

Jose Manuel Valbom Gil (Portugal)

DOM ROBERTO THEATRE
CHANGE AS A NECESSITY IN TRADITIONAL
PORTUGUESE PUPPET THEATRE

Abstract: When we talk about change as a necessity in theatre, the traditional European puppet theatre with its large family spread across the continent always comes to mind. This form of theatre that dates back to the 17th century still has an almost magical fascination for younger audiences and beyond. The century-old movements still used today, combined with constant transformation to remain updated and thus keep the viewer interested/fascinated, ensure that this art does not disappear due to lack of an audience. In fact, this constant change/ updating is the key to its success. Pavis says: Rhythm is not a case of changing speed, but of accentuation, of perception of accentuated and non-accentuated moments: it is a time paced within a defined duration, the chaining of physical actions according to a precise scheme, a “continuous line of action (...)” (Pavis, 2008)

It can therefore be said that of the theatrical arts this is undoubtedly the one that has changed the most over time. The movement of the characters, the size of a glove, allows for a speed of execution in the scene that makes it almost impossible for the viewer to understand how certain routines are performed. A good example of this dexterity is the Teatro Dom Roberto in Portugal, considered one of the fastest shows in the world in relation to its manipulation or even its supposed “father” the Pulcinella of Naples/Italy with its sarcastic humour. But it’s not just their speed that gives them unique characteristics. The puppeteer’s listening to the audience creates a dialogue between him and the characters that

can become almost the centre of the dramatic action, hence, these traditional street shows work largely through improvisation between the puppets and the spectator.

Thus, the movement combined with a simple and carefree narrative creates a dramaturgical moment of quick connection and understanding that works very well for younger audiences but also for older audiences. Although the understanding is different, there continues to be a common line of commitment between all spectators who watch the movements and sounds intertwined in these presentations that are apparently made in a simple and relaxed way. But on the other hand, if we listen and see more carefully, it takes centuries of work to achieve a formula that works in harmony with the public. As Ana Maria Amaral says: *The basic principles of puppet manipulation are almost the same as those of the mask, as the puppet is a mask. However, the mask depends entirely on the actor's body movement, while the puppet, although dependent on the actor's body, is more detached from it, depends more on the energy concentrated in his hands. A glove puppet, or puppet, receives its movements directly from the manipulator's hands. Therefore, it has a lot of agility.* (Amaral, 2004)

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Today we are faced with a reality that is very different from the last centuries, when everything was allowed in puppet theatre without any obstacles of a social or political nature. Now there is an almost self-censorship on the part of creators and puppeteers when it comes to addressing certain divisive topics such as politics, religion or gender issues, etc. It makes theatre for children and young people sometimes lack courage, becoming a mere work of entertainment. This disguised censorship imposed by a more puritanical audience is creating a lack of critical sense in future audiences. To say that traditional puppet theatre is violent just because two characters hit each other with a stick is to reduce centuries of work to one “ugly” word. The actions presented are nothing more than representations of the social mirror presented in puppets. This transformation is not seen across all contemporary works. But you feel that there is actually a fear of creating outside the box.

Ramón Gomez de la Serna wrote almost a hundred years ago: *Children need that theatre. Children without jumping jacks will be dry, heartless children who will not know how life is full of sticks and blows and who, therefore, will receive the strongest blows to their heads when they are most careless. Children need to be taught that life is a maelstrom of blows and that they need to know how to deal with them, be cautious and make them avoid them and rivet the stage.*

The shift to a “safety” philosophy for creators and puppeteers when it comes to choosing repertoire it's nothing new. What is new is the way it is done.

If before we had no restrictions on the themes or actions that were presented and the actions changed depending on the audience or place where it was presented. Hence, performers of this form of theatre are usually excellent in the art of improvisation, now we tend not to risk anything right away.

It is this ability to transform the narrative so that the audience identifies with what they are watching that has kept traditional puppet theatre, especially European puppet theatre, alive for so many centuries.

From Portugal, the traditional bumpkin theatre called Teatro Dom Roberto was censored for more than 40 years under the fascist regime that was in power. But unlike other forms of art, this one has remained unchanged, even being a form of anti-power on some occasions. This fact is due to the courage of its performers who faced the possibility of being arrested every day and the puppets being confiscated by the government police. The protection created by the public itself also keeps the stories starring Dom Roberto alive. It is this constant change that is ultimately the secret to its vitality.

This is the testimony collected from Cesário Cruz Nunes on March 23, 1970, a puppeteer who worked in the city of Évora (Portugal) one day in 1970, which illustrates the daily life of these puppeteers well: *That day, I started to see that people were gathering, there were a lot of people. The whole street was covered, there was no need for a puppet or anything. I gave two strokes (with the swizzle), two words and soon there were so many people there that I started to put the puppets to work. It didn't take me five minutes, and soon five or six police officers appeared around me and it looked like they were taking a criminal away. And there I went to the civil government.*

Another example of this theatre changing to adapt to the contemporary public appeared in the 1980s with the handover from Master António Dias to puppeteer João Paulo Seara Cardoso. When presenting this theatre, João Paulo changes the role of the characters. For example, in the story *The Devilish Barber*, instead of the Barber being the hero of the story, he becomes the Client (Dom Roberto), who kills everything and everyone, contrary to what was done until then. This pleases the spectators even more, as Dom Roberto, as a client, represents the lower social class, unlike the Barber who already had a business. The interesting thing is that all puppeteers since this recent transformation have started to adopt this change to this day. Another example of adaptation is the change in the end of the title *Rosa and the Three Lovers* made by José Gil; instead of Rosa marrying the police officer as was previously presented, she now marries her mistress. Transformations that highlight the importance of stories in the theatre being adapted to the audience so that they feel reflected or familiarized.

The more contemporary titles written for the Dom Roberto Theatre, on the other hand, have maintained the same freedom in terms of the themes they address maintaining the continuity of Dom Roberto's anti-heroism and anti-power.

We can say that traditional puppet theatre is the example that change is a necessity in theatre.

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José Manuel Valbom Gil (Portugal)

Born in Alcobaça in 1968. PhD in Art History and Master in Theater - actor/puppeteer branch at the University of Évora, founding member and Artistic Director of the company S.A.Marionetas - Teatro & Bonecos based in Alcobaça since 1997. President of UNIMA Portugal from 2009 to 2017. Researcher of traditional Portuguese puppet theater and author of the book *Teatro Dom Roberto* - the traditional itinerant Portuguese puppet theater - the *salão de Alcobaça* and the new *Palheta*, published by the Puppet Museum in Lisbon. His works are at the Puppet Museum in Lisbon, TOPIC - Centro Internacional del Títere de Tolosa / Spain, Le Théâtre Royal du Peruchet - Musée International de la Marionnette in Brussels / Belgium, The Center for Puppetry Arts Museum in Atlanta / United States of America and Museu Internacional de Marionetas de Macau. Honorary Live Member of The Punch and Judy Fellowship and Professor Extraordinarius of The Punch and Judy College of professors. He is the author and co-author of more than 50 dramatic texts for puppet theatre. Builder of Puppets and Scenography, Stage Director, Trainer, Author and Puppeteer. He has several articles published in magazines and pages dedicated to puppet art. He has received several international and national awards for his work in the field of puppet theater.