

# Puppy in Czechoslovakia

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**PUPPETRY**  
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**ORBIS - PRAGUE**



The European puppet theatre was not an original, indigenous product. It came to Europe as a decoction or derivation from the decayed eastern prototype, and although it was at times popular also with adults, it did not, on the whole, receive a more systematic attention until the end of the nineteenth century. Its European beginnings were extremely humble or, if one may say so, positively proletarian, which explains the fact that the puppet theatre was weighed down by a heavier load of prejudice than the professional actors' stage.

In inquiring into the prehistory of European puppetry, we must realize that it is very difficult indeed—in Czechoslovakia just as anywhere else in Europe—to throw light on the dark beginnings of this generally overlooked art. For the earliest times, we lack any records whatsoever. Those who then arranged puppet shows were for the most part very simple, often illiterate members of the comedians' guild, typical strolling mountebanks. Small wonder that literary memoirs were quite unknown. And those for whose benefit puppet plays were acted did not think it necessary to mention a thing as paltry as a puppeteer and his theatre—and anyway, most of them could not have put their experiences in writing because they, the onlookers, were illiterate, too.

It is not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that we discover some scattered and occasional traces. In

archives, we come across official entries concerning the licensing or banning of plays, and here and now, we find a woodcut or engraving from those times, and there appears some literary reminiscence, as a rule not very clear, sometimes quite confused, especially with regard to technical details. These splinters, as it were, we must join together laboriously to a mosaic picture of the infancy of Czechoslovak puppetry.

One thing strikes the eye: in the accessible sources, we almost exclusively come across marionettes, i. e. puppets which hang on strings, and in exceptional cases across shadow-theatres, whereas there is no mention at all of hand puppets. We need not, however, doubt that also the hand-puppet theatre has had a long history in the Czech Lands, but it probably did not penetrate to this area until the time when the tradition of the marionette theatre had taken firm root. The fact is that hand puppets could not successfully compete with marionettes, not so much because the former would have lacked a suitable repertoire—there were plenty of subjects to be taken over from the *commedia dell'arte*—as rather because nobody of sufficient intelligence and will-power was found to devote himself to the fostering of this style. Nor must we forget that the public then regarded puppets as nothing but a substitute for the actors' theatre—in this lies the fundamental difference between the oriental and European conceptions of puppetry—and so the marionette was of course much nearer to the spirit of the age than the hand puppet, which, for all its realism, is after all a bold stylization. Nevertheless, it is certain that hand-puppet theatres did exist, as is borne out both by the great age of the Czech word for the hand puppet, "*maňásek*", meaning something like *manikin*, and by the remaining bits and pieces of the repertoire which have come down to us, especially scenarios of their pantomimes. Besides this, hand puppets were certainly

used in ancillary functions, i. e. as a means of attracting the public, used by mountebanks, charlatans, and jugglers. Indirect evidence of this practice is provided by the oldest Czech picture of a puppet, dating from 1588. The shadow theatre remained throughout Europe more or less an exotic plant. In Czechoslovakia, too, it occurred only very rarely, and that as a technical rather than artistic speciality. However, its turn did come with the first wave of Late Baroque romanticism, which provided suitable external conditions for this type of theatrical production. Nevertheless, the shadow theatre never became a popular entertainment in the literal sense of the word.

The field, then, was in possession of the marionettes. The first reliable records of them are to be found in Czech documents from the mid-seventeenth century, i. e. soon after the end of the Thirty Years' War. Their popularity was fostered by foreign troupes, particularly English, and later German or so-called Dutch, and Italian. These were mostly strolling companies, which alternately performed an actors' and a marionette repertoire, but there were also some troupes which engaged exclusively in puppet-plays, among them some former heads of actors' companies who had lost part of their troupe and were compelled, therefore, to perform a simplified repertoire by means of marionettes. This is why with the marionettes of those days, we so often find names and subjects of plays reminding of Marlowe (1564—1593), Shakespeare (1564—1616), Molière (1622—1673), and other classics of the theatre.

The marionette theatre met with a response—above all on account of its reasonable prices of admission. It became a popular entertainment especially of the middle and the lower classes, and in a comparatively short time, native producers of marionette shows made their appearance in the Czech Lands. In this way, the marionette theatre gained a very wide public also in the countryside, because



in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was—apart from the primitive “rustic” plays, and the moralizing repertoire of scholars’ stages—the only form of theatrical show where the public was addressed in its mother-tongue, while the actors’ theatre was dominated, in addition to Latin, first by English and Italian, later by German and more rarely French. We must not forget that it was not until 1771 that the first performance in Czech was given in Prague—with indifferent success, because the actors did not have a sufficient command of the Czech language—and that amateur theatres in the modern sense only began to develop in Bohemia after the year 1820.

In their social status, the first Czech puppeteers came under the class of itinerant people who were tolerated rather than given support, and if the professional actors’ theatre gradually began to rise in the social scale in the eighteenth century, the puppeteer remained well into the nineteenth century—and in his vulgar form up to this day—the brother german of the strolling comedian.

To put it briefly, Czech puppetry, i. e. the puppet play acted in the Czech language, appears in our sources for the first time as a feature of the Baroque era, and we find obvious traces of this first flourishing up to the present day in the repertoire, in the plastic design of marionettes, and in the decorations used by the popular puppet-players, where it is customary to use a perspective stage, hemmed with borders of an opera-glass type, a simplified, small-size imitation of the stage decoration as it was gradually evolved by the Galli-Bibienas, mainly Ferdinando Galli-Bibiena (1653—1743), and his son Carlo (d. 1784).

In the repertoire there are represented in the first place international subjects, such as “Faustus”, “Geneviève”, “Don Juan”, and some biblical themes. Naturally we find here some truncated plays by Shakespeare, which were no doubt a legacy of the Anglo-German actors’ troupes. As

a matter of fact, however, not a few of these plays made their appearance in the Czech puppeteers' repertoire long before they were translated into Czech, prior to appearing on the actors' stage.

A welcome source of subjects for the marionette theatre was the repertoire of the *commedia dell' arte*, whose two types of servant—the crafty Arlecchino and the stupid Brighella—were combined in the Czech “pimprle”, and later, roughly since 1815, in “Kašpárek” (Punch). In this new name of the marionette clown, we ought to see to a far greater extent influences of the contemporary Viennese comedy than of the domestic tradition of Kašpar (Jasper), one of the Three Kings in the Christmas comedies, the one who played the comic part, as a rule.

Frequently, the marionette theatre availed itself of opera libretti, especially at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, a time when the first Czech translations of such libretti were made.

It is interesting to note that the fairy-tale, today so characteristic of the puppet repertoire, was passed over by the puppet theatre 150 years ago, and long after that, obviously on account of the fact that the puppeteer traditionally adapted only texts which had already been dramatized, whereas he did not venture to tackle dramaturgically prose, let alone narrative. If the devil appears in a puppet show, this may be traced to models other than fairy-tales, and if there is an isolated case of a dragon being shown, this is due to the influence of the later *commedia dell' arte* (particularly Carlo Gozzi, 1720—1806).

On the other hand, we do find, curiously enough, in puppet plays acted 150 years ago some dramatized incidents, both contemporary and from the recent past. Typical are plays like “Horia and Gloska” (Rumanian highwaymen executed in 1785), or “The Murderer Kovařík”

(a criminal caught in 1798), but the authors of such plays were not popular puppeteers, but playwrights not associated with the marionette theatre.

An overwhelming majority of the plays which made up the repertoire of Czech puppeteers in the last decades before the revolutionary year 1848 were adaptations of the contemporary theatrical repertoire, and in particular, of the plays of the fertile Jan N. Štěpánek (1783—1844).

The popular puppeteer then had no original repertoire, nor a peculiar decorative style of his own; his stiff marionettes on strings may have been a naive, although conscious attempt at miniatures of living actors—in short, it was all an imitation of the actors' stage, even if of an unwillingly stylized character. Equally, it was unwillingly that the puppeteer stylized the gesticulation of his figures and the vocal rendering of the parts, to which he gave romantic pathos, and if he did create for himself an individual vocabulary, idiom, and, as a rule, also a different manner of accenting, this was a result of his desire to impress his simple-minded public with a solemn, lofty, genteel language.

We have mentioned the fact that the Czech amateur theatre did not make its appearance as an established institution until after 1820, or rather later, when its development was stimulated by Josef Kajetán Tyl (1808—1856). The puppeteer was therefore until that time the only link to connect the Czech countryside with the theatrical life of the town. In adapting to his purposes the contemporary repertoire in the very time when the first signs of the forthcoming national awakening were appearing, the puppeteer was for the country folk one of the most effective promoters of that awakening. It was thanks to this temper of the age and, to be sure, to his exceptional ability, that Matěj Kopecký (1775—1847) won so great fame. He was the descendant of an old and widely ramified comed-

ians' family whose members have been puppeteers to the present day.

The death of Matěj Kopecký symbolically spelt the close of the era of popular puppeteers who had found their last chance in the ferment of the national revival, and whose further activities, obstinately sticking to outworn traditions, were more and more obviously getting out of step with the times. Exceptions only prove the rule.

Fifteen years after the death of Matěj Kopecký, i. e. in 1862, there was published in Prague a collection of his "Comedies and Plays" in two volumes, compiled by his son Václav and edited by a trio of humorists, H. Přerhof, E. Just, and J. R. Vilímek. The two volumes were obviously not meant as a document with a bearing on the history of culture, but as a contribution to amusing programmes then very popular, where parodies of the puppet-show style were acted by living actors. The fact was that the puppeteer's pathos came very handy to those who were as early as the eighteen-fifties attacking shallow Romanticism, and preparing the way for more viable trends. For such ridiculing performance were destined two overtures to puppet-plays by the ingenious composer, Bedřich Smetana (1824—1884), viz. to "Faustus" (1862), and "Oldřich and Božena" (1863). The classical author of puppet-play parodies was Alois Gallat (1827—1901). His farce "Šnofonius and Mordulina" (1854), together with reminiscences of the tradition established by Matěj Kopecký, were a source of inspiration for numerous puppet drawings of the most truly Czech artist, Mikoláš Aleš (1852—1913). In this way, Matěj Kopecký became a delightful legend, expressed with radiant humour in Smetana's music, while it received its graphic contours from Aleš.

However, here we have already arrived at a period when the Czech puppet theatre was going through an interesting transition in its development. On the one hand, it was be-

coming a child's play and perhaps, at best, a modest family entertainment, while on the other hand, it was just those burlesque sallies, performed for the amusement of adults, which tried to convince receptive spectators that puppets have an attractiveness which time cannot affect. However, the need for reform was felt, which was in the first place asserted in a severer selection of plays, increased attention to the language, and a consistent fight against the conventional pathos, which, however, produced results only by degrees. While popular puppetry was increasingly losing ground both in its repertoire and in its technique of production—whereby many a puppeteer, from ignorance, would brighten his repertoire with those very plays which were written as parodies of the puppet theatre—the traditional heritage was taken over by individual amateurs. Soon after 1852, a headmaster, František Hauser, set up at his school in Prague the first marionette theatre of this new type, for which he also wrote a play in 1862 which struck a modern note, "A Voyage to America". A few years later, the first puppet theatres run by societies began to perform. One of the oldest little theatres run by the "Sokol" (Association for Physical Culture) was founded at Kouřim as early as 1874. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these theatres found their crowning achievement and model in the puppet theatre of the "Club of Patriotic Friends of Dr. Pařík and the Třebenice District in Prague", in the years 1902—09. In the meantime, marionette theatres also gained admission to public schools, particularly to kindergartens—one such little stage was established in 1885 by Ludmila Tesařová in the Karlín, suburb of Prague—and subsequently to elementary schools—in 1903, the elementary school at Plzeň-Doudlevice set up such a puppet theatre—as well as schools of higher grades.

The renaissance of Czech puppetry was at hand. In



1887, the first editions of puppet plays were making their appearance; in 1889, the first practical handbook of puppetry was published—its author was the writer for the young, F. Hrnčíř, writing under the pseudonym “Dr. J. V.” In 1894, there were already in existence Czech printed decorations for the puppet theatre of the family type, the work of the artist, Karel Štapfer, later in charge of the scenery of the National Theatre in Prague. The time was quite obviously ripe for puppetry to be given full recognition.

A new chapter in the history of Czech puppetry was inaugurated by the first Puppeteers' Congress in Prague in 1903. In the same year, the Club of Friends of the Puppet Theatre at Kladno invited to participation in the first literary competition for the best puppet play. The marionette theatre was beginning to arouse the interest not only of historians of literature and of culture, such as Professor Arnošt Kraus, but also of expert critics of the drama (Professor Václav Tille), as well as graphic and plastic artists, such as the portraitist and illustrator Artuš Scheiner, the landscape painter, Ota Bubeníček, the draughtsman, Adolf Kašpar, the sculptor, Josef Šejnost, etc.

It was as it were the last echo and the epilogue of the popular puppetry tradition when on September 28, 1905, the theatrical world organized a celebration at Týn nad Vltavou, where a memorial to Matěj Kopecký was unveiled near the church wall on the local churchyard, the exact location of his grave being unknown. Another dignified, even though from the dramaturgic point of view somewhat controversial, salute to the ancient glory of the puppeteer was the publication in 1905 of “Faustus” in book form; this had already been revised in 1891, with the use of traditional puppet motifs, by the eminent student of the Faustus literature, Dr. Arnošt Kraus (died at Terezín in 1943), and the ingenious poet, Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853—

1912). The puppet theatre in the traditional forms was definitively becoming history. This is also borne out by the book "The Puppet Theatre" by Ladislav Novák, who was later to become a Cabinet Minister, which was published in 1906 as the first Czech attempt at an outline of the development of world puppetry, with special regard to the Czech contribution.

No wonder that also the hand puppets, which had up to that time led a bare existence in poor booths on fairs, began to be noticed in the circles of the younger generation of writers and artists, and subsequently to be handled also by experienced artists, beginning in 1904 with the medallist Josef Šejnost (1878—1940), who has already been mentioned.

A few years later—between 1909 and 1911—there also came into being, at Čakovice near Prague, the first public artistic stage for shadow-theatre performances, whose patron and masterly producer in Prague artists' circles was Karel Štapfer (1863—1930).

The man who was at the head of a group of esteemed fellow-workers to become the connecting-link between tradition and the modern age in puppetry was Professor Jindřich Veselý (1885—1939), who in 1909 took his degree of Ph.D. with a thesis of the Faustus element in traditional Czech puppetry. Dr. Veselý set himself several tasks, whose extent prevented him in the end from elaborating the different sectors to the point where they should yield clear-cut conclusions and from summing up his life's work in a comprehensive synthesis. First of all, he set out to concentrate, compare, and publish all documents of the popular puppet repertoire (which were getting scarcer all the time); furthermore, he placed his organizing talent, propagandist ability and publisher's ambition at the service of the contemporary puppet theatre. He began his public activities in 1911 with a retrospective exhibition of puppetry at the

Ethnographic Museum, which turned out a spectacular success: visitors numbered nearly 26,000. As a live retrospective, so to speak, Dr. Veselý arranged in 1912 and 1913 guest performances in Prague of the aged great-granddaughter of Matěj Kopecký, Arnošta Kopecká-Kriegerová (1842—1914), which became a rendezvous of writers, scientists, artists, and journalists.

As a first attempt at a professional centre, there came into being in 1911, with the co-operation of Dr. Veselý, the Czech Union of Friends of the Puppet Theatre, which started activities on a wide field. At the suggestion of Dr. Veselý, and under the auspices of the Union, there appeared before Christmas, 1912, the first so-called 'Aleš' puppets, made in the workshop of A. Münzberg. They were tasteful and technically well-devised marionettes, intended for bigger puppet theatres such as are used in the family and school. A year later, the Union started publication of printed "Decorations of Czech Artists" (size of the mount 72×45 cm), which in addition to their high artistic value, also signified a far-reaching technical reform, by introducing, in place of the customary bordered arches, a simple pair of wide wings.

There is yet another activity in which the Union was associated with Dr. Veselý, viz. the publication in 1912—1913 under his editorship of the two volumes of the review "Český loutkář" (The Czech Puppeteer).

Although the first World War palpably checked the promising start of the renaissance of Czech puppetry, it was not quite unfruitful an era for these endeavours. Above all, it was questions of a new repertoire which were being clarified. Dr. Vladimír Zákrejs, in particular, was making experiments in those days with producing Shakespeare's plays on a specially reformed stage. Subsequently, there was published a whole collection of puppet plays from Shakespeare, furthermore, a volume of puppet-theatre

adaptations of Czech classical plays, and lastly, the first translations from Count Francesco Poggi, etc.

During the war, Czech puppets—both marionettes and hand puppets—came in very handy—on the fronts, at first-aid posts, military hospitals, prisoner-of-war camps, and with the Czechoslovak “Legions” on the Russian and Italian fronts. In April 1917, an actors’ group from the National Theatre in Prague performed for the first time an allegorical play “Pan Johanes”, which the Czech novelist and playwright, Alois Jirásek, dedicated to the puppet theatre. This was the first Czech puppet play of a pronounced literary bent.

Finally, after a pause of four years, as a substitute for the review “Český loutkář” which had had to cease publication, there began to appear in 1917, first in the publishing house of A. Münzberg, later under Dr. Veselý, and in the end in the publishing house of Jos. R. Vilímek, the monthly “Loutkář” (The Puppeteer), which maintained its popularity until its 25th year—the last issue came out on June 15, 1939, i. e. already under the German occupation—and which is recognized at home and abroad as a compilation of enduring value, to which there return time and again not only practical puppeteers, but also historians of literature and of culture.

Towards the close of the war, Czech puppetry as practised by societies was on the eve of its greatest rise. Already a short time before the outbreak of war, on January 8, 1914, the puppet theatre of the Artistic Education Society in the Vinohrady district of Prague opened with the old Czech opera “Dráteník” (The Tinker), a work of the composer of the Czech national anthem, František Škroup (1801—1862). This little theatre, at the cradle of which stood the sculptor, Ladislav Šaloun (1870—1946), who was subsequently awarded the title of National Artist, had, however, to close down for the war years. And it so