Animation theatre:
creativity and socio-cultural determinations

GIUSEPPE TORBOLI*
"George Enescu" National University of the Arts, Iași
ROMANIA

Abstract: In the theatrical realm, doctoral research involves the analysis, reinterpretation, and innovation of stage practices, often drawing attention to traditional performance forms. In the case of puppet theatre, such a study not only enriches the theoretical understanding of this field or opens new perspectives on the processes and techniques of stage creation but also positions doctoral research as an activity with significant cultural impact, contributing to the enrichment of cultural heritage. Exploring aspects such as rhythm and the soundscape within puppet theatre, as addressed in the doctoral research „The Soundscape in Animation Theatre: Practical approach", represents a valuable contribution to understanding how sonic elements influence the dynamics of a performance. It also highlights the importance of studying these language components for puppetry students and emerging puppeteers. Delving into the sonic aspects of a puppet performance and analyzing how they have evolved over time to meet the socio-cultural needs of the era provides creators with new expressive tools and cultural theory material by deepening the connection between sound and artistic expressiveness. Currently, several researchers, such as Ida Hledíková, Deena Kaye, and James LeBrecht, emphasize the technological contributions to puppet theatre performances in relation to audience perception. They underline how new technologies enhance the message conveyed through animated objects. Additionally, there is a noticeable trend in recent years toward a return to the roots of animation theatre, employing stylized techniques adapted to contemporary times.

Keywords: animation, puppetry, creativity, culture.

Introduction

Straddling the traditional and the modern, animation theatre is a complex artistic field combining the immaterial cultural patrimony with the new technologies, relating to contemporary tendencies and to the needs of present-day audiences. A study of this form of art is right where theory meets practice and, by analysing and documenting this form of theatre, we contribute to its revival by interpretations which showcase the new creators' creativity and need for artistic expression. Since we live in a time when technological advancement occurs very quickly, while the fields of culture tend to interest the general

---

* PhD Student, email: alextorboli@yahoo.it; PhD Supervisor: Prof. Anca Doina Ciobotaru.

public less, animation theatre has the mission of reaffirming its relevance and become a platform by means of which traditional values are brought back to people's attention and adapted to the needs of today's audience. Therefore, the study and analysis of socio-cultural influences on animation theatre, together with the exploration of creative dimensions, contribute significantly to the understanding and development of this form of artistic expression.

Culture and animation theatre

In the field of theatre, doctoral research is right where theory meets practice, dealing with the analysis, reinterpretation and innovation of stage practices. To that effect, animation theatre is a complex field where the traditional and the modern coexist and traditional forms of performance are very valuable sources of inspiration. Doctoral research about animation theatre is not limited to an academic analysis of a niche field, but becomes an active process contributing to its revival. Whether we are talking about mask theatre, folk puppets, or ancestral puppetry techniques, traditional forms of performance contain universal elements which resonate with today's audience's sensibilities and are living documents regarding the immaterial cultural patrimony; they can be used again by integrating new technologies and adapting them to the contemporary artists' needs for expression. By rediscovering and reinterpreting these forms, doctoral research obtains the role of a significant cultural act which may bring added value to this field; innovation is not a goal in itself, but a way of maintaining the interest for this theatre genre alive. A reinterpretation of these forms does not mean a simple reproduction on stage, but a creative reconstruction. For instance, the puppetry techniques inherited from the folk tradition can be combined with multimedia elements (video projections, digitally generated sounds, etc.) in order to create performances which bring tradition to the present without compromising its identity.

In an age when the audience is more and more exposed to images with unimaginable dynamics, advanced technologies, smartphones, tablets, etc., animation theatre needs to reaffirm its relevance. Academic studies contribute to creating a theoretical framework supporting artists in exploring new directions; moreover, this research can also have an educational role by including its discoveries and studies in artistic training programmes. Puppeteer students and beginners can learn both from the techniques and principles found in tradition and from the way in which these can be adapted and enriched in today's context. During the beginning of digitalisation, this process caused countless polemics between the practitioners and theoreticians of theatre, but, right now, most performance creators have adapted the multimedia techniques in order to make theatre up-to-date: "The direct influence of technological advancements on contemporary arts has led to the birth of a global community.

The evolution of technology has made an increase in the number of art consumers possible."[1] Therefore, we notice that new technologies, when adapted to the needs of the stage, contribute both to the expansion of creative horizons and to the attraction of another segment of viewers.

Since animation theatre has kept reinventing itself and adapting throughout the centuries by combining tradition with innovation, it has become a theatre field which is favourable to exploring the dynamics between the past and the present. In this context, the universe of sound has an essential role in this process, as it has evolved significantly, influenced by the global tendencies, by the (accelerated) technological progress and also by a change in the needs of the audience. However, a lot of the traditional structures have been kept or reinterpreted, offering a solid basis for innovative developments – thus, animation theatre becomes a synthesis of the old and the new, which makes it a dynamic, flexible theatre field that also maintains a fixed, stable basic structure.

In the Romanian space, starting from the traditional structures documented by Teodor T. Burada, H. H. Stahl, Constantin Brăiloiu and other researchers who have contributed to the creation of a rich database about customs, rhythms, musical structures and folk forms of expression, we can build an essential connection between the cultural patrimony and contemporary theatre art. "Regardless of the time it was conceived, together with the puppet, the musical sign was important in the economy of the performance. T. T. Burada, due to his musical training and his preoccupation with documenting musical folklore, offers important transcriptions of the songs in the puppet performances, so that the show could be performed even now with no risk of deformation."[2] The studies by the authors mentioned above are a valuable point of departure for integrating traditional elements in puppet shows, thus contributing to the diversification and enrichment of the artistic universe.

Teodor T. Burada studied the dramatic customs of Romanian folklore, such as carols or mask theatre, showing us a complex relationship between text, gesture, and expression. For example, the structure of a carol, with rhythmic dialogues and repetitive choruses, can be turned into a dramatic sequence in animation theatre. The text used as a pretext for playing can be adapted to support a universal story, while the puppets' gestures can underline the meaning of each idea. This approach not only keeps tradition alive, but it renews it, as well, offering the contemporary audience access to cultural values reinterpreted in a modern, accessible stage language.

---

[1] Dana Trifan Enache (2025). *Extensii ale tehnicilor multimedia în limbajul teatral* [Extensions of multimedia techniques in theatre language], the AGIR Brochure, no. 1.

[2] Anca Doina Ciobotaru (2011). *Teatrul de animație – între magie și artă* [Animation theatre – between magic and art], Editura Artes, Iași, p. 181.

H. H. Stahl underlines the role of rituals in social and cultural cohesion; this aspect can be integrated in puppet shows in order to reveal the atmosphere and symbolism of these practices. Ritualistic sequences or ceremonial elements can be used as part of the story – either as an extra scene or in order to underline the relationship between human being, puppet and sacredness. For instance, during an exam for *Stage language in animation theatre*, where the studied technique was the ball-on-finger puppetry system, as a preliminary to the development of the Bi-Ba-Bo puppetry technique, puppeteer students had to approach a topic called "The human being and the divine" and to develop the double hypostasis of actor and puppet actor. The indications for the students were that they should imagine a dramatic situation where the human being interacts with the divine, using body expression means and exclusively non-verbal language. This topic approached in animation theatre has the ability to transcend the limitations imposed by reality, because it can symbolically express the relationship between the human being and the sacred; in this context, animation theatre can create a direct bridge between the material and the immaterial, suggesting the dimension of divinity by strong metaphors, movement, and rhythm. The means of expression offered by animation theatre allow for a much deeper exploration of existential questions.

The traditional element becomes a fertile ground for innovation, allowing the puppeteer actors to explore authentic themes, rhythms and expressions that connect the past and the present. Being inspired by such structures, puppeteers can create very meaningful shows, which speak both to the contemporary audience and to the viewers inclined towards traditional cultural values.

The rhythms identified by Constantin Brăiloiu in the traditional Romanian music, characterised by asymmetries and dynamic alternation, can be used in animation theatre in order to enrich the musical composition of the show. For example, the uneven rhythms present in the "doina" or in slow "hora" music could generate a unique, mystical atmosphere, evoking traditional roots and inviting the audience to introspection; moreover, these rhythmic structures can become a guide to the inner rhythm of the characters. The puppets' movements and their way of interacting can be influenced by rhythmic alternation, creating new contrasting forms. For example, a sequence of quick, uneven, irregular dancing can suggest chaos or a frenetic state, while a slow, constant rhythm can induce a state of melancholy and introspection. This relationship between music and motion adds an extra layer of expressiveness, turning theatre into a multi-sensory experience.

A question appears, therefore, which helps us understand the evolution of traditional elements in our times: "What parts of the traditional structures have been maintained?"

One of the maintained elements of the traditional structures is the relationship between sound, gesture, and emotion. The specific rhythms and

intonations, as well as the use of sounds to convey the theatrical message, are techniques which have been kept all the way to present times in puppet theatre, regardless of the cultural context. The ritualistic function of sound has also been kept, even if it is in a stylised form. This evolution from ritual to artistic expression has been a preoccupation of several theoreticians throughout many studies, and they have reached a unilateral conclusion: "Long before the reign of religions – from ancient times all the way to the Middle Ages – drama existed in its embryo form of a few ritualistic gestures, corresponding to a time of primitive beliefs. We are talking about magical drama, more recent than magical painting, but based on the same method […] It is all-powerful before the organisation of religious disciplines, which encompass it, but do not manage to vanquish it. Moreover, it has endured all the way to our times, causing the survival, in certain folk practices, of those separate rudiments of magical drama whose origins need to be sought a very long time ago."[3]

In traditional puppet theatre, most of the time, sounds used to mark the transitions between scenes or even indicated the appearance of important characters. This technique is still used today, enriched by new technologies. Moreover, rhythm remains an essential tool for creating and maintaining the atmosphere on stage, as the relationship between rhythm and emotion is also inherited from traditional forms, but adapted to the contemporary context.

A doctoral research studying the sounds in puppet theatre (such as *The sound universe in animation theatre – applicative perspectives*) significantly contributes to the understanding and fruitful use of this field. The detailed study of the relationships between rhythm and emotion can propose new perspectives on the process of theatre creation, opening new ways of innovating in future. From a theoretical point of view, such research enriches the literature of the field, documenting the evolution of the universe of sound and its relationship with the socio-cultural dynamics, offering concrete instruments to the creators in the field and encouraging the exploration of new forms of expression combining technology with the traditional heritage. By documenting and reinterpreting the traditions of sound, research contributes to maintaining and reviving the immaterial patrimony. This not only enriches theatre culture, but it creates a bridge over time, allowing the viewers to rediscover the beauty and complexity of animation theatre.

Conclusions

Straddling tradition and innovation, the sound universe of animation theatre is an element which has not been studied enough, but which is essential for reviving traditional musical structures; their preservation shows the ability of animation theatre to adapt over time, without losing its identity. Doctoral

---

[3] Ion Marin Sadoveanu (1973). *Istoria universală a dramei și a teatrului* [The world history of drama and theatre], Editura Eminescu, București, p. 31.

research approaching such topics contribute to consolidating this field, offering a more profound understanding of the dynamics between sound and artistic expressiveness; thus, animation theatre continues to be a space for experimentation and cultural reflection, connecting the past to the present and opening new perspectives for the future.

To conclude, research in the field of animation theatre, focusing on the sound dimension and traditional structures, can bring new perspectives with regards to the creation process and also contribute to maintaining and reviving traditional values. Consciously integrating technological elements offers a solid basis for developing new forms of expression, consolidating the position of animation theatre in the socio-cultural dynamics of the 21st century.

Bibliography

Ciobotaru, Anca Doina (2011). *Teatrul de animație – între magie și artă* [Animation theatre – between magic and art], Editura Artes, Iași.

Sadoveanu, Ion Marin (1973). *Istoria universală a dramei și a teatrului* [The world history of drama and theatre], Editura Eminescu, București.

Trifan Enache, Dana (2015). Extensii ale tehnicilor multimedia în limbajul teatral [Extensions of multimedia techniques in theatre language], *Caietul AGIR*, no. 1.