

Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film Arts

Tradition and invention

Director Ildikó Kovacs's puppet theatrical art form

Doctoral dissertation theses

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THESES

Ildikó Kovacs's life work is extremely rich and unique. She worked as a puppet director from the fifties to 2008, her directoral corpus is very important in Hungarian puppet history. She was a prominent figure in contemporary puppet art in Eastern Europe and her work had a great influence on both Romanian and Hungarian puppet theatre.

Ildikó Kovács did not only think of puppets as a means of artistic-directorial expressions. She was also interested in using puppeteering in a wider context, in different ways from art education to puppet pedagogy and therapy. She used puppeteering in a universal way, both directly (as therapy) and indirectly (theatrical education) most of all considering it from a child's point of view. She was ahead of her time. She was continuously experimenting, observing, analysing, focusing on the child and the effects of puppets on the child, due to her holistic approach,

What is the origin of this holistic approach that was characteristic of her work? How did it develop and what kind of styles did it involve? How did it change during the years until it reached its emblematic uniqueness in her shows? Where can the complexity of using literature, music, fine art and movement art together in her shows be found first on stage? I am going to try to find the answers for these questions in my thesis.

Her career provides the opportunity to show puppet history in a Romanian and Hungarian context. Against the background of its beginning and development, two puppet traditions can be shown and compared, namely the László Vitéz and Vasilache traditional street puppet comedy play methods. Starting from the context of puppet history – which is embedded in European puppet art – I am going to examine the puppet aesthetic paradigm and how it changes. By comparing Ildikó Kovács's and her contemporaries' theoretical and puppet aesthetical writings, I shall analyse the shows that were prominent in her life work and her paradigm changing activities. I am going to place her directoral corpus in the canon of puppet theatre by using the method of show-reconstructing.

Her directoral activities are intertwined with the history of Hungarian professional puppeteering in Romania. The structure of the Romanian puppet theatre provided her with an

opportunity to work continuously, but censorship prohibited some of her shows. She had to experience different forms of ethnical, political and professional exclusion and suppression. Her experience in that dictatorial atmosphere is depicted in her shows. Her work had a great role in strengthening and maintaining the common identity of the minority. Ildikó Kovács's corpus is determined by the marginal position she had. Hungarian puppet history considered her as somebody beyond the frontier, whereas the Romanians thought of her as a director representing the Hungarian minority. It means that both countries marginalised her. Besides that, she was a woman in a theatrical world where directoral work was considered to be traditionally a typical male role. Being in the puppet theatre did not mean any symbolical power, so her position was not threatened by men but still, she only had a few opportunities to direct in the theatre.

The unique structure of Hungarian puppet theatres was the cause of the long lasting hegemony of the State Puppet Theatre. Transformation was via a slow decentralisation process coming from "below". After the fall of Communism, the most prominent amateur groups have formed a puppet theatre chain. In this process, Ildikó Kovács had a leading role due to her experience in the Romanian puppet theatre structure and due to her professional and pedagogical work. These all helped puppet theatres to become more professional.

Her work in the nineties is one of the few that started to change the puppet theatre paradigm, first in puppet theatres in the country then in the Hungarian capital, in Budapest Puppet Theatre, too. Her work represents the history of a half a century paradigm change as well. She proved in practice with her work in the country that theatrical art form and play methods, which come from other traditions with other points of view, have their justification and she created a new school in Hungary as well. In my dissertation I shall follow and prove by show-analyses how her theatrical art form changed during the years. I shall show how she finally got to the aesthetics of diversity of the puppet theatre from minimalist stylisation through finding the man puppet as form to complexity. She considered puppets as the most important element with their tragicomic grotesqueness and thought of puppet plays as a tragicomical genre. This was always the main idea behind her selection of themes. She emphasised that puppeteering is 'world creation' and animation of puppets is magic.

By studying her work in Cluj-Napoca, we can see a directoral method which determines the theatrical art form of her shows. I am going to analyse the shows from the perspective of the relationship of the human being and the puppet. The depicted shows have such an

influence that could not get across in her own time because of political-cultural isolation and only stood out later in exclusive professional circles.

She found her own stage form by using pantomime exercises. *Karnyóné* is the first show in which the body of the puppet is formed by the human body and the puppet together. This concept became one of her characteristic theatrical art form later. In Ildikó Kovács's concept the human body is always grotesque, beyond its limits, ready for change all the time, so she freed herself from the closed body-convention.

She discovered that puppeteers are able to project the movements they had learnt from pantomime exercises onto the puppets they animate with the acquired body-consciousness. This effects all the aspects of play as with all types of puppets there is a transformation. That is why there is no puppet-play without projection.

Directing a play was creation for her, where play is the substance. This is the base for heterogeneous aesthetics which became the main characteristic of her shows. *Mise en scène* is puppet theatre diversity where the open, heterogeneous forms are combined, with different puppets, playforms and elements representing the puppet and the human body. In her work, diversity as a method provides an opportunity to connect the infinite elements of puppeteering which was unusual before.

Ildikó Kovács found a solution to speak about problems of her time regardless of age groups by combining traditional street puppet comedy with other modules like pantomime, street-theatre and fairground comedy. In heterogeneous diversity, tradition and its new interpretation organically creates a direct theatrical form, which is similar to the Peter Brook theatre concept, meant for everybody. Atavistic forms have an effect on the visceral level.

According to Ildikó Kovács using puppets gives opportunities "to speak about different aspects of life holistically on the same level with other forms of art." This is how she gives an example and raises the level of self-esteem of puppeteering. For this she had to respect and stick to puppet traditions. With her openness and investigating attitude/spirit she helped to pass it on and her shows emanate it. Up to the present day her work has had a great influence on puppet-art. Tradition and invention are two key words in her directoral work so I am going to examine her corpus in their reflection.

In the summary of my thesis I want to present her pedagogical method and its influence by highlightening a few of her plays which had a direct or indirect effect. More of her

students have become prominent artists in the genre carrying on her intellectual inheritance, influencing younger generations through their work. My thesis was also written with this purpose on mind.