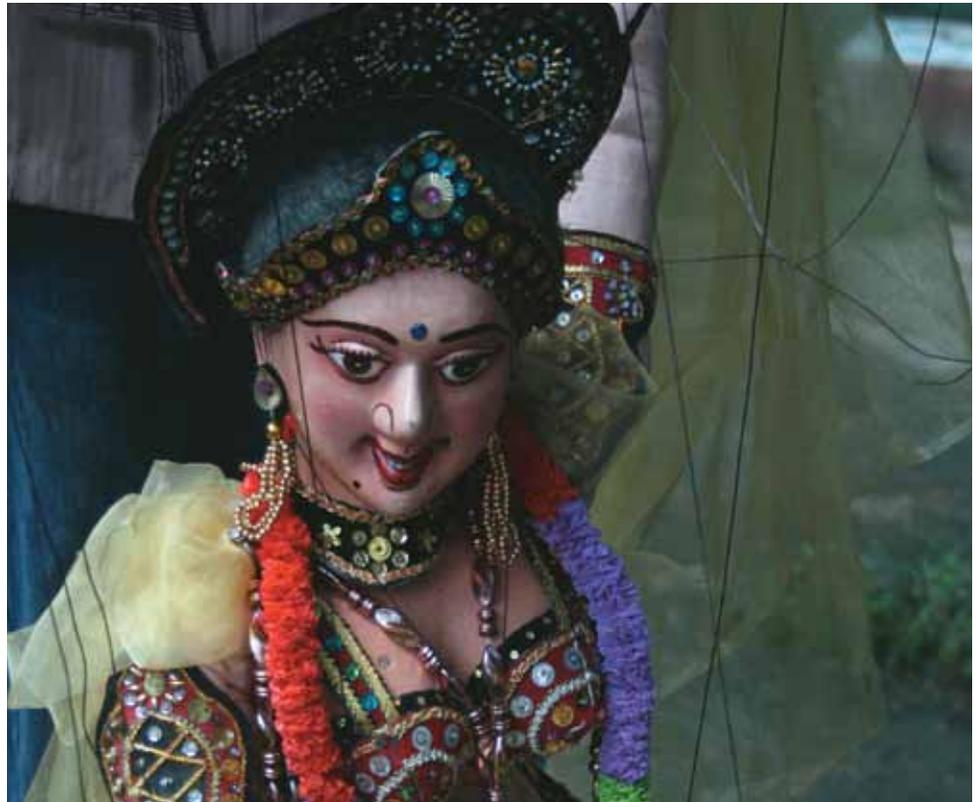
The puppeteers would also write the script and even play the instruments. Big drums and a horn were usually used. One very interesting thing I saw was they used coconut shells to simulate the sound of horses galloping!

Sadly not much is left of this once thriving occupation and today only 5 families practise puppetry in Sri Lanka!

I was fortunate to meet one of the 5 families that live in

Ambalangoda.

Nalin Gamhari is a man in his forties. Proud of the



heritage and skill he learnt from his father. Nalin has made sure his children, sons and daughters, have learnt the art of puppetry as well.

He spoke about his father who practised an older version of puppetry called Nadagam. This traditional form used the horn trumpet and a big drum for accompanying music. About 50 years ago, Nalin's generation of puppeteers started practicing a form that is called noorthi. In Noorthi the puppets are much smaller - 3 feet and sometimes just a foot tall. This form uses the harmonium and tabla as accompanying instruments instead of the horn trumpet and big drum. The reasons for this change in musical instruments and form is a mystery. Nalin simply said that 'Change just happens.'

Now the performances use puppets that are 3 feet tall, weigh about 8 kilos and 22 strings hold and support the puppet. Each puppet performance has 15 characters and lasts 2 hours. 6 artists are present who manage the puppets as well as the music.

However, Nalin firmly believes that the new world will not let this art survive. Though his children have learnt from him, he sees no reason why they would practice puppetry if they cannot make a living from it. With little or no government support and no real platform for artists such as him, his generation may be the last one to practise puppetry as a profession.

Nalin now makes a meagre living by performing during charity events in temples or performing for children in local schools.

Before we left his home, Nalin and his son Naveen, sang for us - a song they usually sing during their performances. Maybe it was the song or maybe the stories, but in that moment, as they sang and smiled at each other, I felt the sadness of an artist who realises that the legacy of his ancestors may have no future at all.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22CvaBG7F6w>



# 5 | Watching Boundaries Breakdown

By Anurupa Roy and Choiti Ghosh

## A Research Residency At The Deutches Forum for Figuren Theater, Bochum-Germany

Feeling re-inspired!

I will categorizing this Research Residency into three parts. The first was the FIDENA festival, the second was the Researcher-in-Residence program and lastly the excursions to theatres.



### FIDENA

We arrived in Bochum, located in the Rhur-Pott, or Ruhr valley , which is the famous industrial belt of Germany. Bochum used to be a coal mining town. The town's many disused coal mines, large steel mills and other mining related structures were lying vacant. Today they have been converted into theatres. What a great idea that is! Such an unusual setting!

The festival uses a lot of these abandoned structures as it's venue.

This year the festival had spread to two other cities of Herne and Essen in the neighbourhood of Bochum.

This was not my first time at the festival. I was at the Fidena in 2007 and what impressed me once again was the philosophy of this festival.

The festival looks at puppet theatre in the largest sense of the word, so instead of calling it "Puppen theater"( puppet theater) it calls it "Figuren theater" (Figure theater). This widens the scope by including Masks, Object Theatre and even specific physical theatre and dance pieces that are based on the philosophy of puppet movement/animation. Very noticeably the festival acknowledges that Puppet theatre is not a part of actors theatre, but a distinct and separate entity.

The choice of performances is outstanding. Some of the best known European puppet companies can be seen at the Fidena Festival. This is mostly an adult festival. Only 20 percent of the shows are for children .

We arrived half way through the festival, just in time to watch Moxxoux Bonte perform two pieces. The first piece was a surreal synchronized dance of two dancers wearing bear costumes. The bears would dance till a gun shot was heard and one fell to the ground and was dragged off the stage by the other. Soon the bear was back but the gun shot was heard again. The piece was like a strange, haunting dream. The second piece with two women dancers synchronized movements of drinking , stirring and pouring coffee managed to make some strong images but was slower than the first piece.

On the following day we saw two outstanding shows, as different from each other as chalk from cheese but unforgettable in their own ways. The first was an Object Theatre piece told with toys, household objects stored in ordinary metal shelves.

Based on the Mission Impossible idea- The story is about two bank robbers, who plan a bank heist which involves climbing a skyscraper, tight rope walking across a high tension wire and jumping 200 feet on to the top of the bank building. One of robbers is the solo actors/objectist who is telling us the story. The other is omnipresent as different objects. Sometimes as a baby doll with a panty hose face mask, or a pair of rubber gloves stuck to the actors back when he is climbing a building, or a pair of shoes crawling on the floor in a crouching position when the two have to squeeze through an AC duct. Their big hurdle is the local mob boss who finds out about the plan and wants his cut. Represented by a single car door which when the window rolls down reveals a TV screen with a speaking mouth and the actors uses his own hand to create a hilarious yet sinister image of the mob boss. What follows is the outcome of a super imagination, a story where a space which looks like a tool store room turns into an action packed Hollywood Blockbuster. This hilarious parody was one of my favorite shows at the festival.

The next show was the dance of death played with hand puppets, live painting and images suspended from the ceiling with wires. The images were lowered, changed, transformed in front of one's eyes by painting on them or scraping off these suspended boards. The show dealt with aspects of death, its absurdity, fear, with humour and tenderness. My favorite scene was where three hand puppets with skeleton heads representing death play "dead" games. They try to "kill" each other, "pretend to be "dead" but wake up each time, laugh and try again. In the end the death glove puppet turns the performance space inside out pulling out and throwing off stage tons of wires, junk, wood and metal giving the feeling that it had

**For a Puppeteer life goes from one performance to the other. In between shows the mind is spinning with the new performance brewing inside!!**

uprooted the entire wiring of the theatre and its wood paneling and floor. Philosophical, existential, poignant and funny . This show keeps coming back to my mind.

Two dimensional life of Her, was an excellent example of the artistic possibilities of using multimedia in theatre to create a new form. Many layers of textured projection surfaces became the canvas for telling the story of a cleaning woman. As she cleans through windows, walls and rooms images are revealed, some real, some abstract, some photographs, some sketches of people, some puppets; they all combine to tell a story. In the end everything burns down. A dramatic scene made more dramatic with the movement of some of the projection surfaces, creating the impression of a real fire.

The other show that inspired with its idea was the site specific show. This is a recent theatre and visual art phenomena which is also becoming popular in India. Artists often use an existing non theatrical space and turn it into "experiential" theatre. It usually involves a guided walk through this space. The "guidance" in this case was a voice through set of headphones giving instructions. The show was called the H&G project based on the story of Hansel and Gretel. Recreating the spooky journey of the Grimm brothers adventure of the young siblings who are abandoned in the forest. We were given a set of headphones and then instructed to walk through a series of rooms. Very dimly lit these spaces really heightened the senses. Apart from the sound and the images really helped to re-imagine the experience of the pair. The forest is a room full of small metal cut out trees with small lights behind them, casting huge tree shadows on the walls of the room. The ginger bread house was made of real ginger bread

and the smell really made one feel like eating it. The voice then instructs you to enter the house and lock the door behind you. As soon as you do ,all along the floor are small heaps of bones of children! The creepiest is the heap of small vertebrae bones. The



witch is a TV screen with two very ugly feet . Finally the children manage to push the witch into the oven and in the last room you see a display case with a little bit of ash, a pair of dentures, one burnt shoe and a broken rolling pin. This was truly experiential theatre and what we noticed is that our senses stayed very sensitive for hours after we had left the site.

### Researcher in Residence at the DFP Library

Watching theatre for a living...that was how our lives were during the first week of the residency. The second part of our residency consisted of 2 weeks of extensive reading and video watching at the DFP library. Figuretheatre can provide a lot of exposure to a hungry learner....

The library and its archives consist primarily of -

- VHS tapes, CDs and DVDs of performances: These are primarily Eurocentric and as a researcher at DFP this is something one should be aware of. They have an extensive collection of material on Object

Theatre, Puppet Theatre, Material Theatre, Site-Specific Theatre, but about 90% of this collection is of European performers and companies.

- The rest of the world- America, Africa, and Asia are all on just one shelf!
- Books are mostly in German, some in French and some in English.
- Journals, Magazines, Periodicals: the collection is quite breathtaking. Most of the journals published by puppetry institutes world-wide can be found here, including 'Sutradhar', the journal published by UNIMA India.
- For research with a specific focus or theme as Anurupa was doing (carnivals, circuses, site-specific performances, outdoor / street performances), a 2-3 weeks residency was ideal.
- But for an over-arching research on the whole world of Object Theatre, even three weeks is insufficient.

### Excursions

The third part of our residency was something that we hadn't foreseen and it was made possible only because of our enthusiastic and motivated host -Anke Meyer .

We had watched a video recording of an extraordinary performance called Walkind by the well-known puppet and object theatre performers Crischa Ohler and Sjef Van der Kind.

Anke managed to organise a visit to their small theatre called Mini Art at the nearby town of Schloss Moyland. Crischa and Sjef were in the middle of creating a new show. We met them after they finished their day's work in their 'mini' theatre.

'Mini' not so much by our standards, the theatre that used to be a nurses' dining room for nearby clinics

can seat about a 80-100 people, and is the most exquisitely converted space I have seen!

Intimate, flexible with a touch of the 'built-by-the-hand' look.

And the couple... Was warm and wonderful - theatrewallahs full of stories!

The next unexpected excursion was another last minute plan to visit the theatre belonging to the company Helios in the nearby town of Hamm. We'd watched a recording of Helios' play H2O only 2 days before. The play was meant for children 2 years and above. It was, to say the least, an eye opener.

Of what a theatre performance for children can be. And what it need not be.

H2O is a quiet piece demanding that a hundred 2 year olds watch in concentrated silence for 40 minutes while the 3 adult performers play with water and its variations (ice, steam, bubbles) and make music and sound with them. it also requires that the adult performers let go of all insecure needs to hide behind slapstick, loudness, glamour, boisterousness while playing for children.

And any of us who have directed and played for young children know how difficult it is to let go of that insecurity!

But Helios' performances prove that children don't need to be bribed with colours and loudness. We were convinced after watching the performance, that the child audience will never look at water the same way again.

Helios too was in the middle of rehearsals for a new play. We were lucky enough to watch a run through of their new play and meet the entire team in their theatre.

The most valuable takeaways of the DFP Residency:

It is not often that they combine the FIDENA Festival

with a researcher in residence; in-fact we were the first and I'm glad we caught the festival.

Watching videos of plays we'd only heard about and ones that we never had. The Institute Internationale Marionette Charleville -Mezieres in France has a similar library and Researcher in Residence program, in fact the latter is an older and larger program but it is important to say that these two libraries complement each other beautifully. While the Charleville library has many more videos of the 'masters' like Phillipe Genty or the Bunraku masters from Japan or Josef Krofta and Sergei Obratsov of an older period the Forum collection has new cutting edge work from Material Theater Stuttgart, Warner & Consortium. Charleville also houses workshop videos from the puppet school students at ESNAM. Apart from the German and French books in both places, there are the puppetry bibles by Henryk Jurkowski and Penny Francis at Charleville and their own in-house publications .

The Forum has an incredible collection of journals and magazines. I discovered that much more material than I had thought has been written about Object Theatre. It is not a desert, more a small oasis really.

Meeting like-minded theatre practitioners who are light years ahead. Going to the flea market on weekends and buying up all the junk from the Ruhr University's backyard. Seeing small theatres renovated from old clinics and railway stations.

Realising the immense need to breakaway from practice at regular intervals and to spend time studying.

Realising the need for a similar library and archive in India

It is always difficult to sum up three such intense weeks into a few paragraphs that can fully do justice to the experience.

# 6 | South East Asia A Wayang Summit November 2012, Jakarta, Indonesia

Like Kathputli in North India is synonymous with puppet, in Indonesia Wayang is a generic name given to all forms of Puppetry.

Organized on a large scale by the ministry of education and culture of the republic of Indonesia.

It was held at a prime location in Central Jakarta, something like Delhi's India Gate.

All the events took place in a huge tent replete with projection, a seminar space, large screens, shops, demonstration space, workshop arena, banquet

space and a space for the secretariat. We were provided with simultaneous translation and a very full program;

There was Video and Photo Documentation, as well as simultaneous projection on large screens so that a very large audience spread over the venue could watch the shows.

The place came alive every evening. Crowds of ordinary people attended the late night performances which ended only at the early hours of the morning.

There were Twelve performances in all of

Wayang Kulit (Leather shadow puppets),

Wayang Golek (rod puppets),

Wayang Suket (shadow puppet story telling with grass puppets),

Wayang Orang (dance drama with dancers and actors)

Puppet performances from Kenya and China



## The Seminar

Presentations by India, France, Canada and Iran about Puppetry in their country for Indonesian Puppeteers.

There were workshops for school children in the mornings.

The objective of the workshops was to reinforce the information and exposure to traditional forms of Puppetry.

Space was given in the Summit performances for Innovative work within the traditional framework.



## The work of three groups was notable

Wayang Suket, Dalang Slamet Gundono (red photo)

He combines contemporary dance, dancers and actors along with a very vivid style of storytelling.

Wayang Golek Ajen

Dalang Ki Wawan Ajen

presented a very dynamic and skillful performance which included multiple projections, shadows, drums

as well as traditional rod puppets.

Wayang Beber Pacitan

Rather like our storytelling with 'Phad' of Rajasthan

It combined two story scrolls. One was traditional and the other contemporary.

The story moved alternately from one to the other. The music and performance was very contemporary and lively.

These performances were a huge draw for younger people.

## From an Indian perspective

The innovative and contemporary flavor of these three performances is noteworthy and a great role model for India to consider when we think of strategies for reviving Puppet Theatre traditions which are suffering from a lack of audience today.

Indonesia shares the similar concerns and is facing identical issues when it comes to protection and promotion of traditional culture. There are many parallels.

A platform for cultural exchange, brainstorming and sharing between the two republics will be very helpful to both.

There is a tremendous respect and love for India and its culture in Indonesia.

We should nurture and reciprocate this sentiment and perhaps translate it into a concrete bridge for promoting Friendship through Culture



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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)

Charleville Mezieres- International Institute de la Marionette - Researcher in Residence

Library and documentation

<http://www.marionnette.com/en/CentreDoc/Ressource>

<http://www.marionnette.com/en/Residence/Recherche>

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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)

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Cover Photo

Ravan - *Tholubomalattam*, Shadow puppet

Designed by Vishal K Dhar

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