

# THE PUPPET THEATRE

## International Trends and the Contemporary Scene in India

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Puppetry, was once a folk art in the field of theatre but has reached new dimensions today invading the urban theatre as well.

Ages ago, the puppeteers were like medicants travelling alone with their small stages and bundles of puppets and equipments walking, or on horses or donkey-back, performing in village squares or fairs, earning a mere pittance for their efforts.

Today the puppet performance has grown into a fulfilled theatre art in quite a few countries of the world. It involves a whole company of workers, technicians, musicians, stage-hands besides manipulators, artists, sculptors and script writers.

Modern puppets are shedding their one-time small portable theatres, and as time goes on, they seem to be growing larger and larger in size, so that they are stepping out of their once restricted area, and moving on to bigger stages, as big as the human theatre, or out into the open-air.

The present trend of Puppetry in the world, is based more on Rod puppets, which are as varied as can be, then Glove puppets, next human actors with fantastic masks made from any indigenous material. More often carved wooden figures of 2 & 3 feet height with mobile hands and legs are moved around by human actors visible to the audience. The String puppet, once termed as a marionette, seems almost outdated and is often considered rather mechanical, for the string control is a remote-control procedure. For a certain string pulled, gives a certain action for surety, and thus lacks the human touch of projection, as Puppetry now is a very developed form of Projected Play.

Many modern puppeteers are adapting from old traditional styles

of puppets like the Japanese *Bunraku*, the Indian traditional *Bomalattam* or the Sicilian and Belgium traditional styles which are mainly rod types.

In the *Bunraku* style, the puppet is almost as large as a human being and manipulated by 2 or 3 actors, the head and right arm by the master puppeteer, the left arm, body by another, while the legs are operated by still another. Many Western theatres, like that of Michael Meschke of Sweden, have used this style very effectively.

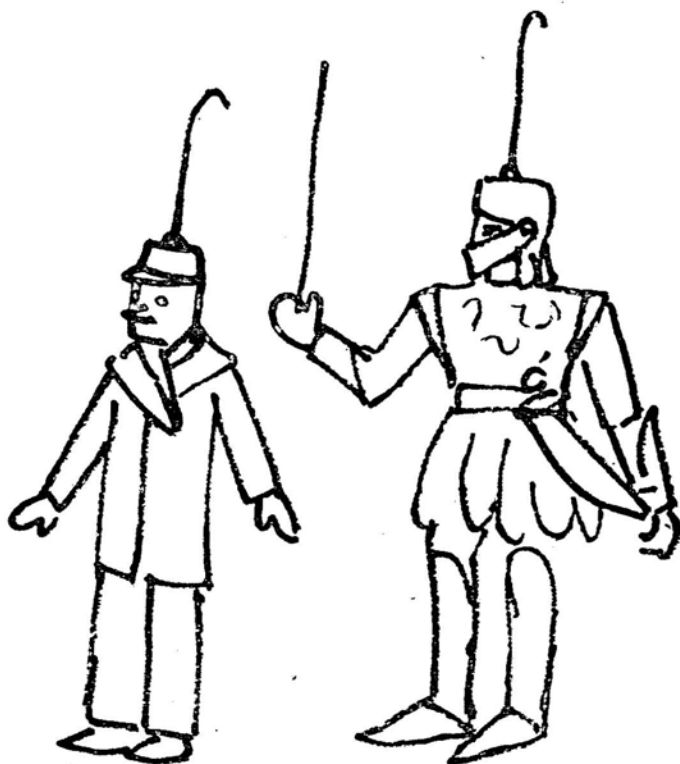
The *Bomalattam* style of Tamil Nadu I have seen adapted by a couple of English theatres and also experimented in by Peter Wilson theatre, from Australia. This type of rod puppets are quite large 4' or so, and have strings attached to their heads and shoulders which are supported by a padded crown, worn by the manipulator, while the hands have metal rods attached, and are moved by the free hands of the manipulator. This kind of puppet technique was used by the Bartons of England, in their play "Rumplestiltskin" and also in "Beowulf" produced by another English Puppet group. But each of them had not completely adopted the Tamil Nadu style, in as much as they had used strings for the hands, instead of supporting rods. The puppets were very beautifully designed, but the heavy hands swung aimlessly, as the strings could not control their weight.

While the Sicilian and Belgium rod puppets are heavy wooden figures 3ft-4ft in height, and are supported and moved by a single iron rod-control, from the top of the puppet head. Michael Meschke of Sweden too has used such large scale puppets, in his "1972 Olympic parade" and in "King Obu" very effectively.

Poland's Lalka theatre, I have seen, use large puppets made from cane, woven like baskets. Besides other Polish, Czech, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, French, Japanese, Brazilian, African, Indians all have started increasing the size of their puppets.

Some modern puppets in Belgium and Africa, are huge-stuffed characters or animals of cloth and foam, and are carried about by the manipulator, like the Zygomar theatre of Namur, Belgium. The huge furry moppets of Jim Hensen of U.S.A. which are worn by live actors, sometimes two manipulators for one such moppet are used. Or like the Russian Bolshoi Puppet Theatre from Leningrad, where the Colonel's wife, a huge rod puppet, dances with 'Schweik' the Soldier, a human actor holding the puppet, his own size and dancing with it. This was in their play of "The Good Soldier Schweik."

Some examples of gigantic puppets and mask puppets are "The Bread and Puppet" theatre of Peter Schumana of U.S.A. His puppets are 2-3 times the size of a human, and worn by human actors, sometimes the actors



are on stilts when they perform in the open air and streets. Often more than one manipulator is working inside these huge puppets. There is nothing rich and fancy about Peter's puppets. They are simple, down-to-earth characters, spreading the message of peace and showing the evils of to-day's times, in Biblical parables, playing in the streets and open air.

The best and most versatile rod puppet performance I have seen, is from Warsaw's Gulliver Theatre, in their play called "The Inhabitants of Cardamon." Here the rod puppets, about 2½ ft-3ft in height, were skilfully manipulated from below and unseen by the spectators. The puppets even changed their clothes and did numerous other difficult feats, unknown to the rod puppets. Besides it was so quickly and cleverly done that it was really praiseworthy.

The puppets having increased considerably in size, pose a stage problem and so live actors, often dressed in black, move the puppets freely on the stage, being in full view of the audience. Very often the modern puppets do not have control-rods but they are large 3ft-4ft characters, carved in wood, with mobile limbs, which the puppeteer moves with his gloved or bare hands.



Like the shows from Poland, when they played "Janosik" and the Czech, Pilsen theatre called *Deti Glfa*, played in "U Hradu Rab", a historical play. Here puppet-players, dressed in national costumes, manipulated the puppet figures on large stages. But somehow like the *Bunraku* players, they did not seem to disturb the audience. Even in Obrastzov's theatre in the story of "The Great Sultan", the rod puppets were moved by men and women in very beautiful national costumes, but in a subdued biege colour with some embroidery. They too did not over-power the puppets. In fact a very lively use of their costume was involved in the stage settings; when the boat is at sea, very rough,—the ladies stood in a row close together on the stage bending forward and picking up the corners of their aprons with both hands swaying them—the aprons were lined in a sea blue satin and gave the effect of waves.

While in another play, by a Bulgarian theatre of St. Expery's, "Le Petit Prince" where the manipulators were in full view, and dressed in air-force blue working the rod puppets. These manipulators outshone the puppets in their hands, and were a great disturbance, making the puppets seem like props only in their hands. So when manipulators are moving about

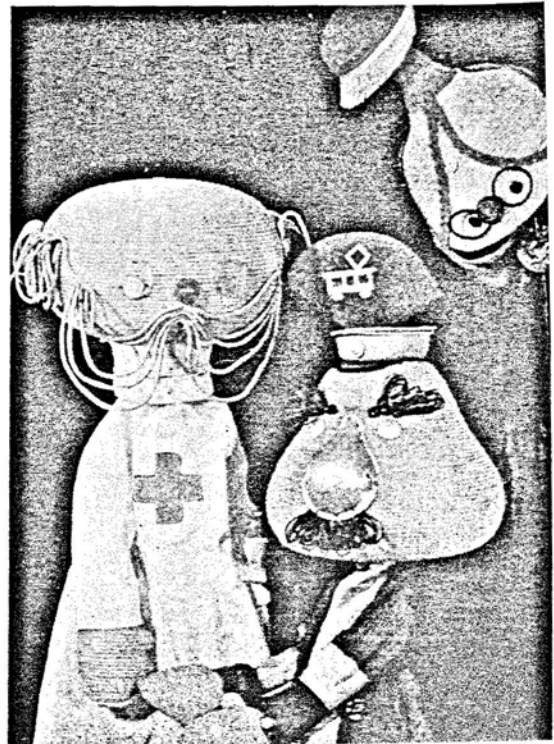




*Large Glove Puppets from Switzerland by Helga and Ueli Balmer.*



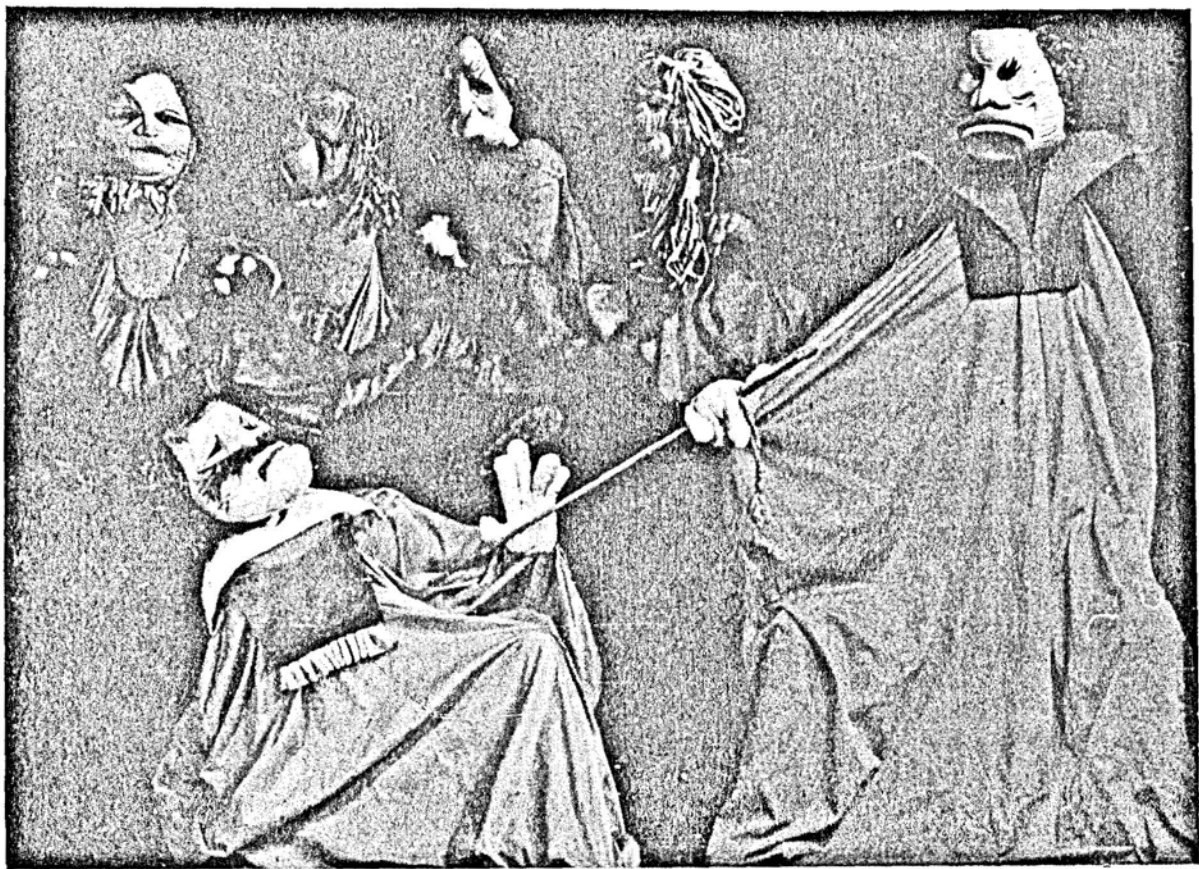
*Cane Puppet from Poland.*



*Large Rod Mask-head Puppets.*



*Rod Puppets, Central Puppet Theatre, Sofia.*



*Huge Mask Puppets, Taiji Kawagiri, Puk Theatre, Tokyo, "Story of Kabachi Village".*

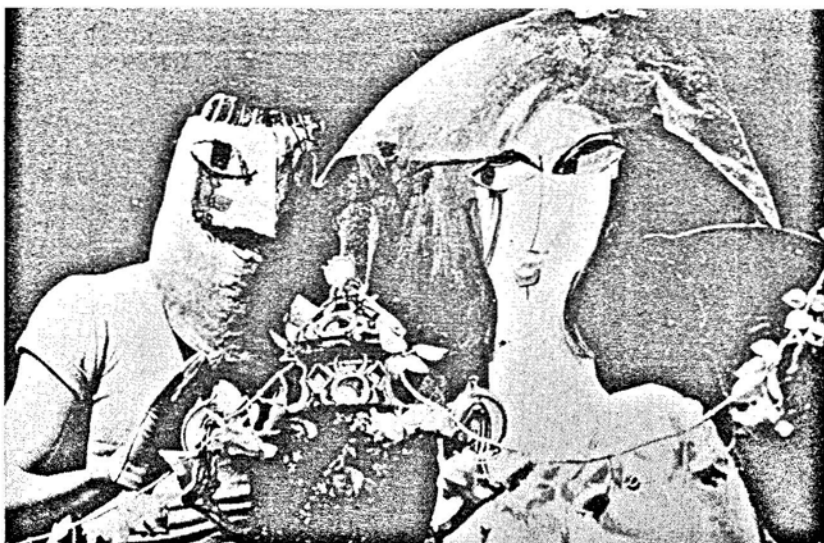


*Marotte dancers, Andre Tahon, France.*

*Rod Puppets, Taiji Kawagiri, from "Amphitriyon".*







*Mask Puppets, Micheal Meschke, Sweden.*

*Vietnam traditional Rod Puppet.*





*Puppet worn by the Manipulator like a costume, Swiss Theatre.*

*Rod head Puppet, Darpana, Ahmedabad.*





*Meher Contractor working on Marrote Puppet,  
Darpana Ahmedabad. (Photos and Sketches, Author)*



on the stage, they do pose a hazard for the puppet characters they manipulate. Thus great care should be taken that the manipulators have non-descriptive apparel, and faces masked otherwise they overshadow the puppet characters and ruin the performance.



Another kind of rod-puppet very much experimented on to-day, is the traditional Belgium type, that has the rod attached in the centre of the puppet-head on top, with a hook-like hold at the end, and which is about twice the size of the puppets. The movement of these is achieved through an up-and-down and forward movement. The limbs of the puppet are jointed and so can move, some incidental and some planned movement is achieved by a string or a separate rod often used. A good example of these experiments was by the Dark (Dragon) theatre from Czechoslovakia, in their play I recently saw in Belgium called "Eulenspiegel".

Another type of rod-puppet used widely is known as the 'marotte'. It has come from the medieval court jester's staff, which was a head attached to a stick. The marotte is just like that, a head attached to a stick and has no shoulders, but the clothes or robes draped on it are straight from under the head. The hands of these puppets are fixed to the folded end of the 2 corners of the robe as per diagram. Rods are then jointed to the hands. Often the manipulators gloved hand is used for the puppet hand. Or the hands are left to incidental movement.

A very good adaptation of this style is the famous French show-business puppeteer Mr. Andre Tahon, whose equally famous compaire 'Capotan' is



one such puppet. In fact all his folk dancer puppets are all made in the 'marotte' style.

### Masks

Masks were once an integral part of folk theatre all over the world and still are in some. Folk theatre often involved in ritualistic play, is equally popular to-day, on the puppet stage all over the world. Masks can be simple and made from a cardboard cutout, or a paper bag worn over the head, to an elaborately designed mask from any indigenous material. They vary in style and type. One type is a mask on a stick, carried like a fan in the puppeteer's hand and placed before his face when necessary. Then there are the simple paperbag or cardboard carton masks, some can be worn on top of the head like a hat and some, very large ones, are worn resting on the manipulator's shoulders. Sometimes they are half-masks adjusted on the head, with a cloth drapery at the back, or strands of wool or string fixed at the back, to give the appearance of hair.

The most fantastic of masks with human actors, is achieved by many leading puppet theatres abroad. Specially of note is the Groteska Theatre from Krukow Poland. Besides there are numerous others of repute, like the Tandarica theatre from Bucharest, Rumania, another from there the theatre of Craiova; Mischeal Meschke of Sweden has used masks very creatively in his little political satire on Hitler, Stalin and Roosevelt; Bulgaria, even Japan

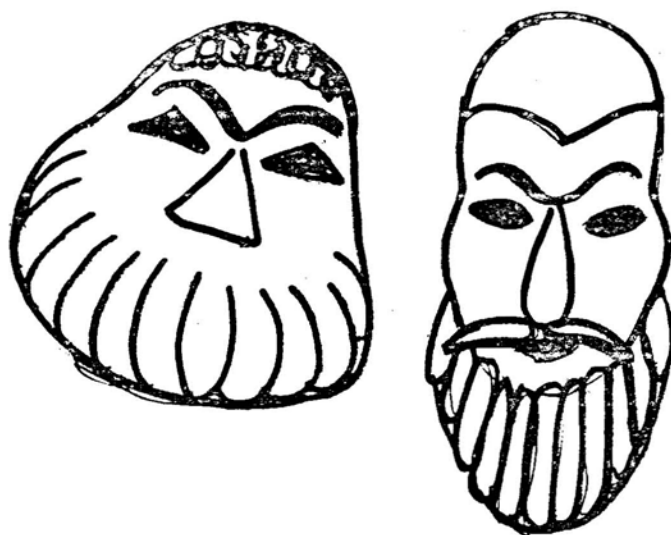
and Great Britain where John Blundell in his play 'The Little Tiger' has used masks very ingeniously made by John Hill. The Russians from Lenin-grad's theatre Bolshoi in their play "The Good Soldier Schweik" have used the mask, a flat face fixed on a neck-and-shoulder stick tee, with dress draped from the shoulder-stick and the puppets were held in front by dancers, in black tights, so that their arms and legs appeared to be those of the puppets.



Masks can be as weird and as grotesque as desired, and even as simple and charming as the show demands, besides a lot of fantasy can be produced through their use. But it must be remembered that when masks are used, the manipulator needs to have good acting skill with a study of mime, for then only can the mask puppets be given the proper life-style. So when it actually comes to puppet playing, the manipulators have to put their heart and soul behind the character they are to portray, to give it life. It demands a lot of involvement and skill on the actor's part, besides of course the lighting technique has to be excellent to help produce the desired effects.

The State Puppet Theatre of Uzbekistan in Tashkent has used beautifully designed masks in their play "Aigul & Bakhtiyar". Also the Azerbaijan Puppet Theatre, Baku, has used masks very effectively in their performance "If not one then the other".

Even the size of glove puppets is increasing, though it has its limitations,



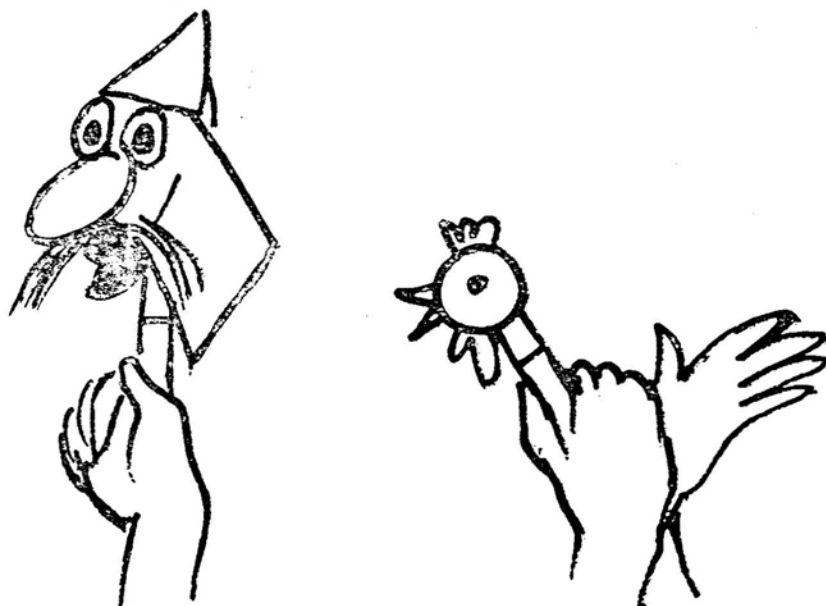
for the glove puppet must fit the hand. Still the head is often made very large, so that a whole hand is used just to open and shut the mouth of some puppets, like the ones made by Jim Hensen of U.S.A. Sesame Street and T.V. Fame. These are also known as mouth-puppets, as they 'bla bla' a lot. M. Philippe Genty of Paris does many of his cabaret and ballet numbers in these styles of puppets.

The glove puppet is still very popular and holds its charm specially with one-man shows, like those of Mr. Sergei Obraztsov of U.S.S.R., known the world over as the King of Puppeteers. Then there is Jean-Paul-Hubert of France, with his one-man portable stage and charming acts. The Canadian couple Mr. & Mrs. Vandenberg whom I saw in Bielsko Bielka Poland in 1976 do a very charming and loveable show with their glove puppets. Mr. Yves Joly of France has used the gloves with such artistry that it needs to be seen to be believed. Bulgarian theatre of Mme Nicolina Georgieva and all others have got wonderful glove puppets plays to their credit.

In fact the glove puppet is used by all world puppeteers and often combined with the rod. This puppet being worn on the puppeteer's hand, can project very strongly or gently as desired, many emotions and movements, specially of a vigorous folk dance or a very subtle-like sigh or sob. On the whole it can be very expressive and requires a great amount of practice.

Modern Puppet artists the world over are using every kind of material available, to create their puppets. In Poland some time back, at an exhibition.

I saw some fantastic puppets designed and made from household and kitchen-ware, from a tart-mould to even a toilet flush chain! Hessian cloth and paper too are widely and very effectively used, in regular shows by M. Yves Joly and the Claude Monistaires from France, and by the Armenian State theatre in their play "The Invincible Rooster" of which sketches are given. M. Yves Joly has used umbrellas of varied types, small and big, to tell a simple love story and this carried away an international prize!



Other puppets recently witnessed at the Asian Festival held in Uzbekistan were by the Bashkir Puppet Theatre from Ufa, where the puppets were of human size on masks, they were made of foam and Hessian clothing strapped on to the performers body while the actors feet went into the shoes of the puppet.

Another theatre from Canada Nova Scotia have a play called "Giant Anna" designed by P.T. Barnum his puppets at 7.25 metres worn by actors in platform shoes as per sketch.

But often, as the Puppets and the puppet stages have grown in size, much mechanism has seeped in too, like in Mr. Obrastzov's theatre in Moscow, where a chorus of dancers are manipulated like mechanical toys. There are many such incidents in the very highly technically developed puppet theatres in many countries, specially the East European countries, where the states support the theatres. Also, sometimes one finds so much use of the human actor visible on the puppet stage, with puppets or with puppets

strapped on to them, that one feels they come in the way, or there seemed no necessity for the puppet which appeared like the costume of an actor as in the Bashkir Theatre show.

Often human actors over-power the puppet character as stated before, with this new trend of the actor manipulator being in full view of the audience. So such shows need very careful choreographing and direction, otherwise they prove flops. Since we see the puppets thus growing larger in size, it is but natural that the performing areas they need are to be large and free of the conventional puppets stage. What with our increasing population, we have to cater to larger audiences as well, this means the size of the puppet and puppet stage area must conform to the human theatre. Perhaps that is why in India we had the large rod-puppets of Bengal, the huge Tamil Nadu *Bomalattam* and Andhra Naika's besides the huge shadow-puppets of Andhra.



In India too many are adopting the rod puppet styles; specially artists who have studied at the State Theatre in Moscow, like Suresh Dutta of Calcutta Puppets and Shukla Rahi. They have both done very creditable work in rod puppets. Suresh Dutta's "Alladin and the Wonderful Lamp", and now his gargantuan efforts in the construction of rod puppets of the Ramayana. He is making an incredible effort truly praise-worthy, but it is too costly an affair and inclined towards mechanism. But he is trained in a highly technically developed theatre of Mr. Obrastzov's and so his aims are high—though very artistic and really commendable. Such artists need help and state support besides encouragement. In fact, encouragement is lacking in our country, but it is for the puppeteers to prove their worth and show our people that their art is truly something worthwhile and not just childish as it is often stigmatised in this country.

Many others are trying rod puppets like Mr. Shrivastav, of New Delhi and the Puppets Calcutta of Raghunath Goswami who did "Hoto Gol Vijay" which was filmed. The Children's Little Theatre, India, have their unit of puppets who have mostly done rod puppets and are producing "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves" in this style, which is known as the Russian style developed by Mme Efimova and her husband a common and popular style used by many.

The Darpana Academy has to its credit a fine historical play, all in wooden rod puppets called "The Story of Ahmedabad" where the puppets are 1½ ft-2ft in height. Here they have also experimented with very large puppets on Bengal Rod style, which are made from baskets and grain threshing trays etc., for the 1977 Andhra Cyclone Relief Fund Pageant. They have used huge masks, made from baskets, worn on the head of the manipulator in one of 'Black Theatre' shorts, called "The Magician and the Clown". They have recently produced a new experiment, with rod-head puppets of the Children's Year called, "Understand the Child", as the photographs will show.

Darpana also has done a play from the Persian 'Shahnamah' "Rustom and Sohrab" adopting the Andhra leather shadow-style and the puppets designed are huge. A lot of inspiration can be derived from the traditional puppetry it is seen.

Glove puppets are used by Darpana and most of the new groups experimenting with puppets—as they are easy to pack and convenient for transport.



Many schools in India are experimenting with puppets: Glove, Rod, String and amongst these is the Shreyas School in Ahmedabad where, every year for their annual Mela, they have made puppets of that region to tell a folk story or depict some theme relating to the country or state as a Project study. In general, puppets and puppet theatres throughout the world are achieving new standards in artistry and skill. This conscious evolution in this art has grown entirely through the worldwide efforts of the World Organisation UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette) which has brought International puppeteers together at festivals and congresses since the last 50 years, when it was formed by a few devoted artist friends in Liege, Prague and Paris. To-day it has brought this art to such a height of theatre, giving artists every opportunity, inspiration and encouragement to work and explore all the potentialities of this art which thrills both young and old alike.

Puppeteers are now used in education and mass communication and can put across social, civic or any message with greater ease and impact than words or any ordinary theatre.



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