

## UZBEK PUPPET THEATER: TRADITIONS AND MODERN PROCESS

*Kadirova Sarvinoz Mukhsinovna**Doctor of Art, professor**State institute of art and culture**e-mail:sarvinoz.kadirova1@gmail.com*

**Summary:** The article deals with a unique form of theatrical art - puppet theater. The author of the article examines the unique development, problems, and prospects of the national puppet theater based on today's realities.

**Key words:** doll, screen, director, actor, puppet, cane puppet, shadow theater.

Looking at the art of the twenty-first century, one may note that puppet theatre has retained its specific features despite exposure to changes in the means of expression, dramaturgical interpretations, and performance styles inherent in drama and acting. Although puppet theatre is influenced by other art forms, its most prominent feature remains communication with the audience through the puppet, its primary instrument. If in the last century, the Uzbek puppet theatre departed from its traditional forms losing its relevance, nowadays it is revisiting its historical roots, drawing from them an inspiration for the art. It employs traditional forms, styles, and pictorial and expressive means to create modern performance media.

Puppet theatre, an ancient art form that formerly catered to different age groups, now operates primarily as a theatre for children. Traditional Uzbek theatre first comes in the form of glove (hand) puppets (chodir jamol), marionettes (chodir hayol), and shadow theatre (fonus hayol) – all founded in oral tradition; its characters are the puppets named Palvan Kachal, Bichahon, and Yuldash Yasavul. The professional folk puppet theatre performer known as Qughirchoqboz relied on his abilities, natural talent, creativity, and improvisation skills, also following the tradition of mentoring. There was a certain consistency in the story line structure and performance dialogues. In a traditional performance, the puppeteer sought to connect episodes he devised into a logically coherent form.

Today, puppets help implement the ideas of the dramatist, director, actor, and designer. To the question of whose role is most important in the theatre, we surely answer, that of the puppet – created and enlivened by human hands. “A puppet hardly different from an ordinary toy may come alive, like a human, in the hands of an artist: it moves, laughs, cries, fights, plays, sings, and does little mischiefs... These little actors tell us about life, love, friendship, fidelity, kindness, and honesty, scouring vices such as deceit and vanity.(1).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in the period of social and political transformations following the colonization of Turkistan by the Russian Imperial government, puppet theatre began to evolve in a different key. If formerly Uzbek puppeteers ridiculed local money-bags, officials, hermits, money-lenders, drug addicts, and thieves, now they mercilessly

poked fun at the czarist administration, translators, and imposter medics. For this reason, some of the puppeteers were subjected to punishment.

Puppet shows were also changing as a result of art-related competition with the European style of Uzbek drama. The Uzbek puppet theatre of a new kind, now operating indoors, behind the screen, and based on literary dramaturgy, took shape later than other forms of contemporary drama.

Following the change in social order, puppeteers were compelled to adapt to the new environment, and now their art was perceived only as entertainment and fun. Critical satire disappeared from the performances. To stay afloat, puppeteers focused on the entertaining dancing scenes where female puppet dancers performed traditional dances, rather than on the adventures of the lead characters in the show.

Now puppeteers were expected to put up a performance that was based on a literary text, without using *safil fife*— a special voice-altering device. Uzbek puppet theatre began operating on an indoor stage, with dedicated seats for the audience, having retained the traditional form of glove dolls and line-controlled marionette puppets.

Tickets were sold to the audience who took their designated seats to watch the show. Quli-bobo Navvotov, a puppeteer from Samarkand, recalls: “Navvot, my father, organized the selling of tickets for puppet shows. For that, they nailed about twenty or thirty feet rugs to the wooden poles sticking from the ground to make the walls rectangular; timber benches could seat 120-200 people; candles or sometimes lanterns were lit inside this improvised hall, and a ticket collector stood at the entrance”. (2).

The exclusion of satire from the old stories and subjects in favor of their visual appeal, as well as their adaptation to the requirements of the modern day, compromised the content and social value of puppet shows. The process continued in the early decades of the twentieth century, too. Some renowned puppeteers, using old traditional subjects and characters that reflected soviet realities to an extent, got down to the making of new repertoire and new heroes.

Eventually, when the social role and significance of the puppet theatre were defined, there emerged a need for a dedicated repertoire and professional training for actors, directors, designers, and puppeteers. One after another, puppet theatres were created in Tashkent, Andijan, Samarkand, Bukhara, Jizzakh and Fergana.

Presently, in keeping with traditions, some favorable changes reflecting local specificity have started to be seen in puppet performances.

Not every dramaturgical genre can be adapted for the puppet theatre, so there has to be a special repertoire. A show should offer a combination of music, dance, humor, ballet, opera, satirical characters, journalism, fairy tales, and miracles. The key objective of a puppet theatre is the appropriate choice of repertoire. The issue is not new: it has preoccupied puppet theatre founders since long ago.

Sergei Obraztsov, a puppet theatre director and publicist, reviewing plays written for puppet shows, noted two errors: one is when the author writing a piece for puppets sees them as

if they were humans performing a regular drama. This applies not only to the characters' actions and behavior but also to the setting where the characters operate. Another mistake often made by playwrights who do not know puppet theatre is the exact opposite and comes from the erroneous idea that, unlike regular theatre constrained by the physical capabilities of a human being, the possibilities of a puppet theatre are boundless". (3).

A dramatist writing a play for a puppet theatre should be aware of its distinction from other productions. Puppet shows are very conventional, metaphorical, generalized, action-centred, and therefore spectacular. A puppeteer capable of enlivening an inanimate object, enjoys the process himself, reflecting on life together with the audience. It all starts with an artist drawing the puppet character's image, then a puppet-making master shapes its expressive appearance. Finally, it is the actor who animates this creative product.

Sometimes even a perfectly crafted puppet may "perform" poorly in the actor's hands, freezing like a statue. And the opposite is true: a puppet becomes very agile when properly controlled. On stage, both the puppet and the human actor personify the generalized characters of good and evil, truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, humanity and brutality.

The puppet theatre dramaturgy is based on a theme. If the theme is presented in a comprehensible and interesting way, in a form appropriate for the audience's age, then the director has clearly defined the content and idea behind the production.

Earlier, writing for the puppet theatre were playwrights Sami Abdukhahhar, Latif Makhmudov, Nigmat Ruzimuhamedov, Raim Farkhadi, Leonard Babakhanov, Anatoly Kabulov, Anvar Obidjon, Mukhsin Khalil and Tashpulat Tursunov. Presently, among them are Maryam Ashurova, Isoktoy Jumanov, Hayitmat Rasul, Tura Mirza, Ibrahim Sadikov, Erkin Khushvakt, Gulchekhrabonu, and several young writers, namely Sirojiddin Rustamov, Azizbek Kurbanov, Mohisadaf Ubaydullaeva, Shavkat Dustmuhammad, Durdona Urakova and others.

In the former times, pieces written for big drama theatres were first performed as puppet shows. Another distinction of a puppet theatre is not in small-form pieces for children or adults, but the fact that its primary means of expression is the puppet, and the show runs by way of its repositioning and movement.

The repertoire of the Uzbek traditional puppet theatre is based on legends and myths glorifying local heroes; it includes productions criticizing social injustice, and pieces with friendly humor and innocent laughter exposing the problems of everyday life. Hence comes the question of what other memorable characters have been added to the names of puppet heroes such as Palvan Kachal, Bichahon and Yuldash Yasavul – those that have still not lost their relevance?

In recent years, the audience has been shown pieces on historical themes, about the heroes of legends and epic tales, about famous ancestors who lived in the past. These pieces are interesting not only for children but also for adults. The onstage incarnation of legendary heroes and historical figures such as Abu Ali ibn Sino, Tumaris, Shirak, Alpamish, Mirzo Ulugbek, Babur, Jalaluddin Manguberdi, Al-Fergani, and Bahadir Yalangtush makes a completely different impression than stories about them.

Standing out among these productions are “Bakhrom and Dilorom” based on the “Seven Planets” epic by Alisher Navoiy (staged at the Uzbek National Puppet Theatre, adaptation by Tura Mirza, director Shamurad Yusupov), “The Language of Birds” (the Kashkadarya Theatre, director Shamurad Yusupov), and “Farkhad and Shirin” (the Andijan Theatre, staged by Timur Malik, director Dilmurod Shaykhov).

Currently, most plays about historical figures are written without taking into account the puppet theatre specificities, which compels the show director to adapt the text. Apart from that, one cannot but notice an excessive use of living actors (instead of puppets), which is contrary to the specifics of this type of theatrical art. Intended for children, puppet shows tell the story of the childhood of historical figures.

Today in Uzbekistan, puppets made mostly of papier-mâché, wood, and textile perform on a stage (behind a screen), unlike it was before—inside a chodir screen in the shape of a large bag attached to the waist. Actors of professional public puppet theatres of the country know how to control not only marionettes, shadow- and glove-puppets but also jiggling puppets (marionette à la planchette) and rod puppets. Naturally, in an open-air performance, one can still see a qughirchoqboz (qo'g'irchoqboz) puppeteer with a screen. However, this is just an element of performing arts rather than a proper theatre of oral tradition.

To make productions, puppet theatres invite professionals, usually from the capital city, or do it themselves with their resources and capacities. Puppet theatre directors are few in number, which is a major constraint given that the director is expected to be keenly sensitive to his audience, educating it. There is also a problem of professionalism. In any theatre, including the puppet theatre, only a professional, a master of his trade, a creator who loves his job, can bring a show to perfection and turn it into a work of art. Currently, in provincial puppet theatres, the director function is performed by people from other, sometimes unrelated, spheres.

Let us focus on the issue of acting, which is relevant for all public puppet theatres. Apart from speaking, a puppeteer has to perform many other actions on stage. “The screen, on the one hand, helps the actor, concealing the whole kitchen behind the art. On the other hand, it requires an extra effort to communicate the actor’s emotion to the audience and engage it. The actor here never faces his audience directly; only the actor’s wrists and fingers inside the puppet fall into the field of vision”. (4).

The puppet theatre actor performs behind the screen in line with the job specifics. However, living actor performance has become a common practice these days. Depending on the show's content, the actor may communicate with the puppets and provide an interpretation of events, thus making the show more interesting. However, this method should not be abused. One has to remember that the lead character here is the puppet: it connects the story line events and initiates the actions.

Currently, one of the most important problems the puppet theatres face is the lack of young professional actors. Provincial theatres employ humanity college students not yet trained in any theatre-related profession. However, they have a will and a motivation to work in a puppet theatre. It is good when a theatre company gets new people through mentoring traditions, which helps its younger members improve their professional skills. The problem may be resolved

with the opening of a distance learning department at the Uzbekistan State Art and Culture Institute, with a degree program in puppet theatre acting.

Shortcomings also exist in the puppet-making method. Most puppets in present-day shows do not have a distinct individual character and are hardly different from a children's toy. One of the major deficiencies in local puppet theatres is the absence of puppets with a wide range of mechanical capabilities, as well as the lack of professionals capable of making responsive puppets.

Because of the shortage of plays written for puppet theatre, today's companies, with the support of experienced actors or literary directors, are attempting to stage children's tales and thereby solve the repertoire problem.

To date, there is not a single study giving a summary overview of the operation of provincial puppet theatres, some of which work in isolation, living in a world of their own. Their archives have preserved nothing: no video records of the shows, no set designer sketches, no set or props, no puppets, no photographs... The only thing they keep is the annual report they submit to the Ministry for Culture and Tourism. They do not have even a small puppet museum that young spectators could visit before the show.

Remembering the historical roots of the puppet theatre, the present author urges the directors, actors, and other puppet theatre creators to keep the "master to student" tradition of continuity, to learn the secrets of puppetry and the skill of making traditional puppets, as well as to respect the literary text of a piece. A constructive solution to these issues will serve the cause of raising a well-rounded generation, and for this reason, the children's puppet theatre should be taken seriously.

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