

In January of 2024, I attended a matinee performance of Grupa Coincidentia and Figurentheater Wilde & Vogel's *Krabat* at the Chicago International Puppet Festival. It was my first time seeing puppetry from a country outside of the United States (Grupa Coincidentia being Polish and Figurentheater Wilde & Vogel being German) and it completely blew my mind. The construction, the staging, the movements, all of it, were like nothing I had ever seen before. It played with the slight disconnect between what your eyes see and what your brain interprets. It was something completely new but felt like an ancient performance, older than time. I attended a panel that Pawel Chomcyzc and Dagmara Sowa from Grupa Coincidentia spoke at and the reverence they referred to the art of puppetry, and the art of object theater in general, has continued to stick with me.

I kept asking myself after the performance: why was this Eastern European approach to puppetry so different from what I had previously experienced in the United States? For ease of reference, I am going to mostly refer to "Eastern Europe" and "Western Europe" through this essay. "Eastern Europe" refers to European countries that had once been associated with the Soviet Union and "Western Europe" refers to the United States of American and European countries not associated with the Soviet Union.

The first obvious reason is the cultural respect for puppetry. In his book *American Puppet Modernism*, puppet historian John Bell says, "In mainstream Euro-American academic thinking, puppetry is somewhere on the low end of theatrical forms that generally places realistic actors' theatre on the top."

In Western Europe and the United States, puppetry had once been a popular form of entertainment aimed at families and adults, but today is considered purely for children (Rustin, 2002). Modern Western puppetry is often looked at as a piece of pop culture and not as a piece of

art worthy of analysis and study (Levenson & Abrams, 2014). Even at the height of its popularity, puppetry was still considered low brow and so were not preserved (Searls, 2023).

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, puppetry is held in high regard. Great Russian directors like Yevreinov, Meyerhold, and Tairov cite puppet theater as their greatest inspiration. Before it was divided into Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia had 1,000 folk puppet theaters and 2,000 puppet theaters associated with schools and cultural organizations. Czech puppetry was considered a vital part of children's education, as it was oftentimes their first exposure to classic literature (Bogatyrev, 1999). In Georgia, a traditional puppeteer was called a "koukne," who was expected to make their own puppets and those puppets would be buried with them at death (Abramitchvili, 2011).

The Polish word for puppeteering is "animator." "Anima" is Polish for "soul," so it adds a connotation of bringing the dead to life in puppetry (Chomczyk, 2024). The perspective brought by this etymological background is echoed by other Polish puppeteers.

Polish puppeteer Marek Waszkiel described the process of puppeteering as "the miracle of animating a lifeless object, a puppet, whose magical life has so much to offer the spectators. (Waszkiel, 2019, p. 75)." While this imaginative, fantastical view of puppetry is not held by all Polish puppeteers, this artist who feels the need to bring the lifeless to life through puppetry is still a common idea (Waszkiel, 2019, p. 75).

From a historical perspective, nearly every civilization has some form of folk puppetry. In Eastern Europe, Azerbaijan (Raitarovskaya, 2014), Georgia (Abramitchvili, 2011), and Russia all find their puppetry roots in pagan rituals and traditional cults (Zguta, 1974, p. 711). The Skomorokhi were a pagan cult that were the first Russian puppeteers, using puppets as "voodoo dolls" in rituals (Zguta, p. 714). The celebrations Koliada, Maslanita, Rusalia, and Kupalo all

used forms of puppetry (Zguta, pgs. 711-713). Poland and Belarus both had their own puppet versions of the nativity: the Polish szopka and the Belarusian Batleyka, both of which combining the sacred and the profane secular (Tattenbaum, 2007 & Ivanova, 2011).

In the United Kingdom, meanwhile, Punch and Judy are the closest the country has to folk puppetry (Rustin, 2002).

This difference in surviving folk puppetry stems from puritanism. In majority Catholic Eastern Europe, churches were more willing to embrace folk practices than the Puritans in Western Europe (Braun, 1990, p. 92). While skomorokhi entertainment was banned in Russia in the 1600s, their puppetry continued through catholicism based puppet shows and the folk puppet hero Petrushka (Zguta, pgs. 719 & 720).

The szopka in Poland was embraced by the church, being explicitly religious, but eventually began to evolve into something more with the shows split into two halves: the first half the Nativity story, and the second half secular and crude (Lewitter, 1950, p. 77). When the Catholic church realized that people were coming to church for the szopka and not for religion, szopkas were banned from use inside the church. However, due to the church's original support, szopkas continued as a popular form of street entertainment, similar to caroling (Tattenbaum, 2007).

In the United Kingdom, however, Puritans disapproved of the continuation of folk practices (Braun, p. 92). Folk puppet theater was frowned upon and thus most UK folk puppetry has been forgotten. When Punch and Judy shows sprung into popularity in the early 19th century, London lawmakers were quick to confine it, and other forms of street performance, to lower class neighborhoods (Crone, 2006, p. 1068). Punch and Judy likely would have fallen to the wayside as well if it weren't for nostalgia of parents and grandparents in the late 1800s. By 1895,

Punch and Judy became pacified from political satire and street art to a form of children's entertainment (Crone, p. 1071).

In the United States, however, the development of puppetry was different. Native American folk puppet practices were suppressed by European settlers and European puppetry struggled to find its footing in the British colonies due to strong Puritan influence (Levenson & Abrams, 2016). This, along with the US developing as a nation much later than European nations, led to American puppetry not having the engrained social or anthropological roots that European forms of puppetry do.

Another key difference between the development of puppetry in Eastern Europe and Western Europe is the influence of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's influence on Russian puppetry began in 1917 with the October Revolution. During the early days of the Soviet Union, Petrushka evolved from the silly and entertaining folk puppet similar to the UK's Punch to a communist warrior who starred in propaganda puppet shows for Soviet children. During Stalin's purges, puppeteers were among those targeted. Nina Gernet, for example, continued to perform puppet shows in labor camps after being imprisoned (Glazunova, 2012b). As the Soviet Union spread, its control over puppetry spread as well. In the early 1900s in Poland, some local puppetry was shut down by Soviets for supposedly spreading Polish nationalism (Waszkiel, 2012a).

After World War II, USSR puppet theaters began mostly performing Communist propaganda (Raitarovskaya & Goncharenko, 2012). Puppet theaters followed the Soviet Model, in which each job in the puppet theater is highly specialized; directors just direct, puppeteers just perform, scenic artists just create the stage, and so on (Waszkiel, 2019, p. 69). This model still continues today in Eastern European nations like Poland. Waszkiel once expressed that Polish

puppet education based around this model leaves puppeteers isolated from both traditional and innovative puppetry. It looks at puppetry as purely literary, just another way to tell a story. Waszkiel makes it clear that he believes that this is still a valid way to view puppetry, but it shouldn't be the only view (Waszkiel, 2019, p. 74)

In the 1940s, the Soviet Union nationalized all theaters across its territories. This allowed puppeteers to be supported financially, but left no room for creative freedom (Waszkiel Poland). Every decision made in the theater had to be approved by the government, including permission to direct a show (Waszkiel, 2015a). To again paraphrase Waszkiel, this resulted in Polish puppetry getting left behind the rest of the world, left in a frozen standstill. In 1989 after becoming an independent country, directors no longer had to receive permission and the development of puppet theater began again. However, because of the pause on puppet development, today Polish puppeteers are not as respected as puppeteers from other countries (Waszkiel, 2019, p. 72).

Part of being under USSR rule required puppeteers to conform to the “unity of method,” or Socialist realism. Puppeteers were required to fall within strict expectations for content: presenting Communism and the Soviet Union in the best light possible (Glazunova, 2012b). One example is the “fight the fairy tale” campaign in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union banned fairy tales under the accusation of being anti communist. At the time, fairy tales were the most common basis for puppet shows, and thus puppeteers had to work carefully around these rules (Poliakova & Goldovsky, 2015).

Additionally, the Soviet Union government held up traditional Russian puppetry as an inspiration to the Soviet cause. The Soviets then pushed traditional Russian puppetry over the local folk puppetry in other territories (Goldovsky et al, 2012). For example, Kazakhstan had the

orteke, a goat puppet that attaches to a musician's fingers while they play the traditional instrument "the domba." During the Soviet era, Kazakhstan traditional puppetry was replaced with Russian puppetry, and the art of the orteke was almost completely lost. Today, the Kazakhstan government funds the preservation of the orteke to keep it from dying out completely (Raitarovskaya, 2012). In Lithuania, folk puppetry was very popular before the USSR. The Soviet Union banned folk puppetry in Lithuania and shut down all the traditional puppet theaters. They attempted to start a state Russian puppetry theater, but it quickly failed. In modern day Lithuania, puppetry is no longer the popular art it once was (Ziurauskas, 2012).

Overall, the influence of history is the main reason why Western European and Eastern European puppetry are so different today. Even the difference in cultural respect I opened this video with stems from these historical influences, with Puritans rejecting folk puppetry and the Soviets cultivating a dramatic respect for puppet theater. Going into this project, I was surprised by what I discovered. I was expecting the main reason for the difference in puppetry to be the Cold War and the Iron Curtain, but that was not really the case. The difference goes back farther, from the Puritans, of all things, and then in recent history the Soviet influence. The Soviet influence is especially interesting to me, as it simultaneously cultivated this highly respectable theatrical art with funding from the government, but also discouraged folk puppetry, censored local puppeteers, and set up a system that discouraged puppet theater individuality.