

Puppet theatre entertaining not just children but adults

Belarusian State Puppet Theatre staged performances for adults back in the 1950s

By Lyudmila Minakova

Anyone under the impression that puppet theatre is just for small children should come to Minsk's 20 Engels Street, where the obsolete stereotype will be broken forever. Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve), Korotkevich's *Boat of Despair*, Chekhov's *Seagull* and Saltykov-Shchedrin's *History of a Town* aren't usually considered to be children's shows yet all are successfully staged at the Belarusian State Puppet Theatre. Of course, children's performances are also common; *Wash'em Clean*, *Pippi Longstocking*, *Morozko* and *Puss in Boots* — among others.

As Belarus' oldest puppet theatre, not long ago celebrating its 75th anniversary, its repertoire, puppets and artistes have often changed but the troupe's dedication and their audiences' delight remain. The puppeteers are always eager to surprise and impress, as well as making people ponder. Chief Director Alexey Lelyavsky, a laureate of the National Theatre Award, tells us more about the amazing work of his team and how the State Puppet Theatre has managed to stay young at heart.

The theatre is 75 but seems to be becoming younger with time. You've been using new puppets



Puppet theatre presents *Eternal Song*: awarded Grand Prix at International *Belaya Vezha* Festival

and have been staging modern shows. Is something else providing the elixir of youth?

We have three secrets: we remember our past, using the exhibits kept at our museum (these allow us to appreciate our past successes more effectively than photos); we continue to invite touring companies from abroad, as in Soviet times; and we nurture friendships within our troupe, while remaining objective about our

work, to ensure we learn from mistakes and progress (idle flattery serves no purpose).

Would you agree that, in the past, puppets were mostly marionettes while, today, they are almost true actors?

They've never been marionettes. The puppets are conduits for the drama. Of course, theatrical aesthetics evolve, shaping audiences' perceptions, but we can't say one trend is better or worse than

another: just different. In the same way, we cannot compare Kandinsky and Repin or declare one better; they were two separate artists, with different aesthetics.

Since actors are behind each puppet, as director, do you notice their moods varying — with some 'off' days?

Naturally, each puppet has its own features, being hand made. Even teddy bears in a shop have slightly different ex-

pressions, despite being sewn to a single template. In every case, you make a personal choice, from your soul. Since our puppets are each unique, they all behave differently. In this respect, our art is unique.

Modern puppets look older and wiser. These days, an increasing number of serious performances are staged but is this well-received or do people scoff at your staging of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*?

There was a time (in Soviet days) when puppet theatre focused primarily on children. However, we've never traditionally been a theatre for children. Even our folk performances — featuring Russian Petrushka, English Punch or German Kasper — are not aimed at children; in some cases, they are exclusively 'adult'. I once had the chance to see an English theatre's Punch (similar to our Petrushka) during a live performance by The Tiger Lilies. They incorporated theatrical elements, which was incredible. It was unsuitable for anyone overly sensitive.

Our theatre turned to 'adult' shows in the 1950s and has shown a great many over the decades.

Do you have a Belarusian repertoire? Among your recent premieres is Mickiewicz's *Dziady* — which is truly unique.

How does a theatre operate? Each director and their troupe must remember that they need to attract audiences. Accordingly, you must capture current trends and moods. The audience's response will tell you what you need to know.

Kind words are common on birthdays and anniversaries...

It's best to hope for long life. In 75 years, many generations have passed through our theatre; 75 is a wonderful point from which to continue, launching something new.

Comparing time and antiquarian watches

From late July to late October, *Time Travel* exhibition hosted by Nesvizh Palace

The unique collection of mantel, wall and bracket clocks is joined by pocket watches and wristwatches from the 17-20th century, comprising treasures from state and private collections. Some pieces were made for the royal courts and a few are the work of famous European masters — such as Jean Lépine, a master of the court of Louis XVI, and Pierre Thomire, who created clocks for Napoleon Bonaparte.

The exhibition has been organised by Gomel's Palace and Park Estate Museum and private collectors, with support from the Museum of Clocks in Lithuanian Klaipeda. The latter holds



Bygone clocks and watches on display

an exclusive collection of 1,700 clocks and watches from various ages — from the first sundials to modern mechanical timepieces. Original and rare artefacts are joined by reproductions with no analogue in Eastern

Europe. Gomel's Palace and Park Estate Museum possesses the largest collection of clocks in Belarus, including items which once belonged to the owners of the country estate: the princely Paskevich family.

Puzzle pictures to be exhibited on our fences

Labyrinth becomes symbol of *Zabor* art project in Mogilev

Forty reproductions of works by five modern Belarusian artists have been on display across regional centres this year, next heading to Mogilev's Spartak Stadium.

In fact, the *Zabor* art project follows an unusual

concept, being arranged in the form of a labyrinth, with works displayed on top of fences and, even, painted onto fences themselves. A map can be followed to locate all the works, with quizzes, puzzles and unexpected surprises along the way, encouraging people to participate, rather than simply view.

The exhibition pursues aesthetic and educational goals. "The event is of interest to artists and urban inhabitants," believes the winner of the *Zabor* art project in Mogilev, Yuri Nesteruk. "Sadly, artists are known only in their narrow professional circles; in this sense, like pop singers, they need PR campaigns."

British social comedy of manners catches our fancy

Gomel's Regional Drama Theatre premieres *Father in the Web*, or *Run for Your Wife-2*

Honoured Artist of Belarus Victor Chepelev is staging the performance, set 18 years after the original *Run for Your Wife* (based on Ray Cooney's play). The major

character, John Smith, is trapped in an impossible situation, with two wives. His children from each become friendly online and fall in love, planning to meet; of course, John must step in to prevent disaster.

Run for Your Wife was written in 1983 and is

among the top hundred popular plays in the UK; it also proved a hit at the Gomel Regional Drama Theatre.

Another premiere for Gomel audiences is *Hercules... The Fifth Labour* — staged by the Gomel City Youth Theatre.