

Library, Films, Workshops, Puppet Theatre-Festivals and More... Three Weeks as Reseacher in Residence in Bochum

On 15th June 2011, I started for Germany, all the way from India. I was headed to the Deutsches Forum für Figurentheater und Puppenspielkunst (Dfp) at Bochum to carry out research in 'Different Forms of Puppetry' with a focus on European Puppet theatre. Having done preliminary research about the place, I had some idea of what I would be doing there. But nothing had prepared me for the life-changing experience I had as a theatre student, professional and as a person.

Visiting a new country, I was a little skeptical about things but it all vanished once I got there. My host, Anke Meyer welcomed me warmly and drove me down to the forum, my abode for the next 21 days. I felt at home instantly and without a hitch got down to work. Thousands of books and videos, all waiting to be explored... I was inspired! I started with history of European puppetry, I felt it was essential to learn about the past to understand the present. As things progressed, I read more and more about modern theorists and practitioners and watched video recordings of various puppet shows from Europe. I was lucky as on a chance visit, I got invited to observe and attend a half day workshop with Florian Feisel on object theatre. And at the Schauspielhaus Bochum I watched some of the most powerful plays I have ever experienced. What can be a better way to learn than watching well made plays? Language really doesn't matter.

The best was yet to come, my visit to the international puppet theatre festivals at Magdeburg and Berlin. Once more the quality of theatre there managed to surprise me and the six days that followed, I feel were like six days of an intensive workshop in all kinds of puppetry. And in a surprising turn of event, Dr. Susanne Schulz from Theatre Naumburg invited me to visit her theatre and sit through a rehearsal of one of the plays in the Cathedral grounds, where I also got the chance to talk to the director.

In retrospect, I feel, books alone couldn't have taught me as much as I learned from witnessing the 'real- thing'. It was a combination of both that opened up the gates of knowledge for me and I hope some day it will all translate into something as beautiful as what I experienced.

The 9th International Figurentheater Festival in Magdeburg, Germany



When I first came to know I would visit the 9th International puppet festival at Magdeburg, little did I know how important this would prove to be in understanding the present scenario of puppet theatre in Europe! The flavor of the festival was quite varied. I witnessed a range of performances at different venues across Magdeburg over two days – 21st and 22nd June 2011.

The first performance that I went to was a lighthearted and thought provoking show staged by The

Dudapaiva Company called “Bastard”. The play is set in a wasteland where a human is dumped. The protagonist together with the foam puppet inhabitants of the wasteland embark on a journey to find a way out. The performance engaged a variety of theatrical techniques by the artist, Duda to bring out the common thread that binds us all – hope, fear and dreams. In a personal interview with the artist I learned that’s the beautiful life-like puppets were carved out of huge single blocks of foam of a special variety. The use of multimedia, dance and music brought out numerous aspects of the story. A very powerful first experience of puppet theatre in Europe, it set the tone of what to expect from the future performances.

Well, if I thought I knew what to expect, I was highly mistaken. The next performance, “Paper cut” by Yael Rasooly was nothing like the previous one and yet every inch as brilliant. The most striking factor for me was the use of ‘Paper-cut’ puppets, literally!! In a totally innovative take on a bored office secretary, Yael Rasooly’s characterization, the plot and her ingenuous use of paper puppets set the audience roaring with laughter. The lighting technique was notable as the table lamp of the office secretary made for a variety of lighting gimmicks. Simple, yet hugely effective, the artist, who is from Israel, said she has been touring around the world with this production and changes the plot a bit to include local humor wherever she goes.

On the 22nd June I went for the play “Reineke Fuchs” (Puppentheater der Stadt Magdeburg, director Nis Sogaard). Two archeologists while analyzing the past, come across the remains of characters from the famous poem of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The scientists are possessed by the characters, which come to life. Thus begin the saga of power, violence and judgment. The puppets were mostly small sized rod puppets. The set design, which resembled a laboratory, had several interesting facets to accommodate the set changes during the narration. Music was used to mark transformations and highlight important moments. Even though the play was in German it was interesting to watch and there was much to learn.

Major Dux at the Schauspielhaus was a multimedia theatre production by the Bavarian state theatre in collaboration with children from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The main element of puppetry used in this production was that of shadow theatre. Beautiful animal masks worn by the children, walked behind a scrim, lit up from behind, recreating a scene in the jungle. African percussion instruments set the mood of the play.

I headed then to watch my last performance in Magdeburg – “Drei Affen” from the Ensemble Material theatre Stuttgart. The language of the performance was a German- Gibberish mix. The story was clear – it was a parable of the uprising of the Objects. Lifeless objects like teacups, chairs and dustbins moved about unhindered and almost spoke to the human characters, their possessors. The only thing left for them to do was to speak – literally. The clinging and clanging made up for that as they communicated their thoughts and feelings to their masters. In fact, in this case the objects seemed to be the masters! The manipulations of objects were carried out by using powerful small magnets, sometimes strings and occasionally by the human characters on stage. All elements like set-design, lighting, music and costume design came together in a harmonious synchrony. The plot was interesting and the treatment brilliant.

As one can imagine, two days and five performances later I had been exposed to a range of puppet theatre. It not only made me aware of the recent advancements in puppet theatre, it was more like an intensive crash course in the field. Post production I always got a chance to talk to the artists and learn more about the work they do. The discussions often led to an interesting exchange of ideas which helped me understand the current trends in puppet theatre in Germany, Europe and abroad.

Tage der Hochschule 2011 – SCHAUBUDE Berlin, Puppetry Department and Museum



Tage Der Hochschule 2011 was the end of year production of the students of the Puppetry department of the University of Performing Arts “Ernst Busch” Berlin. Each day of the 3-day long festival (23rd to 25th July 2011) started with chanting and sometimes scene-reading, at the foyer of the Schaubude. After this came the main performance of the day. The performances which ranged across hand puppets, masked performances, clownery and object-theatre took us into the worlds of these puppets, as they came alive to tell their story. The line-up varied in flavor and essence – from popular tales to perspective views, from comedy to tragedy – it was all there. The evenings would wrap up with screening of short animation films made by the 3rd year students under the guidance of the teachers. The final evening had a special event, an object theatre performance “Hinter der Haut” by the students under the direction of Christian Carrignon and Katy Deville (Théâtre de Cuisine, Marseille). This kind of object theatre was again a novel experience for me.

Most performances were top class and would pass off as professional acts. Perhaps this is the standard of the school itself. A special mention must go to the Head of Department of Puppetry, Professor Hans-Jochen Menzel, who was gracious enough give me a guided tour through the puppet collection of the school and even demonstrated the manipulation of some puppets. We also took a look at the workshops where the students create their own puppets and handled some exercise-puppets to get a first-hand feel.

I had similar experience when we visited the Puppen Theatre Museum Berlin. Amongst others, the lady at the counter shared some insights of how they work with children. This, I found to be invaluable as being a theatre teacher. I work with children and I was hoping to introduce and initiate them into the world of puppets after this. The museum has a gorgeous array of puppets by different artists from Germany and abroad.

What I brought back from Berlin and Magdeburg are numerous impressions of puppet theatre which I am sure will shape the way I think and work in the years to come. I made friends and established important contacts with many theatre artists and directors who had come to witness the festivals. What better way can there be to experience a different culture? The entire experience was richly rewarding. I would like to thank Deutsches Forum für Figurentheater und Puppenspielkunst (dfp) and its director, Annette Dabs, for this opportunity. And a very special ‘Thank-you’ to Anke Meyer, my host and guide – from whom I learned even more.

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