

A look behind the scenes of puppet theatre

The traditional Dutch
Jan Klaassen and his
wife Katrijn and their
foreign counterparts.



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**Poppenspe(e)lmuseum
Puppetry Museum,
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Welcome

The Dutch Jan Klaassen and Katrijn puppetry characters have relatives everywhere, from far beyond the Bosphorus to the Pacific Ocean.

Jan Klaassen's English cousin, Mr Punch, is a loud-mouthed clown with two humps.

One hump is pointing up, making him look like a hunchback, and the other is pointing down, like a huge pot belly.

A large hooked nose, which almost touches his protruding chin, is characteristic of this blushing puppet-character's head.

He brazenly looks out at the world with his protruding, piercing eyes. A world that is narrowed down to a small area: within the frame of the puppet theatre stage.

But everything that happens in this small area is huge and really important. Just imagine, all the excitement during the play is created with the puppeteer's strong right hand and arm.

The puppeteer's right and left hands

All that the main characters in folk puppet theatre do is brag and show off, and – unfortunately – commit murder. What do they want? They want to conquer the world! A world that turns out to be a lively but very tiny spot: a small street, a house, a room, a cell, or a spot in the woods.

The puppets' lives are characterised by a series of violent events. One by one, many a co-player briefly crosses their path.

Some of them are charming, sweet or brave, others are evil, arrogant or vain. But they all end up badly. It is the puppeteer's left hand that lets these co-players live or die, one at a time.

That was the easiest way to do it, the puppeteers had discovered: put the main character on the right hand and the other ones, who have brief encounters with him, on the left one.

Between the scenes, the hand with the main character is held upright to keep the audience occupied. The left hand quickly moves down to change puppets.

Centuries-old traditions

Folk puppet theatre is based on centuries-old traditions, whereby figures, performance techniques, and props have been passed down from one generation to the next.

An international repertoire has originated from national puppet theatres influencing each other.

Props

A variety of standard props such as a little box, a club, a frying pan, sausages, a carpet beater, gallows, a broom, an organ grinder's collecting box and a puppet theatre bell are used in traditional puppet theatre. Most of these props are usually disproportionately large compared to the puppets on the tiny puppetry stage. But this adds to the slapstick-like nature of the performance.

The club

The club is sometimes used to beat a rhythm on the back of the head of one of the opponents on the stage, or to poke him or her in the stomach. Once the enemy has been beaten, and is lying helpless on the floor, the victor runs his stick over the former's neck. You may wonder if puppet theatre is cruel. Of course not, it is just a question of practicalities.

Street puppet theatre

The puppeteer in a street puppet theatre must entice his audience from passers-by, the plays must be short and full of action. Performances like these can still be found in folk puppet theatre in Europe even today.

The hand puppet

The puppeteer moves the puppet with his fingers. There is a hole on the inside of the puppet's head and neck, where the puppeteer puts his index finger. His thumb is placed in one sleeve and his little finger – sometimes together with his ring and middle finger – in the other.

The hand puppet has no body under his clothes. After all, the puppeteer's fist fills up the body area.

In the past, puppet heads with hats were carved from a single piece of wood. The puppets' hands, lower legs, and feet were also made of wood.

Puppet booth

Puppet theatres come in all shapes and sizes. They are usually mobile. Hand puppet theatre often makes use of a taller than head-height cubicle, so the puppeteer is invisible to the audience.

The old-Dutch Jan Klaassen and his wife Katrijn

Jan Klaassen has a large, red boozy nose, a big pot belly and a hump. He wears a colourful costume and has a tricorne or pointed hat on his head. His legs have been sewn to the bottom of his jacket and he has clogs on his feet.

Humour

Jan Klaassen originated during the second half of the 17th century and is a typical lad from Amsterdam. He has a way with words and a good sense of humour. Those who bother him can count on a scornful remark or a good beating with his club.

His wife Katrijn has a mob cap on her head. She usually wears a flowered dress and an apron and is definitely not good-looking.

'Five kilos of potatoes could easily fit into her mouth', says Jan.

Katrijn and her husband are always quarrelling. But she is the boss and is constantly attacking him with a carpet beater.

Punch-and-Judy show

A long string of sausages is a common prop in the English Punch-and-Judy shows.

There is a well-known scene where Mr Punch thinks he can feast on the whole lot. He puts them in a frying pan, which he places on the theatre stage. In an unguarded moment, his friend Joey the clown manages to steal the sausages.

Sausages

In another scene, Mr Punch puts his and his wife Judy's baby into the sausage machine. He minces the baby up into mini sausages, which have the same pattern as the baby's dress.

When Punch reverses the handle, the little nipper reappears unharmed.

Crocodile

In a following play, while Mr Punch's attention is distracted, the crocodile suddenly appears on stage. Snap, gulp and all the meat is gone. Bad luck for Punch!

Vitéz László and the devil

The comical figure in Hungarian folk puppet theatre is called Vitéz László. His costume, pointed cap and nose are red. He looks like the old-Dutch Jan Klaassen and the German Kasperl.

In a well-known scene, a miller asks Vitéz László to chase away a devil. He is rewarded with a few bags of flour. Using increasingly larger frying pans, he finally succeeds in driving away the devil. The hard blows of the metal pans on his opponent's wooden head ring out like a gong.

Pulcinella

The Italian Pulcinella is the forefather of many European clown puppets. He originates from the Naples area.

Pulcinella wears a white costume and a tall hat.

His black half mask has a hooked nose. It looks like a bird's beak. His name is the diminutive of 'pulcino' (or little 'chick').

By using a pivetta (a throat whistle), the puppeteer gives Pulcinella a squeaky voice.

Sometimes Pulcinella is a man and sometimes a woman. In a frequently played scene, a chicken falls in love with him. But the only way to Pulcinella's heart is through his stomach. He fries and eats the chicken. His belly then starts to get bigger and bigger until he lays egg, which he hatches. Lots of little Pulcinella babies come out of the egg.

The backdrop with the bay of Naples and a smoking Mount Vesuvius belong to Pulcinella just as much as an Amsterdam canal with a bridge are part of Dutch puppet theatre with Jan Klaassen.

Guignol

Guignol is the main character in French folk puppet theatre. He was created in Lyon around 1800.

Guignol wears a brown tailcoat with gold-coloured spherical buttons on top of his waistcoat and he has a bow tie under his chin. On his head is a bonnet – a brimless cap - and his hair is plaited into a long braid.

Gnafron

Gnafron, a poor cobbler with fiery red cheeks, is Guignol's best friend. He loves his wine. 'Gnaf' means 'cobbler'.

When Gnafron has no work – and therefore no food – he decides to make soup out of his leather pinafore – a type of apron. He jokingly says: 'Cut up into pieces, fried in the frying pan with a bit of butter, onions and vinegar, it is really delicious!'

Rod puppet theatre

The Italian island of Sicily has a rich tradition in puppet theatre. There they perform with rod puppets: the pupi. These are heavy, stiff 'marionettes' that are moved from the top.

The rod from which the puppet hangs, runs through its head and is attached to its wooden body with a hook. In this way its head can turn. A stick is attached to the right hand so the arm can be manipulated. The left arm is moved with a string.

Charlemagne and the Saracens

The repertoire comprises the adventures of the medieval emperor Charlemagne and his knights (the paladins).

Their fight against the Saracens (the Mohammedans) was fierce, with heads literally rolling. The fighters wear a suit of armour and a helmet and they carry a shield of hammered copper.

Tchantchès

The rustic Tchantchès is a comical character in the traditional rod puppet theatre from the Belgian city of Liège. He mediates between the puppets and the audience. The kind-hearted and smart Tchantchès likes his drink. His clogs make a terrible racket on the wooden boards of the theatre stage.

Rod puppets from Liège are operated with head rods. To allow them to walk, one leg is slightly longer than the other. By leaning on one leg and then moving the head rod, the other leg automatically swings forwards.

Rod puppet theatre from Liège resembles that of Sicily. But the bodies, arms and legs – and even the suits of armour of the knights that perform on stage – are made entirely of wood.

The Antwerp poesjenellen

'Poesjenellen' is the name of the rod puppets from the Belgian city of Antwerp. They are sturdy, heavy puppets that hang from a rod which is either hooked to their heads, or runs straight through the head, and is hooked to their torsos. The top end of the rod is bent to create a handle for the puppeteer.

The poesjenel has a second rod attached to its right wrist, which moves the right arm. The word 'poesjenel' is derived from the name Pulcinella.

Just pull my strings

Performing with Jumping Jack puppets was particularly popular during the 19th century. The puppets were sometimes made of wood or fabric, but the paper versions are better known. They were available in the form of 'popular prints': a folk or children's printed image that was in circulation during the 1800s. The flat Jumping Jack has hinged limbs that move when you pull a string.

The figures are made of loose parts: a head, arms, upper and lower legs, and a torso. These figure parts could be cut out and coloured, if so desired.

Commedia dell'arte

Some Jumping Jack puppets were of a very high quality. Their clothes appeared to be made of gold! They often resemble figures from the commedia dell'arte. This is a form of folk and improvisational theatre that originated in Italy during the 16th century and became popular over large parts of Europe. Regular characters usually took the stage, such as the charming Colombina and the clowns Arlecchino, Pulcinella and Scapino.

Many commedia dell'arte characters eventually acquired a permanent role in European folk puppet theatre.

In German the Jumping Jack is called 'Hampelmann' and its French name is 'pantin'.

Wayang from Indonesia

The concept of 'wayang' comprises various forms of puppetry and dance. Wayang kulit is shadow and rod puppet theatre. The figures used in wayang play are made of leather and sometimes of paper or braided rice straw. Some wayang figures are made of wood, such as the three-dimensional wayang golek and the flat wayang klitik.

Wayang wong theatre ('wong' means 'human') involves 'real' actors. Wayang topeng is a dance performance in which wooden masks are used. The dalang (puppeteer) moves all the figures, speaks their texts, sings, and directs the gamelan orchestra that sits behind him.

Dalang

During the rod puppet and shadow performance, the dalang is seated cross-legged in front of or behind a white screen. With a small wooden mallet – that is held between his toes – he strikes a wooden chest to set the tempo of the music played by the gamelan orchestra.

Lamp

A burning lamp is mounted between the puppeteer and the screen. In this way, the wayang kulit figures can be seen as shadows on the other side of the screen. Figures that are not being used are pricked into the soft trunk of a banana tree log: the evil characters to the left and the noble ones to the right.

Semar

The plays are based on stories from two Sanskrit epics of ancient India: the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Semar the clown is the servant and adviser of gods and aristocrats. He has a big bottom and a large belly, a broad face and only one tooth in his mouth.

Petruk

One of his sons is called Petruk, who has a long nose and a sagging belly. His head is on a long neck that bends forward.

Garuda

The wayang lamp usually resembles the bird Garuda: a symbol of luck and friendship. Garuda is the golden eagle from Indian and Indonesian mythology.

Eagles are attributed with supernatural powers.

Garuda is half human, half animal and has the role of protector of the oppressed.

Garuda is king of the birds and considered the messenger between the separated worlds of humans and gods. He is the arch-enemy of snakes.

Kancil

In 'wayang kancil', another form of wayang kulit, the clever little mouse-deer Kancil plays a leading role. Whether it be elephants, tigers, crocodiles or people, little Kancil outsmarts them all.

Shadow figures from Turkey

Turkish shadow figures are made of transparent leather which is decorated with holes and painted colourfully. These performances are part of a centuries-old theatre tradition. The figures are held right up against the screen and are moved with short rods, which are perpendicular to the shadow figures themselves.

Karagöz and Hacivat

The main characters are Karagöz and his friend Hacivat. Unlike the other characters, Karagöz is moved with two rods. One passes through a hole in his shoulder, the other is attached to his hand. And a good thing too, because he deals out some hefty punches.

Hunchback

Karagöz has a hunchback and a black beard, and he wears a turban. Unlike Hacivat, he is uncultured and impulsive. Poverty is the only thing they have in common.

Hacivat uses rather pompous language and likes to show that he knows the Islamic classics very well. His buddy Karagöz often makes fun of him.

Applause!

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