

Puppet Theatre in Denmark, "Greetings from Denmark, Magdeburg 2000"

By Jette Lund (slightly revised January 2003)

We know that there have been puppet shows in Denmark since the end of the 1700's. European touring groups have of course visited the country and we know that there was a "Mester Jakel" show ("Punch and Judy") at the fairground "Dyrehavsbakken" (in the outskirts of Copenhagen) - a theatre, immortalised both in pictures and in the Danish Golden Age literature.

At the end of the 1800's the paper theatre dominated. The lithographical art of printer Alfred Jacobsen is still to be bought - partly second hand, partly reprinted. "Dansk Dukketeaterforening" (The Danish Model Theatre Organisation) only deals with this kind of theatre, mostly as collectors objects or as a hobby, but in the second largest city in Denmark, Aarhus, there is a small, but well known professional paper theatre at the theatre "Svalegangen", where the director and actor Per Brink Abrahamsen plays classical plays as well as modern (e.g. by Karen Blixen) for which have been designed new figures and sets.

Some travelling artists ("mountebanks") maintained the puppet shows up to the 1900's, - but now with figures known from the cartoons of the weekly magazines, e.g. "Knold og Tot" - (in Germany "Max and Moritz") which the Danish artist Beck Daucke had made for himself around World War I (in which Denmark was neutral). Also at Dyrehavsbakken puppets was played. From 1955 it was the traditional Danish Pierrot-figure, personified by Erico Lund, who lead the puppets until his death in 1983. After a pause the new Pierrot at Dyrehavsbakken Kurt Flemming is now reviving the tradition.

But like the rest of Europe the puppet shows are passed on to new hands as the old half-yearly markets in fairgrounds and marketplaces disappear in the new industrialised urban areas. Puppet theatre is taken over by other artist, like painters and sculptors, and by educationalist. In Denmark it is artists like e.g. Helgo Andersen and later Kaj Matthiassen who leave their mark on the time during and after World War II. Helgo Andersen establishes in 1966 the so far only permanent, subsidised Danish puppet theatre in "Kongens Have" ("Kings Garden"), a park in Copenhagen. Apart from that one can find puppet shows on fairgrounds as e.g. "Legoland" in the middle of Jutland and "Tivoli" in Copenhagen, all placed in open air and therefore only in the summer.

This should not lead anyone to believe that puppet theatre as an art is dead in Denmark - it has on the other hand become "invisible". As a protest against the formal classical plays, which the official theatre for children, "Skolescenen", performed in the theatres build for grown ups and in which the children could hardly look over the back of the chairs, the Danish touring children's theatre sprung up at the end of the 1960's. These theatres very often used puppets. Furthermore the puppet maker and actor Ole Bruun Rasmussen teaches puppetry - from 1972 to 1986 more as 19 courses. In 1970 the actor Jytte Abildstrøm gets her own theatre "Riddersalen", which also (often) performs with puppets. This is also the case at "Det lille Teater" (The little Theatre) in Copenhagen, founded in 1966. But as in the international UNIMA the passions run high on what is in

fact "real" puppet theatre - only in 1972 UNIMA choose to "recognise" modern kind of theatre with puppets and e.g. object theatre. The late, world-famed puppet player Ray Nusselein establishes his "Paraplyteater" in 1968 - and also around his unique and fascinating plays the debate goes if it can be looked upon as "real puppet theatre". For this reason a large amount of the Danish puppet theatres choose to avoid this very useless discussion by simply looking at puppets as one of many means to tell a story.

Therefore it rarely appears in programmes and descriptions of plays that it is a kind of puppet theatre. Only by knowing the theatre group or the people involved in the show or by asking is it possibly to locate the most interesting puppet shows in Denmark.

Financial support is given to children's theatre and e.g. modern experimental theatre but not to puppet theatre as a special art form. As a comparison one can see that children's theatre groups always state if it is a dance show for children and that there has been given a massive (and well deserved) support to modern Danish dance theatre.

There might be many reasons for the puppet theatre to be looked upon as a "stepchild". Firstly - the conception "puppet theatre" in Denmark is strongly connected to the paper theatre. Secondly - and this is probably not just in Denmark - puppet theatre is in many peoples' mind connected to children's play, hobby and education, and not to professional artistic (theatrical) activity.

The teaching of puppetry is not offered as a special professional training but very often in connection with pedagogical educations, for educational use in kindergartens, schools and institutions. All credit to this, but it is not this way the active, professional, self-confident Danish children's theatre wants to look upon itself.

On one hand this freedom which the children's theatre assume means a development of exiting theatrical forms, e.g. a series of beautiful poetic shows from "Gruppe 38" in Aarhus, from Hans Rønnes "Teatret" and many more. On the other hand the "invisibility" of the puppet theatre can result in a less fortunate attitude to the craft, that lies in the playing of puppets, which sometimes - roughly speaking - is looked upon as something any good actor can learn in about an hour.

In the 1980's a "new wave" begins in which theatrical groups like "Den blaa Hest" in Aarhus takes up an interest in puppets.

Ray Nusselein takes the initiative to two large international festivals under the name of "Another Kind of Theatre".

From 1985 an annual puppet theatre festival takes place in Silkeborg in Jutland. Here it is the "Silkeborg Dukketeater" (Silkeborg puppet theatre), which takes the initiative to a festival, which in the first years mainly concentrated on the more traditional forms. Here, too, the "new" puppet theatre is now to be seen.

During the later years Denmark has had more and more offers of puppet theatre; e.g. from 1992 the annual "Minifestival" in the south of Zealand and from 1996 "Teater på kanten" in Hanstholm (the very north of Jutland).

In the amateur field e.g. "Skørping Marionetteater" in northern Jutland has worked with classical marionettes since 1976. From 1981 to 1999 the

group "Det røde Bånd" in Copenhagen has worked with classical as well as modern kinds of puppet theatre. From this group several young people have attended the professional educations in Frederikstad (Norway) and Berlin (Germany) Occasionally they also meet Danish teachers here - in Norway Morten Grue, and in Berlin Ray Nusselein, who from 1995 to his death in 1999 was professor at the school.

From 1966 to 2000 Denmark had its first real professional education within puppetry: The 18-month long "basic education" for puppet makers in Hanstholm.

In the research area a lot has happened during the 1990's. In 1992 at The Institute of Theatrical Science at The University of Copenhagen Lilo Skaarup writes her special subject "From Commedia dell' Arte to Popular Puppet theatre - about Mester Jakel and his Family" and in 1995 Jette Lund writes her special subject "The Fictive Reality and the real Fiction. Elements to the theory of the Puppet Theatre". In 1993 Ida Hamres ph.d.thesis: "Animation Theatre as an Art - and as a Part of Aesthetic Development and Education" is published from The University of Educational Studies in Denmark. Her book "Marionette and Man, Animation Theatre - Picture Theatre" is published in 1997. The same year (the late) Niels Roed Sørensen publishes his book "Sutradhar, the Three-dimensional Puppet Theatre of India" - based on extended scientific studies in India and in collections, which today are to be found at the Ethnological Collection at The University of Aarhus at Moesgaard.

The discussions of the 1960's and 70's about the "pure" or the "real" puppet theatre have luckily almost died - currently with theatres developing new theatrical forms in all fields, forms that relate freely to formerly stiff genres. Danish examples are e.g. "Odinteatret", "Hotel Proforma" and "Cantabile II".

This also goes with the theatrical form we deal with - no matter if one prefers the name "figure theatre", "animation theatre", "object theatre" or "puppet theatre". The more "fundamentalistic" focusing on the difference in the modes of expression of the puppet theatre is perhaps giving way to a greater understanding of what they have in common. It is important to the development of methods within the new educations in this field - and it gives hopeful prospects for the exiting art of puppet theatre's fate in the new millennium.

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