

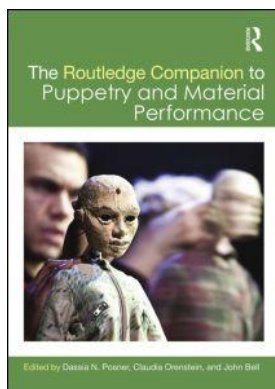
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Integration of Puppetry Tradition into Contemporary Theatre

The Reinvigoration of the *Vertep* Puppet Nativity
Play after Communism in Eastern Europe

Ida Hledíková

A tradition of “crèche” performances, representations of the Christian Nativity, existed in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Austria, Bohemia, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Russia) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This tradition primarily came from folk plays presented at Christmastime, but the oldest traditions were derived from pastorals with a Christmas theme, which appeared in the European Baroque theatre around 1555 when the first modern-era plays performed in Latin, called *pastorales sacrae*, were staged in Italy (Slivka 1992: 90). Alongside this tradition, which was developed by Jesuits, came popular presentations of the Nativity story performed in the language of the local populace, the “folk.” These Nativity scenes, presented as folk plays, existed in both puppet and human form or as a combination of the two.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the socialist revolution in Russia and later political changes in Central European countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany, following World War II, brought a definitive end to the traditional puppet theatre. Such performances were considered private commercial activities, which were forbidden under Communist governments because they were incompatible with the principle of public ownership. At the same time the presentation of crèche folk plays with their religious themes was illegal. The strictest ban on religious performances was established in the republics that made up the Soviet Union after the revolution of 1917. Traditional Christmas plays (called *vertep* in Ukraine and *batlejka* in Belarus) have strong roots in the countries of the former Soviet Union, but their presentation disappeared for 70 years. The ban had an ideological rationale: it was a ban on any manifestation of religion.

However, during the 1990s a revival of old traditions was launched spontaneously in the USSR after Mikhail Gorbachev instituted *perestroika* – a process of liberation immediately preceding the collapse of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. It was a new chance for free expression and independent theatre. Many professional puppet theatres of the former Soviet Union resumed the practice of presenting Nativity scenes and other traditional productions. At the same time the popular Russian street glove-puppet show with its “hero” Petrushka was once again seen. Nowadays these post-traditional shows are played mainly by professional soloists and professional puppet companies. The actors, directors, and scenic and puppet designers of these plays are educated in theatre schools or schools of fine arts. The majority do not copy the old models completely but take inspiration from them to create new performances derived from traditional content, such as the Nativity scene.

Interesting examples of this type of theatre come from Ukraine. We can see the process of alteration of the Ukrainian *vertep* through three stagings of the Nativity scene, all directed by Sergij Bryzhan and designed by Michail Nikolaev. Both are eminent puppetry artists who work in the County Puppet Theatre in the town of Chmelnickij. These productions show the crèche tradition being used in new, contemporary forms, while maintaining some principles of the original tradition. The Nativity play has become a scenic artifact.

The presentation of three different stagings of the *vertep* Nativity play in Ukraine created by the same director and scenic artist is an excellent example of experimentation with one theme in the puppet theatre. While the first two productions by Bryzhan maintain the status of classical storytelling with regards to the nativity of baby Jesus, his third staging for the most part offers conceptual changes, in the spirit of a modern approach, to become a decomposition of the well-known biblical story. By breaking up the story, the creators make room for a loose interpretation of the narrative and for their presentation of puppetry and visual ideas. At first glance, this version of the story has little in common with the traditional account. Disrupting the story to allow a free flow of associations is one of the characteristic features of postdramatic theatre, which is related to post-traditional puppet theatre.

Post-traditional puppet theatre, in general, is a form of puppet theatre that has attributes of the theatre of objects, usually involving figurative puppets, and that deliberately engages with the elements of traditional puppet theatre dramaturgy, including inspiration, puppetry technique, and specific staging procedures, but which are stylized to create an original new form.

In its formal aspects, this modern presentation of the Nativity play is far removed from folk traditions. Only the story, characters, and structure of the play remain. A postdramatic staging, such as in the third Nativity play by Bryzhan entitled *Resonances*, is devoid of story. The creators do not copy old forms but are, rather, inspired by the story's theme in creating original work.

The crèche story is always simple and short: in the first scene characters, such as shepherds, peasants, and the Three Kings, go to see the baby Jesus with their offerings. The second scene is with King Herod. A sage announces to Herod that a new Jewish king has been born. Herod expresses his fear that he will lose his crown. Then Death comes and beheads Herod. The Devil, who accompanies Death, rejoices

and takes Herod away to hell. The play has other versions in different regions, but they all include the same basic events. In Slovakia, for example, a Roma (“Gypsy”) character is presented instead of a Jewish man. The story is usually staged in something resembling a small house, of one to three floors, according to regional tradition. The puppets are small, usually between 15 and 25 centimeters, fixed on a stick, and animated from below.

Out of Bryzhan’s three new stagings of the crèche, the first, and the one most influenced by tradition, was done in 1995. The last one is a new performance that was conceived – to use terminology from Hans Thies Lehmann in his book on post-dramatic theatre – as a framed “state”: “The state is an aesthetic figuration of the theatre, showing a formation rather than a story, even though living actors play in it” (Lehmann 1999 [2006]: 68). On the one hand, Lehmann’s idea can be perceived as the form tackling the theme while abandoning classical storytelling through characters, relationships, and dramatic conflicts. On the other, however, Bryzhan composes the staging of the scenes with great creativity. He addresses the audience through visual metaphor. He focuses on the abstract scenic form, which allows the audience to make their own associations. The director achieves this provocative abstraction by applying textual and visual fragments, which more or less correspond to the basic structure. It is a free treatment of the theme through theatrical visualization with puppets. This is the principle of the postdramatic treatment of subject at work in his production of *Resonances*.

The first Nativity performance created by Bryzhan and Nikolaev, called *Vertep* after its genre, was done in “family-theatre” style. The family theatre is a type of theatre built on the idea of joint performances by family members (the director cast himself, his wife, and daughter in the play; however, they are not amateurs – both Bryzhan and his wife are members of the Chmelnickij County Puppet Theatre). The stage has an intimate character, consisting of a classical booth with three stories arranged in a hierarchical order: at the top there is the Heavens – where angels usually fly; life on Earth, represented by the Christ child; Mary and Joseph (i.e., the Holy Family); the Three Kings; a typically Ukrainian character “Don Cossack”; and a donkey, is situated on the middle level; and in the lowest space, the scene with Herod, the Devil, and Death takes place.

This staging of the Nativity play is devoid of unique interpretative shifts. The content and message remain true to the spirit of the story and celebrations of the birth of baby Jesus. The content corresponds to the tradition, while the form differs. The puppet technique is identical with that tradition. Simple puppets on a stick are moved up and down and back, as well as from left to right and back, by the actor. The visual arrangement of the scenery and use of puppets fulfill traditional aesthetic requirements. In traditional theatre, the concern is artistic naïveté, although here the staging is performed by professionally trained puppeteers, not folk actors. Contemporary theatre-makers, by contrast, seek inspiration from both self-exploration and ethnological research, since this tradition was interrupted for more than 60 years.

Bryzhan directed his second Nativity staging, *A Christmas Mystery*, in the Rovenski Puppet Theatre in Rovno, Ukraine. The concept, image, and philosophy of this staging are based on an East European religious-art tradition (mainly Ukrainian,



Figure 20.1 *Vertep*, Bryzhan Family Theatre, Chmelnickij, Ukraine (premiered 1995): Director: Sergij Bryzhan; designer: Michail Nikolaev; from left: Olga Bryzhan, Natasha Bryzhan, and Sergij Bryzhan. Photo courtesy of Sergij Bryzhan

Ruthenian, or Russian) called “writing,” but which is, in fact, painting icons. “Writing icons” in actuality involves painting biblical stories from the life of Jesus Christ and the saints on wood as a specific manifestation of faith. Therefore, icons are not “painted” but “written.” Icons appeared in Russia as early as the fifth and sixth centuries. As with Nativity plays, the tradition of writing icons was also interrupted by the Communist regime, but a change occurred after the fall of the government.

The scenic design of *A Christmas Mystery* reminds one of an iconostasis – a large wall of icons. The iconostasis is placed in front of the altar in churches that adhere to the Greek Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox liturgical rites. It consists of several icons arranged as a wall and includes other larger and smaller paintings with Christian motifs. This markedly stylized scene design and the actors’ costumes were created mainly in blue and white. In iconic symbology blue means eternal wisdom and godliness. It is also a symbol of the tunic of the Mother of God, who unifies the lives of Earth and Heaven. White is a symbol of holiness and godly light. The paintings are combined with puppets.

The scenery consists of images that can be rotated, thereby producing windows. This stylized screen evokes an iconostasis. The creators chose this form to depict the Nativity play because it directly corresponds to the biblical stories portrayed on the icons, which capture the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The design also recalls the iconic style in its lack of perspective, since the oldest icon painters did not use perspective.

The puppets and the faces of the actors are visible in empty windows. The actors play with small puppets on a stick and sing beautiful Eastern liturgical chorales. To



Figure 20.2 *A Christmas Mystery*, Rovnenski County Puppet Theatre, Rovno, Ukraine (premiered July 1, 2000): Director: Sergij Bryzhan; designer: Michail Nikolaev. Photo courtesy of Sergij Bryzhan

be present at this performance is a wonderful cultural experience. It blends stylized artistic conception, contemporary aesthetic taste, iconic tradition, and church singing.

The creators' objective in these numerous productions is to explore different variations on a theme that is one of the pillars of Christian culture. A return to the old forms is no longer possible. The puppet theatre and its creative potential, however, can offer new possibilities.

The biblical model offers the possibility of different interpretations, but most stagings present the classic biblical story. The audience's interest springs from a thirst for a theme whose prohibition symbolized the loss of freedom and religion, which is why it is still captivating, even after more than 20 years of freedom. New festivals of Nativity plays, especially those held in Ukraine and Poland, are proof that there is a growing interest in this genre.

Resonances, Bryzhan and Nikolaev's third *vertep* staging, has a completely different artistic conception and, with its alternative way of staging, it is exceptional. Its attractiveness lies in experimenting with the decomposition of the classic biblical play. The directing and design concept is built on the staging and materialization of its creators' associations, while leaving room for spectators to make their own. Another specific feature is the creation of a Christmas atmosphere without the authors' direct illustration of the biblical story, yet the viewer perceives this story through his/her own associations. Russian theatre critics hailed the show as a *vertep* for the third millennium on the occasion of The Nativity Evenings Festival in Moscow in 2005. The imagery of the staging, if we compare it with the two previous *vertep* productions, is the most contemporary and reflexive, bringing all of the associative potentials of theatre to bear. Tradition here is less expressed, but it is still present, serving as a concrete starting point for new imagery. While the audience is

not able to identify all the messages and allusions in their full richness, despite knowledge of the old tradition, this kind of show provides an opportunity for audiences to use their own imagination and find new meanings.

This third version of a “Nativity scene” is a contemporary *vertep* created through the free invention of the director and designer and based on the principles of collage. They used puppets and figures, which they found in a depository at the Puppet Theatre in Chmelnickij. In his essay “Letter to Author,” Bryzhan describes how “associations appeared constantly as a mysterious mold on the walls” (Bryzhan 2012: 376). This expression corresponds to an image in one of the films of the famous Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. The principle of collage is one of unexpected associations, which can appear autonomously. He says:

It is not we who dictate to the puppets what they have to do, but vice-versa, it is the puppets who dictate to us. To use different puppets all would look differently. One needs only to feel where the puppets lead you. Only one thing I knew surely was that I would need a window. A window symbolizes expectation. When I was a child, I often used to be alone at home. At that time I would be sitting by the window watching the birds outside, the falling snowflakes, then I was not so sad.

(Bryzhan 2012: 235)

Bryzhan and Nikolaev utilized a method of collage that made use of many different performing objects – objects that are not connected to the classical Christmas story but which could suggest a variety of meanings. For example, two cheesy old Santa Claus toys represented two of the kings, while an old Snow White toy stood in for the third. Use of these commercial figures evoked Christmas-shopping fever. In addition, there were portrait photos of different famous and lesser known personalities, mainly writers and artists, who “look out of the window, full of expectation.” They are hanging on threads like puppets, and in Bryzhan’s interpretation, their role of bearing spiritual messages is the same as a Nativity story.

This analysis of three Ukrainian Nativity stagings shows different possibilities for the treatment of the classical biblical theme through various directorial and artistic concepts. They confirm the use of a great variety of forms and puppetry techniques in this revived tradition. It is only up to the creators’ invention as to how they tackle the theme. As one can see, the possibilities are endless.

As for respect for tradition in the sense of content and ideology, I conclude that puppet theatre-makers in Central and Eastern Europe do not significantly shift interpretation of the biblical message. Rather, the staging of a work like *Resonances*, presented in the spirit of postdramatic theatre, treats the theme in a distinctive style, avoiding the classical story and provoking the viewer’s imagination at the same time.

In terms of form, the stagings are not intended to replicate the old folk puppet theatre and Christmas customs involving caroling around the puppet crèche. Instead, this new model derives inspiration from the traditional forms – puppetry technique, arrangement of the stage area, and the use of various cultural traditions. While these crèche performances are new stagings, they show that traditional forms can be a rich source of inspiration for theatre artists.



Figure 20.3 *Resonances*, Chmelnickij County Puppet Theatre, Chmelnickij, Ukraine (premiered July 1, 2003): Director: Sergij Bryzhan; designer: Michail Nikolaev. Photo courtesy of Sergij Bryzhan

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