A Theatre of Visual Excellence

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Abstract: The authoress provides an analysis of the hitherto creation of Odivo, a Slovak independent theatre group, transiting different forms of theatre. By creating rich metaphoric images and by its playful approach to the puppet, material (often, live and natural), and to an object, the imagination of child and adult viewers is stirred, and the group’s creation acquires intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives. Given the fact that its creation is primarily based on non-verbal images, enhanced visually and musically, it is transferable to the international theatre scene.

Key words: Odivo, poetics, performance, experiment, puppet theatre, materiality, imagery, visual language

The changes in the paradigm of the 20th century theatre arts were accompanied mainly by reflections on the scenic potential of a dramatic work, new possibilities of theatre and its overlap with other art forms (especially in the so-called visual and performance or performing art forms), and the social functions of theatre in the broad sense of understanding the needs and expectations of society. They explored the position of the actor vis-à-vis the audience, the architecture of theatre and public spaces, theatre communication strategies, etc. On the other hand, these considerations revisited the origin of dramatic expressions – the ritual origin of theatre, the possibilities of creating universally understandable archetypal images, inspirations in the performative elements of oriental and third-world cultures, their transfer to the creation of performing arts of the Western world and vice versa. They have sparked a global debate on the concept of intercultural theatre. With the growing internationalisation of theatre, interest in intercultural projects and theatre outside the mainstream of Western cultures, by that meaning especially the so-called interpretive theatre, intercultural studies began to thrive. The architects of these theories (for example, Patrice Pavis, Erika
Fischer-Lichte) sought to appreciate cultural production stemming from intercultural transfers.¹

The phenomenon of interculturality in performing arts is generally seen as a mutual exchange, a dialogue of theatre makers from different cultural backgrounds or as a creative inspiration for otherness in the creation of a dramatic work. Just as interculturality may come about in the staging/performative approaches of theatre makers to a dramatic work (at the level of the work’s creation and structure), it is also present in the reception and communication relationship between the viewer and the dramatic work (at the level of reception and interpretation).² Interpretive and semantic subtleties of the interculturality of a dramatic work are revealed in the reception of the work per se. “Every culture has its unique way of coding, use, and contextual incorporation of multi-channel systems of non-verbal and paraverbal expressions and their transformation to art.”³ Viewers opt for their own interpretive keys and individual signs and codes are associated with cultural contexts close to them.⁴ On the contrary, the capacity of a dramatic work to communicate across cultural borders, i.e. in a manner facilitating the recipient’s decoding the signs outside a cultural system known to him/her (within the meaning of semiotic theories), should prove the work’s universal value, no matter how abstract this construct may sound.

At a pragmatic level, the capacity of a dramatic work to become “universally understandable” may be deliberated from the perspective of its flexibility to connect to the current international context or of its communicativeness beyond the border of national culture. This “transferability” is linked to a number of external and internal factors, such as, for instance, national cultural policy, the availability of grant schemes facilitating the staging of dramatic works abroad, participation in international workshops and training courses, foreign theatre scene contacts and focus, theatre professionals

⁴ BALLAY, M. Interkultúrne inscenačné tendencie v súčasnom divadle [Intercultural Staging Tendencies in the Contemporary Theatre]. In Európa – interkulturný priestor [Europe – the Intercultural Space], p. 19.
motivation, compactness, the size of scenic props for a particular dramatic work, etc. Last but not least, the theme and manner of its scenic realisation, i.e., an overall attractiveness of the work to be staged abroad, are not to be overlooked. Odivo is a good example of an independent theatre group from Slovakia which has the potential for creation that is “easily transferable abroad.” Its creation leans on performative forms, it experiments with puppetry methods, and the power of the communication of its works is in the creation of visually and musically powerful non-verbal images.

**Odivo, a Theatre of Images, Movement, and Action**

Odivo is a Slovak independent theatre and performative group with the creative core around Monika Kováčová and Mária Danadová who invite a broad range of theatre professionals to collaborative projects, among them being musicians, actors, performers, puppeteers, stage designers, light designers, and others. Founded in 2014, Odivo formally operates as a civic theatre association and an impetus for establishing a platform with legal personality was given by the collaboration between Monika Kováčová and Mária Danadová on the production *Láska P a Vášeň B* [Love P and Passion B, 2014].

The vision and artistic-production direction of the group are tied to the international context in several ways. Odivo is a group without a permanent space and several works were created on the basis of residential projects financed by national (the Art Support Fund) or international grant schemes (the Visegrad Fund). Odivo regularly (with the exception of 2017) applies for funding in the programme of the Art Support Fund intended for the presentation of art abroad or for international mobility. It is also worth mentioning that Odiva shows interest in building strategic international partnerships. Odiva’s founder, Monika Kováčová, sets specific priorities every year and selects the countries with which she is keen to develop cooperation. Odivo has so far established partnerships mainly with neighbouring countries - the Czech Republic and Poland. The female creators probably bet on the well-known contacts in these countries as well as the relationship between the cultural and socio-political framework, which presupposes similar viewing experiences. At the same time, it may be related to the availability of the grant scheme of the Visegrad Fund and with the benefits of its residential

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5 Odivo attended several theatre festivals in Bulgaria, Slovenia, or Croatia.
creation programme for a group that does not have its own space.6 Undoubtedly important is the rich metaphorical, visual, and in relation to puppetry and to performative arts, experimental language developed in Odivo’s creation, which is attractive to and interesting for the international theatre scene as well.

In his publication dedicated to the developmental transformations of puppetry arts the Polish theatrologist Henryk Jurkowski maintains: “If now, in the artistic transformation process, individual theatre elements are being shaped in a novel way (fewer words, more images, or, on the contrary, depending on the artist’s will), what it simply means is that creative professionals with a new sensitivity begin to appear in theatre, having a novel vision of reality.”7 Odivo theatre projects put emphasis on the creation of images whose reception does not require the knowledge of and the expertise in specific socio-cultural systems or in concrete languages. According to Patrice Pavis, the image in contemporary theatrical practice has become a concept and expression that stands in opposition to the text, plot or action.8 Let us now consider Odivo repertoire and projects as briefly outlined above. An exception is the staging of a puppet debut Láska P a vášeň B [Love P and Passion B, 2014], which is based on an original dramatic text, as well as the production for children Divočiny [The Wilderness, 2015], whose staging is based on a fairy tale by Maurice Sendak [Where the Wild Things Really Are]. In their work, the female theatre makers digressed from the traditionally constructed plot based on a source text, the creation of dramatic actions and the verbal language means in the style of acting. Increasingly, their work began to show inclination towards imagery and visual representation of the theme. Patrice Pavis deliberates the theatre of images, which spontaneously prefers visual thinking, as a concept with an ability to suggest a deep unconscious dimension of the work.9 Having the

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6 Odivo’s very first production Láska P a vášeň B [Love P and Passion B] was promoted within the performing arts residencies under the Visegrad Fund grant scheme. Since 2019, Odivo’s project Svetlonos [The Torchbearer] has been on the list of successful applicants for the performing arts residencies funding (envisaged staging in 2020). For more visit the Visegrad Fund. Performing Arts. Results. [online]. [cit. 28 November 2020]. Available at: https://www.visegradfund.org/archive/results/performing-arts/?c=2019.


9 Pavis bases himself on Freud’s hypothesis that the image is a more suitable representation of unconscious processes than conscious thinking and the language. Visual thinking is
knowledge of a language system of a particular country is not imperative in this case.

The scenic realisations of Odivo are characterised by performative forms and they are close to multiform artistic expressions. The attributes of the forms of experimental, chamber, multimedia, puppet or visual theatre meet and connect together in Odivo’s works. The female theatre makers experiment with the methods of puppet (figurative and non-figurative), object, movement, and physical theatre, tending towards creative principles with enhanced visuality and music. When it comes to the musical element, emphasis is often placed on rhythm, for the most part created live on stage by a musician playing a musical instrument (for example, drums, the guitar, percussion instruments). It is characteristic of Odivo that the performances are also given in non-theatrical spaces or on small studio stages, in which they maintain close contact with the audience. In this way, the theatre makers evoke an intimate atmosphere, important for the overall understanding of the stage form. The themes probed into by the female creators require the intimacy of space in order to establish closeness with the viewer. The poetics of their creation is linked to intimate themes and personal experiences with love, passion, desire (Láska P a vášeň B [Love P and Passion B, 2014]), experiencing a mental disorder – schizophrenia (Stopy v pamäti [The Footprints in Memory, 2017]), the quest for light and man’s tumbling into darkness (Svetlonos [The Torchbearer, 2020]). Having regard for the depth of these sensitive and delicate themes, the theatre makers opted for suitable scenic elements. Therefore, their language is poetic, metaphorical, and symbolic in many ways. In their performances for children, they reveal fantasy magical worlds – in the production Divočiny [The Wilderness, 2015], the hero Max gets into an exotic land full of bizarre creatures, where he becomes a king. In the performance Aero (2018), the images of flying objects are created, in the production Neviditeľní [The Invisible, 2019], a group of researchers travels in space and discovers the habitats of mysterious beings whose existence has never been established.10

closer to unconscious processes than verbal thinking, because in terms of evolution, it is older. In PAVIS, P. Divadelný slovník [Dictionnaire du théâtre], p. 121.

10 The repertory of Odivo also features a movement production Versus [Versus], and of the creative duo Monika Kováčová – Mária Danadová, it was only the latter one working on the project together with other theatre makers. Versus is a dance and movement reflection of a female vision of the world and a probe into her inner world, contributing to a range of delicate and engaged themes brought on stage by Odivo group. See Odivo. Versus. [online]. [cit. 25 November 2020]. Available at: https://www.odivo.sk/repertoar/versus/. 
From a Dramatic Source Text to Authorial Production, from Word to Image

The staging of a debut work Láska P a vášeň B [Love P and Passion B, 2014] was loosely based on the play by the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca Láska dona Perlimplína a vášníosť Belísa [The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden]. The dramatic conflict builds on a love triangle between the old Don Perlimplín, his maid Marcolfa, and young Belisa. It is a comedy with characters and a story typical of commedie dell´arte: an old man falls in love with a young woman, the maid is in platonic love with her master who marries a much younger woman who cheats on him. The way out of the situation is an artful scheme, but, alas, it had a tragic end. Belisa does not love Perlimplín back, she craves for more passion and cheats on him with other men. However, she falls in love with a secret admirer who writes her love letters. The secret admirer is none other than Don Perlimplín, her husband in disguise. The story, in which desire, passion, and jealousy appear as elementary motifs, comes to a sad end, with Don Perlimplín dying.

Odivo captured the play as an intimate puppet production with elements of grotesque puppetry, poetry theatre, movement theatre, and performance. The narrative did not have linear interpretation, the female creators deconstructed it by inserting unfulfilled dreams of their characters. There were three versions of staging the wedding night scene and the scene of Perlimplín’s death, reflecting the illusions of individual characters. When portraying the visions of these events, the theatre makers changed the form of scenes and means of expression, depending on the attitudes and interpersonal relations between dramatic characters. Perlimplín’s blind infatuation with Belisa became an inspiration for a movement-lyrical scene illustrating the vision of his first night with Belisa. In it, Mária Danadová, in calm and gentle tone of voice, recited into a microphone the loving words that Perlimplín had addressed to Belisa. The actress worked with comic stylisation of the puppet scene, portraying Marcolfa’s fantasy of what might have happened after the wedding and Marcolfa’s romantic fantasies looked pretty grotesque. The scene of the wedding night, as conveyed by Belisa’s ideas of reality, was conceived by the theatre makers as a performative puppet mini-play. Mária Danadová put on a white shirt, white high-heeled shoes, and placed a white tiara around her head, adorned with lace ribbons. Dressed up, she animated the puppet figures of Perlimplín and Belisa on a bed behind a transparent curtain. In Lorca’s original text, after Perlimplín had fallen asleep during the
wedding night, Belisa cheated on him with five males. The storyline was elevated by the female creators to a more metaphorical level and Belisa’s lust and sensuality were accentuated. Mária Danadová, dressed up in a white costume with an artistically unique folk bridal headband, kept walking past the bed in the centre of the performance area. She would stop by the microphone, making sounds like erotic sighs and sobs which blended in with reproduced sounds. In addition, she kept making gestures as if taking pairs of different men’s shoes into her hands, only to let them fall to the ground the next instance.

When it comes to the diverse forms of scenic expression, it was this early work in which Mária Danadová’s sense of flexibility was first demonstrated. Following a “Schechnerian” understanding of a performer’s function, thanks to her skills, single space was transformed into diverse spaces. In *Láska P a vášeň B* [Love P and Passion B], Odivo alluded to a tendency to accentuate the importance of the acoustic element by employing music. Matej Štesko, who accompanied Mária Danadová by playing his electric guitar live, is to be given credit for background music and creating sound effects. Overall, it was music significantly contributing to a dramatic expression of the above scenes. All puppets were made of wood (self-growths) combined with natural products (Marcolfa’s head), with leather and textiles, and by their overall appearance, they were symbolically connected with the types of characters rendered. Skinny arms and legs were connected to Perlimplín’s elongated body and his head was dominated by a distinctive nose. Marcolfa’s stout body was clad in a red cloth garment and a white rock. Conversely, Belisa’s puppet had a slim waste, with pieces of natural wood sticking out of her head (a type of exotic plant species).

**Immersions in the Soul Using a Visually Strong Theatrical Language**

The inclination towards movement and creation of images primarily by visual means was more pronounced in the authorial performance *Stopy v pamäti* [The Footprints in Memory, 2017]. The theme was an encounter of both the female creators with paranoid schizophrenia, as their brothers were diagnosed with the disease, and clinical signs and manifestations of this mental...
illness served as a source of their performance. *Stopy v pamäti* [The Footprints in Memory] had not ambition to be a fact-based documentary or self-art therapy. Quite the contrary, immersions into the fragility of the soul and the processes of consciousness and unconsciousness of a schizophrenic person and the patient’s relationship with the real-world environment were mediated by the authoresses of the theme, concept, and the realisation of the work using evocative non-verbal images. Movement, physical action, and especially a metaphorically rich playing with the light, shadows, objects, and puppets enjoyed a unique position in this authorial performance. This time, Mária Danadová and the drummer Ján Fiala were on stage together with Monika Kováčová. The viewer observed a series of captivating scenes evoking different levels of the state of mind of a mentally ill person and his struggle with everyday life, which could be understood through the lens of the disharmony of the inner and outer worlds of a schizophrenic person or his reverse perception of chaos and order. For example, in the opening scene, Mária Danadová lied down on the floor amidst the objects lying flat on the ground, such as empty pots, pots with tall dry plants, plastic bags with loam soil, a spray plastic bottle, and floor lamps knocked to the ground. While Monika Kováčová kept lifting the items from the floor each time she walked by, placing them in the upright position, Mária Danadová would return them to a lying down position.

In piercing silence which took possession of the stage in the first part of the performance, the theatre makers accentuated the processualism and details of portrayed actions. Several reviewers unanimously agreed on their enchantment by the image of a non-verbal puppet play, in which Mária Danadová animated a large wooden puppet with a mounted head of a baby roe deer dressed in a white nightgown. With caution and curiosity, the deer puppet kept slowly taking out items from the plant pot – a small wooden ladder with a falling ball, a plush teddy bear, an apple, and nuts. Mária Danadová meticulously built a relationship between the puppet – the deer – and other objects. The deer was free to go in pursuit of these objects and to find them – it played with the ladder, the teddy bear; it kept rolling the nuts and cracking them with a wooden leg only to place them in the teddy bear’s lap and slowly laying down by the bear’s side. The tranquil moments of

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13 The puppet was made by Pavol Rosenberger. It was made up of the head of a roe deer baby dying after a combine harvester broke its legs. The author created the puppet in its memory.
the performance gradually outgrew into a more dynamic part enhanced by the performer’s dynamic movement and action and by the drummer’s loud and rhythmic drumming.

Increasingly, the individual scenes resembled light and shadow installations. The shadow was presented in a variety of forms (it was created by the performers’ silhouettes or by the silhouettes of objects), it turned into a repetitive visual element urging to seek an archetypal dimension of the performance. In his performance review, theatrologist Miroslav Ballay paraphrases some passages from The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious by Carl Gustav Jung. He maintains that the biggest risk lies in an absolute liberation of archetypal images from the control of the conscience of a psychiatric patient. The condition may occur when patients, due to the dissociation of their conscience, quickly fall into the snares of such archetypes and are no longer conscious of them. The presence of Monika Kováčová and her action on stage are interpreted by Miroslav Ballay as a “quasi hounding element” or the shadow archetype, part of a split self, hounding her second half and being a source of her anxiety.14 Of the performers’ duo, it was Monika Kováčová having the light on stage under control. She kept switching the lights on and off, she would illuminate Mária Danadová’s action while her shadow was cast on stage (for instance, when Mária Danadová was teetering on the edge of a wooden log or was planting a flower in the plant pot). By illuminating withered tree branches using a small torch, an impressive shadow transcending the entire space was produced. The illusion of robust overgrowing branches or thicket created by the shadow play of the plants, she was able to demonstrate, by employing utterly elementary associations, the paranoid thoughts of a person suffering from mental illness.

Based on interviews with some viewers and their spontaneous reactions after the performance, Monika Kováčová is convinced that the performance “opens inner gusts in people. They need not be necessarily conscious of the source material being schizophrenia and its clinical manifestations (...). Rather, it unlocks themes that are deeply personal for people which they

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have not been exposed to for a long time or have been subdued in them.”15 At the same time, the universality of visual language and the power of the subliminal nature of composed images not only open a wider field of interpretation to viewers, but also become a prerequisite for cross-cultural intelligibility. At the end of a paper on visual theatre, Henryk Jurkowski maintains that “in all countries, visual theatre has its door open to any type of audiences. (...) Literary theatre requires a special ability of the audience – the knowledge of language and their psychic predispositions to hear and understand it through the scenic behaviour of actors or puppets.”16

In the so-called multimedia puppet performance *Svetlonos* [The Torchbearer, 2020], the female theatre makers of Odivo immerse even deeper into the inner world of man by employing a visually strong theatrical language. The performance was created in collaboration with the Slovak puppet artist and technologist, performer, actor, and director Ivan Martinka, who was the project originator and promoter of its underlying idea, author of the theme and libretto and, last but not least, creator of the puppets employed in the performance.17 Its libretto has the form of a symbolic literary story and it is based on the motif of seeking light as “archetypal, multicultural understandable image (...) which has vanished or for a fleeting moment has gotten out of sight.”18 The theatre makers unfold motives on stage in a sequence of associative, largely non-verbal images, accentuating their visual aspects, such as desire to find lost light (within the meaning of joy, the purpose of

17 The theme of Svetlonos [The Torchbearer] matured in Ivan Martinka for quite some time. In the performance, the motif of seeking light and man’s encounter with darkness may metaphorically allude to anxiety or depression. Thematising feelings of anxiety and depression was present in Ivan Martinka’s production earlier on, for instance, in *Pinocchio* staged by Nové divadlo in Nitra (New Theatre Nitra). Ivan Martinka portrayed Pinocchio as a small boy making a bad decision and overwhelmed by anxiety. For more see DZADÍKOVÁ, L. Svetlonos a Svetlonosky. In *Loutkář*, 2020, Vol. 70, Issue 4, p. 78.
18 Partial, and yet, relevant inspiration for writing the libretto was the fairy tale *Slnkový kôň* [The Sun Horse] by Pavol Dobšínský. See DANADOVÁ, M. *Fenomén figúry v súčasnom bábkovom divadle* [The Phenomenon of a Figure in Contemporary Puppet Theatre]. [Dissertation]. Bratislava : Vysoká škola múzických umení, 2020, p. 87. [online]. [cit. 11 February 2021]. Available at: https://opac.crpz.sk/?fn=detailBiblioForm&sid=60B4917E3BAC23F10071AF27651C&seo=CRZP-detail-kniha.
life, life stamina), seeking to escape the destructive forces in life or getting to know the dark side of our personality (the shadow archetype in Jungian understanding).  

However, building the storyline is noticeable through the escalating presence of darkness, which appeared repeatedly in various artistic and visual forms. Darkness, for example, was epitomised by a black ball, which Ivan Martinka pulled out from his shoe along the line of clown gags and, together with Mária Danadová, alternately kept putting it over their hands like a glove puppet while shaping it into a monster. Later it was discovered by a child who played with it like it was a football. The climax of alluded situations was the image of Svetlonos [The Torchbearer] in its concrete puppet form. An animatronic puppet was used, i.e., an electromechanical backpack puppet, a technologically and artistically elaborate structure made by Ivan Martinka. The figure bore the likeness of a monster with a long neck (tentacle), a small head, glowing eyes, and a glowing chest. Mária Danadová had the aluminum structure strapped to her shoulders and over the torso, and in a sensomotoric way animated it from within. By employing this striking figure and by playing with it, theatre makers managed to create a surreal and evocative theatrical image of supper during which monster Svetlonos (the performer slipped inside the device) and performer Ivan Martinka sat at opposite ends of a long table. In silence stretching out in space, all that was heard was a loud chewing sound made by Svetlonos over an empty plate. An illusion of a man’s (performer’s) falling into the trap of Svetlonos was artistically accentuated by a long dark cloak resembling a thick cobweb. It stretched from the shoulders of Svetlonos across the table all the way to the performer, eventually wrapping around his body. In parallel, the situation was observed

19 Ivan Martinka’s creation is noted for its spiritual inclination. To give an example – within the context of his collaborative projects with Andrej Kalinka in performative group Med a prach [Honey and Dust] such themes and their realisations were introduced that “corresponded to the humanistic understanding of the world and man’s mission, to spiritual and Christian beliefs.” For more see KNOPOVÁ, E. Ivan Martinka a Andrej Kalinka. In PREDMERSKÝ, V . (ed.). Dejiny slovenskej dramatiky bábkového divadla [The History of Slovak Puppet Theatre Plays]. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2020, p. 663.

20 In mythology Svetlonos [The Torchbearer] is a being that lures people by its light, strays them from the right path and brings them into darkness.

21 DANADOVÁ, M. Fenomen figúry v súčasnom bábkovom divadle [The Phenomenon of a Figure in Contemporary Puppet Theatre], p. 93.

22 The technological details of the figure are given by Mária Danadová in her doctoral dissertation. See ibid pp. 93 – 96.
by a child – a puppet animated by the performer and violoncellist Mariana Bódyová, who moved the puppet around the table and alternately moved it from one side of the table to the other. Reviewer Lenka Dzadíková interpreted this impressive image as a moment of facing one’s fears, whereby familiarising oneself with fear (darkness) can bring light back into our lives. Aside from the animatronic puppet, the use of a virtual puppet was an absolute novelty in the context of Slovak puppetry scene. It was a programmed light figure, epitomising the sought-after light, whose movement was controlled directly on stage by a game joystick.

In the spirit of performativity, the creators also tended towards processual art, i.e., to capturing the liveliness of the events portrayed on stage. Everything inanimate (matter, material) took shape directly on stage with the participation of the audience and acquired a dominant position in the performance. To give an example: the entire process of making the puppet of a child and its bringing to life was visualised live. Ivan Martinka pieced together the individual puppet components on stage (fabric body, wood chips representing limbs and head with controls). Simultaneously, the activity was recorded on a camera, so the viewer could watch the process of shaping the puppet’s body on a projection screen. Accompanied by live singing and music, the performers also dressed the puppet of the child before the audience and mounted its face mask, with Ivan Martinka putting final touches to it while the performance was on. The image imbued with mysticism and accentuating the course of the action was an outcome of the performers modelling a conical shape of clay with a hole (epitomising a shrine), into which Ivan Martinka later inserted his head to get to the light source.

Creative professionals declare that their underlying motivation was to “react to a persistent feeling of a need to re-define the puppet in modern world in direction of its spiritual content” which was also reflected in the choice of the means of expression. Svetlonos [The Torchbearer] is yet another visually and musically inspirational piece in Odivo’s repertory in which the poetics of a theatre group couples with Ivan Martinka’s prin-

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24 It was made by heating up thermoplastic material from Ivan Martinka’s face mould. For more see DANADOVÁ, M. Fenomén figúry v súčasnom bábkovom divadle [The Phenomenon of a Figure in Contemporary Puppet Theatre], p. 90.

25 Ibid.
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principles of theatrical creation and thanks to technology and digital art, their creative approach is elevated into aesthetically novel and visually captivating forms.

Odivo and the Child Viewer

Experimenting with puppet theatre methods, a sense of work with materials, performativity, and a sense of imagery are among the creative principles applied by Odivo, and this is also unique to their creation for children. Its role in the theatre group’s dramaturgical profile is just as important as puppet and performative creation is for adult audiences. The verbal element is also dominated by visual and musical aspects stimulating the receptivity of the child viewer. The female creators deliberately avoid unfounded overexposed contact with the child viewer, which is a frequent feature of contemporary children’s theatre production, especially of privately owned theatres and small touring ensembles putting on performances for kindergartens and elementary schools. “We try to calm the children down, as a lot of children’s theatre performances are by nature loud, posterlike, and simplistic.”

The poetics of Odivo children’s performances is rooted, inter alia, in endeavours to push the limits of the quality of the overall production of drama and puppet performances for children in Slovak theatre.

In their manner of performing, the live sound in both the acting and music elements fully replaces words and literal names. The actors on stage reduce the acoustic means of acting to emotional and expressive sounds covering a wide range of emotional expressions, which they produce in line with the content meaning of the events portrayed (the mimicking of animal sounds, sighs, sobs, cries of joy, sadness, anger, etc.)

Divočiny [The Wilderness, 2015] is a puppet production with elements of performance, inspired by the children’s book Where the Wild Things Are (adapted from a Czech trans-
loration Tam, kde žijí divočiny by Jan Jařab) by Maurice Sendak. It is the story of Max, a boy who torments animals – in the performance, it is the cat. Max finds himself in a fantasy faraway country, where he encounters the wildlife, exotic monsters and eventually becomes their king.

The actors in Divočiny (Mária Danadová and Filip Hajduk) not only manipulated the puppets, but by making sounds and movements they also added finishing touches to the scenes of Max’s adventurous story. They made sounds like howling, whistling, imitating the sounds of the wind, splashing water, of a thunderstorm, and other sounds. With respect to the performed action, live music on stage (drums, percussion instruments, the vibraphone, the guitar) became a full-fledged element creating the story’s atmosphere and interpretation. For example, to suggest that Max was exposed to the wilderness, actors with faces smeared with black colour would dance around a wooden box, making Native American sounds. Hajduk’s expression also made use of very simple acrobatics (juggling with rubber ducks, carrying on his chin a bigger tree branch decorated with bicycle accessories). To stimulate the children’s imagination without literally naming things, the theatre professionals also worked with visual allusiveness. The sea or the ocean was evoked by a blue fabric, Max’s stranding in the wilderness was symbolised by an object of a small lighthouse, and the like.

The motifs of exoticism and wildness were developed into visually inspirational forms of animal puppets and other objects. In her review, theatre critic Martina Mašlárová, spontaneously referred to the puppets as the production’s “best visual delicacy.” For example, an unusual tree that caught Max’s attention was made of the pieces of a living branch, on which the female creators hung rudders and bike bells. Odivo creative professionals maintain that their approach to working with objects and things and their materiality “oscillates between it being rooted in their original functions and their metaphorical meanings.” To give an example, a bicycle wheel was used as a basic component of a chain carousel mechanism. The puppets of wild animals were made of a combined material – self-growths and parts of old bicycles (pedals as bird legs, the spring as an

29 MAŠLÁROVÁ, M. Tvoriť sa dá s vlasm, s penou, so žuvačkou aj s virtuálnou bábkou [You Can Create with Hair, with Foam, with Chewing Gum and with a Virtual Puppet], p. 11.
animal’s neck). The roughness and naturalness of materials semantically enhanced the illusion of wilderness, which the theatre makers strived to conjure in a figurative way.

Odivo targeted the visual sensuality of the youngest viewer by a performative piece, the so-called ‘batolatórium’ Aero [bambinarium Aero, 2018], “a theatre of objects par excellence” or “a theatre-object poetry”, as the performance was referred to by theatre critic Vladimír Mikulka. Aero, in which the female creators elevated everyday items to a level of imaginary play (for instance, a fan, a hair dryer, pumps, plastic bags), was targeted at a young viewer of eighteen months. The framing idea of this visual performance was examining the physical property of air in relation to diverse material, such as confetti, balloons, balls, fabric, etc. Two performers (Mária Danadová and Juraj Smutný), by literally examining and discovering the reactions of the material used – a straw stick, paper, plastic bags – created live images of flying objects, by allowing the air to circulate. In Aero, music (although reproduced), with soothing melodies predominating, was a full-fledged semantic element of individual scenes. To give an example, the actors on stage folded a plastic bag into a dummy and (together with a balloon) had it hover over fans with circulating air. A hair dryer blew coloured straw sticks apart, bird feathers in glass vessels, a white sheet was blown away, and colour confetti were scattered by a fan only to get trapped in a transparent square-shaped plastic sheet, and a lot more experiments were made.

The production Neviditeľní [The Invisible, 2019], was mounted in the Bratislava Puppet Theatre, i.e., not under Odivo brand, but Monika Kováčová and Mária Danadová feature in it as authors of the libretto and directing. It is a musically and visually powerful production based on the alternation of the scenes sung by actors and the associative scenes of exploring expeditions (five actors as explorers) to the lands of magical beings associated

30 The visual concept was developed by set designer Ivana Macková. A component part of the scenic design concept was a portable stage platform on wheels – a functional wooden box on which the puppet play was staged. The box had a tilt feature and the side wings allowed for their positioning. It was foldable and portable with storage space for puppets and objects.

31 MIKULKA, V. Divadlo evropských regionů [Theatre European Regions]. In NA DIVADLO, 27 June 2019. [online]. [cit. 30 November 2020]. Available at: https://nadivadlo.blogspot.com/2019/06/mikulka-divadlo-evropskyh-regionu_27.html?fbclid=IwAR0sRba28ARDt_3n2IDNnlBrs0osj84Z3RIZDScKXaXhHs2EHH2thLQRDFw.
with internationally popular legends (Loch Ness monsters, elves, yetis, dragons, and sprites). The show was dominated by expression through an object, through the material, and by an audio-visual experience of working with them. Surprisingly, the puppet per se did not appear in this project at all. The female creators used a combination of natural and artificial materials (artificial grass, water in a glass aquarium, tree branches, living soil) and in a playful, Odivo-like way, it interacted with the actor and other objects on stage. For example, the quest for the Loch Ness monster was portrayed through playing with water in an aquarium – the actresses kept blowing into the water through narrow tubes, ruffling its surface to create bubbles, and in the darkness, a torch was used to illuminate the aquarium filled with water which changed colours and abstract shapes were formed on a piece of glass from the water foam. By projecting clusters of live branches onto a white surface in utter darkness, they created an illusion of a haunted forest, a dragon's abode, thus enhancing the mood and the atmosphere with the sound of the wind and the noise evoking the heartbeat.
**Toward Interdisciplinarity**

The performances of Odivo group are visual puppet shows, they are a theatre of the object and material, a theatre of diverse means of expression. Although their performances carry a certain degree of theatricality, they are predominated by the aesthetics of performance, in which the main actor – performer – is given a multifunctional role. Slovak theatrologist Ida Hledíková writes that in the field of contemporary puppet art, we have advanced very little when it comes to the development of figurative and non-figurative visual theatre and we hold fast to a literary text. The theatre created is “descriptive, narrative, we tend towards playing without the puppet – and even when puppets are employed, then only with an illustrative purpose or without material.” By contrast, Odivo’s theatre production breaks out of this condition. The puppet, an object or material, and the visuality connected with them, are given main thrust in their projects. Theatre professionals organising their expression set the puppets and objects in motion, often times fulfilling the role of animators and sometimes narrators, and, above all, they are performers maintaining their flexibility. At times, it is physical action predominating (*Stopy v pamäti* [The Footprints in Memory]), while elsewhere, the performer’s role vis-à-vis the puppet is subordinate and everything inanimate that is animated by the performer assumes a dominant position (*Svetlonos* [The Torchbearer]). The performer also becomes a musician, in line with accentuating the musical element of the show. The most recent project *Svetlonos* [The Torchbearer] is a good example of not keeping the musician in the “marginal zone” but rather have him actively approach the animation of puppets and objects on stage (DJ Lukáš Kubičina, together with Mária Danadová and Ivan Martinka dressed up the puppet of a small boy and violoncellist Mariana Bódyová animated the puppet in a scene with a robotic monster). *Svetlonos* [The Torchbearer] is a good example demonstrating the overlap of the activities of professionals of diverse artistic and non-artistic professions (including electrical engineering, video technology,

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or IT fields), and by their ability to transcend other people’s areas of expertise, an interdisciplinary puppet-performative work is produced. According to Czech theatrologist Jana Pilátová, interdisciplinarity is among the determining attributes of the so-called “Third theatre.”[^34] In her understanding, the Third Theatre turns to the concept of otherness in the broad sense of the word which does not only apply to theatrical conventions and to the signs taken over from other cultures, but, in addition to ethnic boundaries, it also transcends the boundaries of other art forms, the boundaries that separate the arts from science, praxis and theory, professionalism and amateurism.[^35] The Odivo group gravitates toward such otherness and their projects may be deliberated not only in the context of their intercultural but also interdisciplinary significance.

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**LITERATURE**


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[^34]: The term was coined by Eugenio Barba, founder of the Odin Teatret in Denmark, who, in 1976, was given the task of organizing a conference on theatrical research by UNESCO and the Institut International du Théâtre.


MIKULKA, Vladimír. Divadlo evropských regiónov [Theatre European Regions]. In NA DIAVADLO, 27 June 2019. [online]. [cit. 30 November 2020]. Available at: https://nadiavadlo.blogspot.com/2019/06/mikulka-divadlo-evropsky-regionu_27.html?fbclid=IwAR0sRba28ARDt_3n2UDNnlBrs0ssij84Z3RIZDSKXaXh5s2EH2thLQRDFw


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