

Developing and Promoting Puppetry in South Africa: The Role of Arts Festivals

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Abstract

When state support for the arts drained away after 1994, theatre in South Africa became a freelance industry and arts festivals proliferated. In the absence of permanent puppet theatres and with few theatre houses which present puppet shows on a regular basis, arts festivals with predominantly adult festival goers became a prominent showcase and developing ground for puppetry. Arts festivals are event-driven platforms which are popular because of their unique features, their ability to focus consumers' attention by presenting some extraordinary cultural experiences, their newsworthiness and the higher demand for artistic experiences than non-festival performances. A number of the arts festivals in South Africa have exposed the art form in such a way that creativity and experimentation with a multifaceted mode of expression were stimulated. Arts festivals as attention-drawing events have also won some puppet artists much needed recognition in a competitive industry.

Keywords: South African arts festivals, puppet theatre, fringe theatre, adult audiences

1. Introduction

The artistic scene in South Africa was dominated for more than 30 years by government-subsidised theatre, ballet and opera. After the dismantling of the regional arts boards in 1997, the playhouses and various theatre companies had to become independent. As theatre in South Africa was now changed into a freelance industry, arts festivals proliferated. Within ten years the country experienced an immense growth in annual festivals, of which 28% could be classified as 'pure' arts festivals, involving either performing and visual arts exclusively, of various combinations of them (Visser, 2005).

Arts festivals as "markers of social and cultural life" (Pichard and Robison, 2006) have thus become an important feature of the artistic landscape of South Africa. In the diversity of South African society certain festivals have become a means to celebrate, acknowledge and strengthen the cultural identities of minority groups. At the same time they have also become vehicles for social integration and a celebration of the arts.

The arts festivals are important places for artists to benchmark their work against the work of practitioners in the same genre from around the country. It is also a great place for networking and meeting with colleagues from around the country and even internationally at some arts festivals. Awards on offer at the arts festivals and an opportunity to have one's work reviewed provide potential recognition and can contribute towards building or affirming one's brand as a practitioner or the artistic merit of a production.

The arts festivals in South Africa area showcase for the diversity of theatre, which includes serious drama, comedy, cabaret, music theatre, dance drama, experimental theatre, visual theatre, multimedia theatre and crossover theatre, to name just a few examples of the wide variety on offer. Generic categories as a means to publicise and organise the supply for festival goers differ from festival to festival. But puppetry has never been offered as a separate category and is usually included as an aspect of children's and adult theatre, with the latter featuring mostly as part of visual and fringe theatre. Out The Box is the first, and so far the only, arts festival dedicated to puppetry in South Africa. It is, however, not the first or only arts festival to play a role in developing and promoting puppet theatre, which is widely perceived in Western countries as a marginal art form (Jurkowski, 1988) that usually features as fringe theatre at arts festivals.

2. A brief Historical Background to the Development of Puppetry in South Africa

Puppetry in South Africa is part of the country's colonial heritage. The indigenous peoples of South Africa, unlike many pre-colonial communities elsewhere in northern, western and central Africa (Arnoldi, 1995; Dagan, 1990), had no puppet tradition apart from toe puppets in the Karoo, a region whose inhabitants at first had very little contact with the settlers in and around the Cape (Kruger, 2011). In 1837 WFP Parker and his "Mechanical and Picturesque Theatre of Arts" arrived in Cape Town, where he and his "unrivalled Automaton Figures" were received by the "Nobility, Ladies and Gentleman" with "great satisfaction" (Fletcher, 1994). He even returned in 1839 to perform in Grahams town, which more than a century later would become the home of South Africa's first arts festival. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century audiences in Cape Town were also entertained by puppeteers from France and Italy (Balder in Potgieter, 1973). The visits by European puppeteers continued and in 1902 the company of Antonio Colla from Milan once again visited South Africa with their marionettes (private correspondence with Piccolo Teatro in Milan). After World War 1 a German company toured the country (Balder in Potgieter, 1973) and visitors from Europe continued to visit the country even after local puppeteers appeared on the scene in the 1930s.

During the 1940s cultural role players such as the National Theatre Organisation (NTO) started to devote attention to the development of theatre for young audiences and explicitly aimed to bring puppetry to the attention of schools and educational institutions. The NTO therefore strongly collaborated with Children's Theatre Incorporated, with which they joined forces in 1955 and 1957 to bring John Wright, a former South African who had moved to London where he founded The Little Marionette Theatre, to South Africa to tour the schools. In 1954 Jan Bussell's Hogarth Puppets toured the schools at the invitation of these two institutions. The high standard of their shows must have been an inspiration to the local puppeteers, and it is also not far-fetched to assume that the association of puppets with young audiences exclusively started to develop. It is clear from Storrar's book *Beginners Please* (1968) that the bulk of the shows done for young audiences were initially puppets shows, mostly performed by Marion Beache's Canames Marionettes from 1944 to 1952.

The initiative to develop children's theatre in South Africa and the enthusiasm of puppeteers to develop their art into a viable profession seem to have occurred at the same time and it was therefore almost inevitable that these two impulses would merge. This of course created young audiences for puppet artists and fewer and fewer adult shows were presented— to such an extent that the full potential of the art form remained undeveloped until recently. The close relationship between puppetry and children's entertainment, as well as with education and even therapy that developed in South Africa was a worldwide phenomenon in Western countries by the 1950s. Batchelder and Cromer (1959) refer to these applications as "by-products" which "obscure or supersede puppetry as drama". In South Africa these so-called by-products never threatened the existence of puppetry in theatre, but puppetry as a theatre form for adults did not develop. After the NTO was replaced by four regional arts councils in 1962 (Hauptfleisch in Rubin, 1997), the situation remained unchanged. In addition to this dilemma, the application of puppetry for young audiences increased with the arrival of television in South Africa in 1976 as this addition to the spectrum of entertainment created a strong demand for children's shows. Puppet artists tapped into this growing demand, with the result that adult puppetry had disappeared almost completely from the scene by the 1980s (Kruger, 2011). By the early 1980s Gary Friedman's Royal Puppet Company was virtually the only group whose work also included shows directed at adolescents and adults. Apart from street performances by Friedman as a solo performer, his company (Royal Puppet Company) performed in a few mainstream and fringe theatres and at the National Arts Festival, which was launched in 1974 in Grahams town. For many years, however, Friedman's work was mainly educational theatre with puppets; this started with *Shakespeare is Pie* (1980-1983), a very successful attempt to make the prescribed Shakespearean texts more accessible to high school learners (Kruger, 2008). The educational focus of his work intensified when he founded the African Research and Educational Puppetry Programme in 1984 and long-term projects directed at adults such as *Puppets against AIDS* and *Check Your Mate* became his main focus (Kruger, 2008).

As a background to the role of arts festivals in the development and promotion of puppet theatre in South Africa, one must therefore bear in mind that puppetry is locally far more popular as children's entertainment and an educational tool, as can be seen in the strong television presence with regard to especially pre-school viewers. One also has to bear in mind that there have never been any permanent puppet theatres in the country and that relatively few theatres houses present puppet shows on a regular basis. Arts festivals with predominantly adult festival goes therefore became a prominent showcase for puppet performances.

3. The Main Arts Festival in South Africa as a Platform for Puppetry

Beginning with the renowned National Arts Festival (NAF) in Grahamstown in 1974, the late 20th century saw the development of a widespread festival circuit in South Africa and arts festivals have been a particularly prominent and immensely influential feature of the theatre industry in the period after 1994 as state support for the arts drained away. Amongst the other big annual arts festivals are the Klein Karoo National Arts festival (commonly known as the KKNK, Oudtshoorn) and Aardklop National Festival (Potchefstroom). The Woordfees/Wordfest (Stellenbosch), Suidoosterfees (Cape Town), Walvisfees (Whale Festival, Hermanus), Innibos (Nelspruit) and Volksbladfees (Bloemfontein) have also developed into popular arts festivals that include theatre. Not all, however, have featured puppetry on their programmes.

Amongst these arts festivals NAF has been the most active in developing and promoting puppetry. Between 1983 and 1998 Gary Friedman's Royal Puppet Company often performed there. In 1983 Royal Puppet Company presented *Shakespeare is Pie* (acronym for Puppets in Education which included excerpts from three Shakespeare works for high school learners) at the Five Roses National Arts Festival, as NAF was then called (Taylor, 1983). At the Cape Town festival in 1984 Friedman and his company performed *Puppet Cabaret* (a collection of sketches) (UNIMA Newsletter, September 1984). This production as well as *The Miller's Tale* (an updated puppet version of one of Chaucer's tales) and *The Puns and Doedie Show* (a political satire by Friedman in the Punch and Judy style) played at NAF in 1984 (UNIMA Newsletter, September 1984). The NAF performance of *Puppet Cabaret* included *P.W. in Space*, a short satirical sketch with the prime minister of that time as a ridiculous superhero as part of Friedman's campaign against apartheid as an oppressive political system. A year later Friedman performed a new version of *The Puns and Doedie Show* at NAF and also performed it at the '85 Durban Expo. With *Pomp and Politics* at NAF in 1988 Friedman and his Royal Puppet Company continued their socio-political work by campaigning for peace and understanding. Friedman made his last appearance at a local festival with his solo Jewish-Zulu musical comedy *The Lost 'n Horror Show* at NAF in 1998 (Badenhorst, 2007).

The role of NAF in promoting the influential and ground-breaking collaborative works of Handspring Puppet Company and visual artist William Kentridge seems to be one of NAF's greatest contributions to the development of the potential of puppetry in South Africa. When Handspring Puppet Company was founded in 1981 by Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones, they originally performed only for young audiences and turned to adult audiences only in 1985 with much trepidation when they took *Episodes of an Easter Rising* to NAF and afterwards to UNIMA's World Festival in France. Luckily this adaptation of a socio-political radio drama about two white women on a remote farm and a black political activist on the run during the apartheid era was well received at both festivals and Handspring was inspired to switch their focus permanently to adult work (Kohler, online). *Episodes of an Easter Rising* was also Handspring's breakaway from conventional puppetry. It was their first experiment in exposed-style puppetry, a turning point which they found very liberating and have used in every subsequent project:

Audiences were not put off at all by the visible mechanics. On the contrary, it became clear that the inner workings of the puppet performance were of interest. No longer was it necessary to collude with the trickery of the puppet booth. The audiences could settle down more comfortably with the puppet figure as metaphoric rather than as literal. This breakthrough has informed all our subsequent work in one way or the other. (Kohler in Taylor, 2009)

This change of direction and style led to their collaboration with William Kentridge as director, designer and animator, which resulted in some of the most prominent multimedia stage productions or cross-over theatre of the 1990s in South Africa. The collaboration started with *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (a puppet and film adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck*) which opened at NAF in 1992. This was followed by a number of award-winning multimedia mainstream theatre productions such as *Faustus in Africa* (1995), *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), *Il Ritornod' Ulisse* (1998), *Zeno at 4 a.m.* (2001) and *Confessions of Zeno* (2002), all performed in mainstream theatres and at NAF as part of the main festival programme. These collaborative works offered Kentridge the opportunity to apply his charcoal drawings and short animation films in full-length stage productions and took Handspring and South African puppetry to another level. These productions remain unique as they not only succeeded as mainstream theatre productions, but also won a number of prestigious theatre awards which will be referred to later. The collaborative productions of Kentridge and Handspring undoubtedly set a high standard aesthetically, and the recognition by theatre critics, the media attention, audience support, prestigious festival ranking and awards all played a role in shaping the aspirations of the present generation of puppet artists in South Africa.

NAF continued to showcase puppet shows, mostly as part of their fringe festival, which houses young artists and a variety of theatre forms. The year 2010 saw “an explosion of puppetry” (UNIMA Newsletter, August 2010). Acclaimed visual theatre productions of 2010 with either puppets or masks included *The Butcher Brothers* (directed by Sylvaine Strike with masks by Daniel Buckland), *Pictures of You* (produced by FTH:K, masks by Janni Younge), *Quack* (also produced by FTH:K, puppets and masks by Janni Younge), *Innuu* (produced by Baba Yaga Theatre), *I Claudia* (by Susan Danford), *Indlovu People* (produced by Jungle Theatre), *The Adventures of a Little Nobody* (produced by Ubom!) and *Tin Bucket Drum* by Niel Coppen, who became the Standard Bank Young Artist of 2013. These were amongst “the strongest and most popular productions” on the NAF Fringe, “clearly a testament to the growth of interest and quality in visual theatre” (UNIMA Newsletter, August 2010). These productions are also a clear indication of the eclectic nature of contemporary performances in which puppets feature. The 2014 NAF showcased the popular *Sadako* by Hearts & Eyes Theatre Collection from Cape Town, which was revised for the main festival programme, as well as *Ubu and the truth Commission*, which was revised by Janni Younge for Handspring Puppet Company to celebrate twenty years of democracy in South Africa.

The Little Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) is one of the biggest arts festivals in South Africa; it has always included puppet shows as part of their children’s programme and has since the early 1990s more than once featured the work of Youth and Puppet Theatre with Erik de Waal, who has become a well-known storyteller who uses puppets and masks on the Canadian festival circuit (Sakwa, online). Other festivals such as the Woordfees/Wordfest, Walvisfees/ Whale Festival and Inniesbos also include puppets as a regular feature on their programme for children, but no puppets appear in adult theatre. Wiebke Holm has so far been the only puppet artist to use Aardklop National Arts Festival in Potchefstroom as a showcase for her adult work. This might be because of the Afrikaans character of the festival and the location of the festival.

At the KKNK puppets were absent from adult theatre until Nieke Lombard performed *Elnora & Nirvana* in 2013 in the newly created Baanbreek (meaning *pioneer*) venue. This fascinating show features Nirvana as the soul of the old Elnora, a puppet made from sponge and cloth. The show does not have a clear plot line, but moves in a circle of metaphors around issues of birth, life, death and reincarnation. This production first featured at the Vryfees in Bloemfontein in 2012, where it was nominated for Best Debut Production and later received the annual Van Rensburg award for Best Free State Theatre Production (*Volsbladnuus*, online). The KKNK performance of 2013 received two prestigious awards: the HerrieKanna for mind-shifting work and the SlurpieKanna as best emerging artist (Openlab 2014, online). With their new Baanbreek venue the KKNK has created the ideal platform for experimental work in the field of visual and performing arts. *Kontinuum*, an imaginative multimedia show with sand animation and shadow theatre created by Naomi van Niekerk, accompanied by acoustic and slide-guitar compositions by Arnaud van Vliet, was performed in this venue in 2014 (*Kontinuum*, online).

It is interesting to note that KKNK 2012 hosted a retrospective exhibition of the work of Handspring Puppet Company of the last 30 years (Altschuler, 2012). Although KKNK has never featured any show by Handspring Puppet Company, they acknowledged the pioneering work of Handspring in cross-over and multimedia stage productions with this exhibition.

4. Out The Box Festival for Puppet and Visual Theatre

Arts festivals dedicated to puppetry are a worldwide phenomenon and many of these festivals from all the different continents are listed on the official website of UNIMA (www.unima.org) and the Puppetry News blog (www.puppetrynews.com). In South Africa Gary Friedman organised a once-off puppet festival in Johannesburg in 1995, when the African International Puppet Festival was presented at the Johannesburg Civic Theatre (Badenhorst, 2007), but it was almost two decades later that a festival for puppetry emerged that would become a more or less annual event.

Out The Box (OTB) Festival of Puppets and Visual Performance was launched by UNIMA (International Union for Marionette Art) South Africa (or Puppetry SA as the organisation is now also known) in 2005. This was done with a strong intention to establish a platform for the support and development of visual theatre in South Africa (Marneweck, 2006). UNIMA SA defines visual performance as “interactive artistic expression using visual imagery, puppetry, objects, video, art and multimedia” (UNIMA SA, online). The aim of this festival is to encourage performances that “move beyond realism and a spoken text by creating diverse imagery, using puppetry, objects, video, art, multimedia, poetry and physicality” and the host believes that “visual performance encourages experimentation and the integration of artistic mediums” (UNIMA SA, online).

Since the first festival in 2005 the festival has grown from a one-day event of workshops and performances, to a ten-day festival which showcased puppetry and other visual performances for both adult and child audiences, interdisciplinary performances, street entertainment, talks, workshops and a mini-conference. Apart from a popular programme for children, the festival programme also hosted an adult programme and in 2008 the Moving Things film component was added to showcase stop-frame animation and puppet videos and short films. The festival is intentionally designed by the management team of working artists “to support and expand thinking on experimentation and artistic possibilities of puppetry and visual theatre” (UNIMA SA, online). In 2007 a number of training and development initiatives such as Iqonga (Platform) for young artists were launched and their works were showcased at the festival. Active Puppets have also been launched and the festival started to host the Active Puppets Youth Festival programme to showcase the work of young artists from disadvantaged communities. From 2007 to 2011 international theatre companies have also participated in the festival alongside leading professional and semi-professional local artists. A lack of sponsors meant that no OTB was held in 2012 and 2013 and UNIMA SA could showcase the work of the Active Puppets initiatives only at less prominent occasions. To once again create a platform for more professional work, UNIMA SA created a mini-OTB with five puppet shows and two workshops as part of newly established Cape Town Fringe Festival in 2014.

The quality of the OTB shows has always been of a high standard in general. But one also has to look at the number of shows and level of audience support in evaluating the impact of the festival on the art form. The 2010 OTB festival featured only three puppet shows for adults and almost twice the number of visual performances without puppets. Some of the adult puppet shows were also not well attended. One would like to believe that this was because the festival was moved to April and that left artists with insufficient time to develop new productions after the annual NAF of 2009, while some members of UNIMA/Puppetry SA were also occupied with preparing the giant puppet appearances for the Soccer World Cup in May 2010.

The 2011 OTB had a large number of productions which featured puppets. The programme (UNIMA SA, online) featured a host of work from the Cape Town area, Johannesburg, Durban and Grahams town as well as 14 other countries with the support from overseas institutions such as the Goethe Institute, the Flemish government, Pro Helvetia from Switzerland, Royal Netherland’s Embassy and the Consulate of Greece (Cape Town) as well as locally from the Arts and Culture Trust and individuals. The festival included shows in Afrikaans and isiXhosa such as *InjaKa Vuyo* (winner of Best Puppet Debut) and *Isangua/Sirkelpad* (nominated for Best Puppet Design). Unconventional puppet shows for young audiences were showcased such as Niel Coppen’s *Marvellous Mixtures*, *The Adventures of Sam the Swallow* by Imbewu and *Benji and the Aliens* by Moving Hands Theatre, a multi-award-winning South African company which performs largely in the UK. One of the most popular shows and winner of Best Puppet Production was the family show *Sadako* by Hearts & Eyes Theatre Collection from Cape Town. Directed by Jacqueline Dommissie. The show combined video projections, live actors and puppets to tell the story of Sadako Sasaki, who suffered from leukaemia after the atom bomb disaster in Hiroshima and began folding papercranes in order to be granted a wish, as folding one thousand paper cranes will give you a wish, according to a Japanese legend. Through this story, not totally unknown in South Africa, local audiences were provided with a lens for understanding their own culture by experiencing universal themes expressed in another culture. *The Ogreling* (directed by Yvette Hardie and Ntomboxolo Makhutshi for Free Voice Productions from Cape Town, which received a Special Mention for General Excellence), using a combination of live acting and shadow puppets, was also a family show with a great appeal for adults. Antamapanthahou from Greece presented *The Strings of Music* (Special Mention for Puppet Manipulation). This funny music concert with a diverse music ensemble – a folk music percussionist, an accordion player, a gipsy singer, a guitarist, a rock drummer, three classical violin players and a young violin player – and an Asian belly dancer also created entertainment for the whole family, combining string puppets, marots and rod puppets with commedia dell’arte elements and techniques. Puppets appeared in more shows exclusively for adults than in the previous year. Amongst the international adult shows were *Last Man Standing* by the Kenyan Institute of Puppet Theatre, which tells the tale of Mara, the brave wildebeest in an environment with increasingly hostile human activities and *Punch and Judy in Afghanistan* (nominated for Best Puppet Production) by Stuffed Puppet from the Netherlands, who combine the traditional Punch and Judy elements with sharp political satire. Amongst the local adult shows were *Red* by Ysterolifantwartz from Cape Town, a dark-humoured story with a sinister twist, and *Ouroboros* (already performed at NAF in 2010 and earlier in 2011 at the Baxter Theatre), which was devised and directed by Janni Younge as the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist of the year.

As mentioned, a mini-OTB with five puppet shows and two workshops was presented in October 2014 as part of the newly established Cape Town Fringe Festival. This new arts festival is a partnership between NAF and the City of Cape Town, and is modelled on “some of the world’s most iconic events”, inspired by “the energy and ethos of popular Fringe Festivals in New York, Amsterdam, Adelaide and Edinburgh” (Cape Town Fringe Theatre, online). The limited OTB programme included the award winning *Elnora & Nirvana* by Nieke Lombard and four family shows. The four family shows all had a strong African theme. *Bokele and the Sun*, based on two African creation stories and featuring puppets assembled from found objects, was presented by Jill Joubert (a member of Handspring Puppet Company in the 1980s) and Isabella Grobler. *Jabulani and the Book*, performed by puppeteers from the Active Puppets programme of UNIMA, is based on the popular story about the young boy Jabulani, who encounters a greedy lion. *Qhawe* (meaning ‘hero of the people’) tells the story of how the lost son of a village chief had to find his way back home to claim his birthright. The show was performed by the Masiphumlele Community Theatre Group. *WenaMamela* (meaning ‘you have to listen’) was performed by the award-winning Mamela Nyamza as a work in progress, which is to premier later in 2014 in Berlin. Although not part of the mini-OTB, the Cape Fringe Festival also featured *Lake* (directed by Daniel Buckland), a clever and entertaining performance with projections, shadow puppets and masks.

5. Developments in Puppetry as Highlighted by arts Festivals: Subject Matter, Style and Genre

Since Gary Friedman’s *Puns and Doedie* and Handspring’s first adult puppet show, *Episodes of an Easter Rising*, adult puppetry in South Africa has very often had a socio-political content, as was also evident in Handspring’s collaborative work with William Kentridge in the 1990s. Looking at contemporary South African puppetry presented at the arts festivals, contemporary artists have sustained this momentum by emphasising present-day social problems, human relationships and the interaction between people and their environment. A fine example of this social consciousness can be found in *Benchmarks* by FTH:K, a young theatre company whose work can be described as performance in full character masks. This show, which received Best Puppet Manipulation at the 2011 OTB, featured a timid middle-age clerk, a reclusive widow and a young Zimbabwean refugee as three lonely individuals who are drawn into an unlikely relationship that ultimately transforms their lives. Another example is *Tin Bucket Drum* by Niel Coppen, who was nominated for a Standard Bank Standing Ovation Award at NAFin 2010. This play tells the story of Nomvula, a child with revolutionary ideas in a country with a cruel and silent dictatorship, by means of shadow puppetry, Kabuki theatre, live percussion and the traditional conventions of African storytelling. *Ouborous* by Janni Younge (the 2010 Standard Bank Artist of the Year) reflected on the flow of life and ordinary human relations by using the mythological dragon, a symbol of the cycle of life. The dragon eats his own tail and is a representation of self-reflection. No dialogue was used, and movement, projections and exposed-style puppets depicted the lovers moving through time and space as they encounter each other and themselves.

Contemporary puppet theatre in South Africa, as seen in live performances and highlighted by arts festivals, has adopted an eclectic style for adult, family and even young audiences. The mixture of visual elements in a layered text became very prominent, with the collaborations of William Kentridge and Handspring Puppet Company which were showcased at NAF from 1992. Today different puppet types are mixed with other visual elements such as masks, animation, projections, objects, film, actors and dancers in an open performance area. Even many contemporary children’s shows are no longer performed in booth and puppets are mixed with masks and animated objects, as can be seen, for example, in the work of Erik de Waal, Wiebke Holm and Ubom! at the 2010 OTB, and the work of Imbewu and OopkopKo-op Company from Cape Town at the 2011 OTB, as well as many of the shows presented at the Woordfees/Wordfest and the puppet shows at the 2014 Cape Town Fringe Festival.

The art form as adult entertainment has clearly become more sophisticated in both subject matter and style, while children’s shows are also showing clear signs of a more experimental approach and fewer European fairy tales are performed. In December 2008 Janni Younge (CEO UNIMA SA at that time) spelled out the most important trends and priorities of UNIMA SA for the future and listed “re-invest in the children” as one of four aims, because of the “demand for well-developed puppet theatre for children” (UNIMA Newsletter, December 2008). This implies an interesting and well-structured plot, well-defined characters and a presentational style that reflects imagination and a high level of skills. Young audiences past the pre-school phase have become more sophisticated over the years and this might well be the result of the ready availability of television and digital entertainment, which often offer spectacular entertainment and to a large extent creates popular characters and storylines.

Puppet theatre does not necessarily have to be technically sophisticated to compete with digital entertainment, but simplicity needs to be combined with an imaginative text and presentation that can stimulate and entertain.

Another interesting feature of contemporary puppetry, which can clearly be seen at the arts festivals, is the tendency to simply present puppetry as theatre. None of the arts festivals in South Africa presents puppet theatre as a separate genre and puppetry mostly features as part of fringe and experimental categories. OTB, as mentioned, is a festival for puppetry and visual theatre (a combination which will be explained below) and it was presented in 2014 as part the new **Fringe Festival in Cape Town. This new arts festival was** inspired by the energy and character of popular international fringe festivals, it is “bold, innovative, exciting and pushes the boundaries for both artists and audiences”, according to the festival’s CEO, Tony Lankester (Cape Town Fringe Theatre, online).

South African puppet artists often present their multimedia puppet shows as visual or experimental theatre. The positioning of puppetry as part of visual theatre is in fact a widespread international phenomenon that distinguishes contemporary metaphysical puppetry, which can be complex in imagery and meaning, from traditional puppetry. Visual theatre often seems to be a more appropriate description for contemporary puppetry, as performances often have a multidisciplinary character with puppets and visible puppeteers as a vital element in the concept, mixed with live actors, dancers, animated objects and projections, and music and visual images taking the place of dialogue. This is the type of performance which UNIMA SA hopes to stimulate with OTB. Visual theatre is an interdisciplinary performance form with numerous definitions and associated with many modes of performance: performing art, installation, multimedia, puppetry, theatre of objects, dance theatre, theatre of images, total theatre, experimental theatre and alternative theatre. Visual theatre is very much the combination and fusion of different art forms which can easily incorporate contemporary puppetry as a diverse phenomenon. Puppet theatre, a term which has several dissimilar associations in different cultures at various times, rather reduces the art form in its current form to a single and discrete category, and does not acknowledge the amalgamation and integration of artistic modes which have become a common feature of contemporary puppetry. Arts festivals have played a key role in South Africa to eliminate the somewhat artificial barrier that exists at times between puppet theatre and other performance forms. This artificial isolation of puppet theatre can restrict the progress of the art form and can have a negative impact on the development of adult audiences, especially when this segregation is combined with the perception that puppets are only fit to entertain children and the full potential of puppetry is not showcased and stimulated.

6. The Impact of Arts Festivals on the Fringe Nature and Status of Puppetry

Puppetry has developed in South Africa into a recognisable part of fringe theatre and the arts festivals have made a valuable contribution to this by offering puppet artists a platform in a highly competitive freelance industry. One must, however, take into account that “The Fringe model rests on two pillars – firstly the nature of the work on a Fringe is such that it is bold, innovative, exciting and it pushes boundaries for both artists and audiences; secondly a Fringe festival has a business model behind it which encourages independence and sustainability, while costs are shared between performers” (Cape Town Fringe Theatre, online). The Cape Town Festival’s Artistic Director, Ismail Mahomed (Cape Town Fringe Theatre, online), explains this model further: “The Fringe model means that productions will pay a modest registration and venue hire fee, and then take the lion’s share of the box office. The Fringe itself then manages the bulk of the marketing, ticket sales, venue setup and all the staffing, financial, technical and legal requirements for the event.” To these expenses of the artist must be added the development of the production, production costs, travelling expenses and daily expenses. This implies minimal financial support, but the marketing is done by the festival. Fringe productions at any arts festival carry a huge risk, while productions on the main programme are largely subsidised.

Although Janni Younge wrote in UNIMA SA’s report after the third OTB that “a new awareness has entered the South African cultural consciousness about puppetry and visual performance” (UNIMA Newsletter, October 2007), support from audiences and funders must still increase considerably if puppetry is to become “part of the most prominent fringe theatre in South Africa and an art form with which we identify and for which SA is known” –this was the wish she expressed when developing the Out The Box festival (UNIMA Newsletter, May 2005). It is still a long way for the full potential of OTB to become reality, especially in the absence of sponsors for a broader and bigger festival, and puppetry will have to rely on other arts festivals to keep this awareness alive.

7. The Impact of arts Festivals on the Recognition of Puppetry in South African Theatre

With the exception of the collaborative works of William Kentridge and Handspring Puppet Company in the 1990s, puppetry and visual theatre are very much a fringe art in South Africa, a country without any permanent puppet theatres to serve as a base venue where regular audiences can steadily be built up so that puppet and visual theatre artists do not have to depend on festivals, especially fringe programmes as the sole location where they can expect to find audiences. Noticeable efforts such as the Arena programme at NAF have lately been made to bridge the gap between mainstream and fringe and/or experimental theatre in South Africa.

Marneweck (2011), writing in a report on 2010 OTB, raises the following concern about the recognition of puppetry in South African theatre:

The categories of the South African Theatre stronghold do not as yet adequately support South African Visual Performance or South African Puppetry. How can Performance platforms (such as festivals, theatres, awards) support experimentation and grow not only upcoming artists but also receptive audiences in order to facilitate the 'new and radical happenings' of contemporary Puppetry Performance? Out of the gaps between production, presentation and reception, we see the emergence of a number of new arts festival and awards that seek particularly to defy and define the traditional Patriarchal Western Theatre approach to the selection and endorsement of new works and arts practices.

To challenge this approach and to address the need for recognition, OTB introduced a new feature in 2010, as Marneweck (2011) reports:

In a bid to put Puppetry Performance even more firmly on the South African theatre map, 2010 saw the landmark introduction of the Handspring Puppetry Awards at Out the Box. Company Directors Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, in the creation of these prestigious awards, are acknowledging not only artistic excellence in the craft but also the gaping silences and awkward categorisations of puppetry in other awards around the country.

To be fair, one must admit that puppetry work was not completely ignored over the years. A number of mainstream productions which involved Handspring Puppet Company received Vita Awards: *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1987) for Play of the Year in the Cape; *Starbrites* (1990/1991) for Production of the Year of a New South African Play; *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992/1993) for Production of the Year of a New South African Play, Set, Lighting, and Directing; *Faustus in Africa* (1995/1996) for Production of the Year of a New South African Play, Set and Costumes. *Il Ritorno D'Ulisse* (1998/1999) received a Vita Special Award for Opera. In 1990/1999 Handspring Puppet Company received a Special Vita Award for Contribution to South African Theatre (Handspring awards, online).

Although perhaps ignored at times, there does seem to be a growing awareness and recognition of artists in the field of puppetry and visual theatre, as can best be seen in the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year award that was awarded in 2010 to Janni Younge, who went on to become a director of Handspring Puppet Company, and to Niel Coppen in 2013 after he captured the attention with *Tin Bucket Drum*. NAF has acknowledged the outstanding work of director Sylvaine Strike with *The Butcher Brothers* by awarding her a Standard Bank Golden Ovation award in 2010, while Baba Yaga Theatre received a Standard Bank Silver Ovation for *Innua*, and Niel Coppen was nominated for a Standard Bank Standing Ovation for *Tin Bucket Drum* in 2010. The awards, previously mentioned, given to Nieke Lombard for *Nirvana & Elnora* in 2012 by Vryfees and in 2013 by KKNK are also very inspiring. Hopefully the Handspring Puppetry Awards will not only add to the prestige of OTB, but will also inspire sponsors, artist and audiences to support a festival which has the potential to make a noticeable impact on the direction taken by contemporary theatre in South Africa.

8. Conclusion

Developing audiences and attracting sponsors for puppet theatre as (still) mainly a fringe art is undoubtedly a process. Arts festivals as event-driven platforms are an important source of energy in this process. They not only serve as a platform in the absence of playhouses which regularly offer puppet shows, but are popular because of their unique features, including their ability to attract new groups of visitors, to focus consumers' attention on some extraordinary and cultural experiences, and their newsworthiness. One also has to keep in mind that the demand for artistic experiences at festivals is relatively high compared to non-festival performances, offering an attractive marketplace to both consumers and producers (Snowball and Antrobus, 2002), which are very important in the freelance industry of South Africa.

Apart from marketing benefits, festivals in South Africa have undoubtedly at the same time exposed the art form in such a way that creativity and experimentation have been stimulated. Artists became inspired to explore the potential of their art form, and the content and style have changed as a result of this exploration. Artists also began to explore the art form as adult entertainment and a multifaceted mode of expression. This higher public profile has also meant that some puppet artists have gained much needed recognition in a competitive industry.

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