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Marie Jirásková and Pavel Jirásek

## Puppet Cabaret: Visual Idioms, Performance Technologies and the Poetics of Czech Special Puppets in a European Context 1850–1950

(From Artistic Automata through Trick and Variety Puppets, to Puppet Cabaret and Variety Show Clowns and Acrobats)

A popular conclusion to a show was the ‘variety’. That was a concession of course – one visual artist once upbraided me badly for it at the Educational Institute of Vinohrady [Vzdělávací sbor vinohradský], but – well – the gentleman had never been a theatre manager himself and had absolutely no knowledge of children’s nature. A puppet that juggles, walks tightropes, balances a trapeze, throws shots, dances – what a joy for children! Children aren’t and never will be passive objects of an artistic education; if children like juggling puppets, an artist has to come and give the puppets an artistic form and refine the young ones’ taste in that way. Even here it holds that ‘Grey is theory, mere junk, and green is the golden tree of life’ [a quotation from Goethe’s *Faust*]. (HLOUŠEK 1912)

In the ethnographic column of the first number of the second year of *Český loutkář* [The Czech Puppeteer] magazine (1913), the young editor Jindřich Veselý (1885–1939), writing under the pseudonym M. Hájek, brought news of the traditional puppet theatre of the Maizner brothers, Bohumil and Ladislav, of the renowned dynasty settled in the East Bohemian town of Nová Paka, about one hundred kilometres northeast of Prague (VESELÝ 1929: 63–4). After a short extract from the play *Kašpárek and the Turk* (*Kašpárek a Turek*) he dedicated his attention to the richly equipped store of the Maizner family, accompanying his description with two large-size arranged photographs showing a part of the ‘fifty-headed wooden company from the Sucharda workshop’ (HÁJEK [VESELÝ] 1913: 14–5). The Maizners (earlier also known as Meissner, Maissner and later as Majzner) had been active in East Bohemia from the late 1700s and they were characteristic for their aim at an original repertoire, as the earliest extant copies of Czech marionette plays testify (BARTOŠ

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1959). The visual aspect of their sumptuous theatre was heavily influenced by the sculpting and woodcarving workshop of the Sucharda family of Nová Paka; towards the end of the nineteenth century, this was namely the workshop owner Antonín Sucharda Jr., or the later master woodcarver Jan Mádlé Jr. (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 69–76).

The first photograph shows a horizontal section of the Maizners' collapsible stage; in front of the decorations of the chivalric hall, there are twenty-five large marionettes of the Sucharda provenience, richly costumed and with characteristically hyperbolic carving of the cheeks, expressively modelled hairs and beards and technological ingenuities such as moving jaws and eyes (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 69–76). Jindřich Veselý describes individual characters and types, all of which were well known to contemporary audiences; in the middle, 'Kašpárek is seated on a wire'; to the left the types of a Lackey and Vagner with the sitting Uncle Škrhola; towards the centre, 'the first lover in narrow white trousers, flanked by a gang of knights'; behind Kašpárek, three beadles or robbers with mesmerising eyes and 'seal-like moustaches'; to the right are the ladies of the higher circles; besides them a country girl with a basket, peasants and old woman 'with a shawl tied across her chest and with a pack basket'. To the very right, there is a group of four devils:

the little 'unfeathered' ones as well as the old 'hirsute' ones that can belch real fire and sulphur from their muzzles; the specialty of one of them is that he borrowed his right leg of an Alpine chamois. (HÁJEK [VESELÝ] 1913: 14)

It was nothing exceptional to present the wooden actors of serious dramas and comedies in photographs; a number of similar representative images have survived from other Czech marionettist families, sometimes including the posing principal demonstrated in the above example. What is, however, exceptional is the second photograph, arranged with like care in the decoration of a village green that seems as if the photograph's observers had fallen down from the realm of the 'high Muse' of dramatic art to the fringe of popular entertainment, landing somewhere in a circus arena or a variety bar. The author of the article Jindřich Veselý explains that the Maizner brothers also had variety artists and acrobats that performed in their concluding plays called *podehry* (under-plays) by the Maizners or *podlešky* by the Kopeckýs (HÁJEK [VESELÝ] 1913: 14). The favourite protagonist of these is Kašpárek – this time in the centre with *Šimlíčka* or *Havlach* (a typical marionettists intentional corruption of the word *Valach* (gelding horse – marionettists liked to play with language and combine folk terminology with words picked up and corrupted from reading.) To the left is a puppet of a woman metamorphosed into a hot-air balloon with two passengers in a boat; an Acrobat with a rod (at that point transformed into a gymnast of the Czech Sokol<sup>1</sup> movement); and

1 The *Sokol* movement was a Czech youth sport and fitness initiative founded in Prague in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner. Whilst it began as a fitness initiative, the Sokol developed to include education through lectures, debates and field trips. It also engaged with the arts as part of a programme intended to provide for the physical, moral and intellectual life of the nation.



Fig. 1: Trick puppets and variety puppets of the Maizners from the Sucharda workshop.

*Český loutkář 2 (1912): 1: 16.*



Fig. 2: Marionettes for the dramatic repertoire of the Maizners from the Sucharda workshop.

*Český loutkář 2 (1912): 1: 16.*

a Contortionist, decorated on his chest with many outlandish medals. To the right of the centre is an Acrobat on a trapeze (also a Sokol figure); under him a synchronised brace of little dancers – *Taneček* (the Dance); a Girl juggling spheres; two black Athletes; a second Kašpárek doing *legerdemain* tricks with an umbrella; and a Ballet Dancer with a ball. Veselý's article is a unique testimony to the fact that most travelling marionette companies in the Czech lands in the 1800s and the early 1900s performed not only their repertoire pieces, but also performed so-called 'variety' theatre – generally after the main piece. This 'variety' was the theatre of trick puppets, of metamorphoses, of acrobatic, mechanical or flying automata. While central European and Czech theatre studies have engaged with detailed linguistic, performative and stagecraft analyses of the marionettists' texts or theatre practices, it has often been forgotten what makes puppet theatre unique: the mystery of the revived matter – or: the visual dramaturgy of a form of theatre that is scenographic spectacle *par excellence*, a theatre whose technological finesse was often anxiously protected as the trade secrets of marionettist families and companies. This form of performance, much like the mystery of grand scale magic and illusionist spectacles, used to be a specific branch of the visually artistic puppet theatre.



This fact has often been marginalised in the context of Czech theatre studies, simply because such shows were not ‘dramatic’ but were rather – spectacles of the variety theatre, akin to conjuring, entertainment and magic-act style theatrical forms. However, in England, such forms have been given due analytical attention by Philip Butterworth, who studies medieval and early modern usage of mechanical paintings, automata and puppets in magical performances, which later combined with more mainstream theatre culture (BUTTERWORTH 2005). Nowadays, and particularly in Anglophone contexts, these performance types are recognised and accepted much more often; they are scrutinised in the discipline of Performance Studies and are recognised as belonging to the sphere of visual performance and performance art – genres of spectacle that coalesce in the diversity of their expressive means with other phenomena, such as the New Circus. A visual theatre style that was not primarily based on a dramatic text and its performance, but rather on a spectatorial, pictorial and dynamic presentation similar to illusionism, manifested itself first in the nineteenth-century poetics of artistic automata – the ‘metamorphoses’ (transformation puppets) and later in trick and variety puppets – and, eventually, at the start of the twentieth century, in a whole arsenal of special puppets, including clowns and acrobats of the Modernist Puppet Cabaret.

## Transformation Puppets (Metamorphoses) of the Travelling Folk Marionettists

Jindřich Veselý, the leading historian of puppet theatre, returned to the topic of variety puppets in the Ethnographic column of the renewed *Loutkář* in 1918; his article ‘Variety and changeable puppets of our puppeteers’ (VESELÝ 1918: 11–2) records the practices of the popular puppeteers Lagron, Kopecký, Maizner, Novák and many others of the early 1900s. Veselý is here tracing his efforts by practitioners not only to keep their audiences in an increasingly competitive entertainment market, but also to attract new ones; hence:

After the longest play, such as *Faust*, Kašpárek at least would come onstage, giving thanks for coming and announcing the title of the next play. Regularly he would call out his Kalupinka (originally ‘Kolombinka’ [Colombina]), his little wife whom he would comically kiss welcome and then they would dance – or he would call his horse – his gelding *šimlíčka* or ‘Rozárka’ or *havlach* – and give him a lump of sugar and numerical quizzes (like in a circus), he would sit on him face to tail and otherwise make the children merry. If the play was shorter, a one-act play ‘*dohra*’ (epilogue) would be added, which our marionettists call ‘*nachšpil*’ [from German *Nachspiel*], ‘*přidánka*’ [the ‘added one’ or encore] or ‘*podleška*’ or ‘*podneška*’ (they explain the origin of the word in that it is a play that is *po dnešním* [after today’s] performance); such encore can be for instance *The Learned Pig*, *The Haunting Kašpárek*, or there is comical *spiel* by the [bumpkin] Škrhola in a hotel



Fig. 3: Historian Jindřich Veselý in his collections; the planary puppets for *Faust* in the background. *Loutkář* 14 (1929): 3: 67.

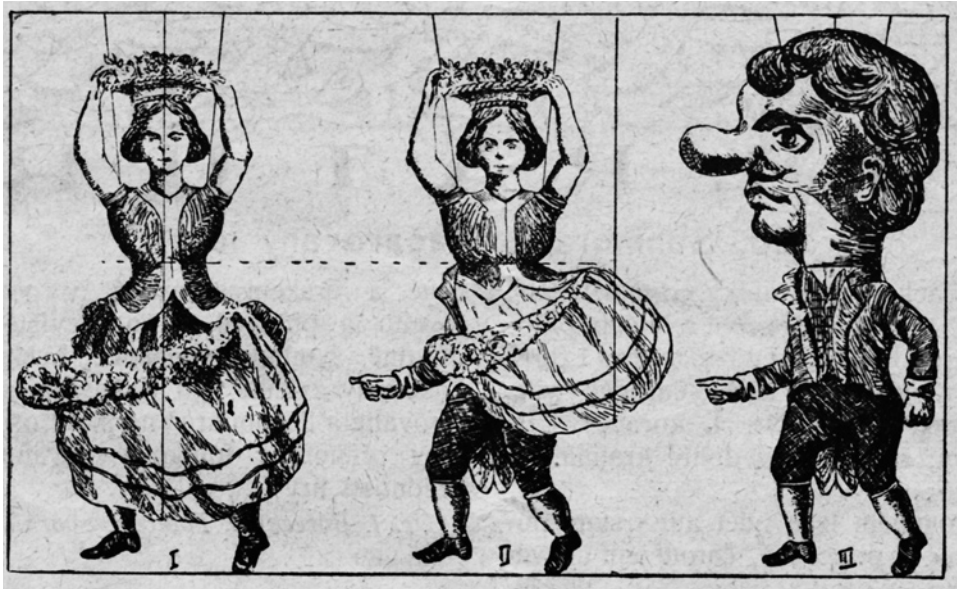


Fig. 4: A girl with a basket of flowers changing into a man with a large nose; a transformation puppet, a metamorphose, a *flákačka* (slap puppet). *Loutkář* 3 (1918): 1: 11.

where he orders various foods – [the nonsensical] ‘štrykybrykyfrancle’ – but the waiter (or Kašpárek) smacks him on his sweet-tooth – or the old folk scene of Kašpárek at the recruiting commission. (VESELÝ 1918: 11)

The oldest types of special puppets used in these epilogues comprise mechanisms capable of transforming their shape into something wholly different – known as *proměny* or *metamorphoses*. Performances with these puppets originated in the Baroque roots of the European marionette theatre, so they are also common for the German and Austrian regions (HAVLÍČKOVÁ 2009; BERGENSTENGEL 1995; BERNSTENGEL and REBEHN 2008; MÄSER 1977); in the Czech environment ‘their popularity [was] all the greater since they were based on nonverbal dynamic performance and often helped overcome linguistic barriers’ (DUBSKÁ 2004: 48). The evidence corroborating the practice can be found in the long-lasting trans-European touring of the dynasty of Jan Jiří Brát, originally from the East Bohemian town of Náchod, who called himself a *mechanik* (engineer) in advertisements. Even before the year 1800, most of his productions concluded with shows called *Proměny* (*Verwandlungen*; transformations) and his trademark speciality was the concluding puppet dance *Kozáček* (the Cossack *Pas de deux*) (DUBSKÁ 2011: 50–1). Also his wife and children further developed the illusionistic and animation principles of *theatrum mundi* – not only in their epilogues, but incorporated them intensely into the plots of the regular repertoire and adapted the *metamorphoses* to the visual and dramatic style of the performed plays (DUBSKÁ 2011).

The popularity of various mechanical tricks generally grew over the course of the nineteenth century and the inhabitants of many central European cities were regular spectators of a variety of panoramas, cabinets, *theatra mundi*, optical magic but also, of course, mechanical theatres, mechanical ballets and artistic mechanical figures’ theatre – which were essentially the form that puppetry held at the time (NOVOTNÝ 1944). Puppet *metamorphoses* of the late nineteenth century can therefore be perceived as a continuation of the long-standing tradition.

A very specific group of puppets were the so-called *flákačky*, *pleskačky* or *práskačky* (all names deriving from the verbs to whack, to slap or to slam); these were equipped with an ingenious construction and their manipulation, generally with a musical accompaniment, allowed an illusionistic transformation of the entire puppet. Coloured transformation puppets of a grotesque nature made of paper (or cardboard) were named after the loud crack of stamping ‘at which the cardboard of the *metamorphosis* makes a noise of whacking, slapping or slamming’ (VESELÝ 1918: 12). This abrupt noise, reminiscent of the crack of a ‘slapstick’ was accompanied by a visual transformation. During the cracking, a simple collapsible mechanism flipped the painted part of the puppet, revealing the reverse painted side; this was the metamorphosis of the figure into another or into an unexpected object. Naturally, many of the metamorphoses were dependent on the creativity and invention of their makers who combined two figures or objects of a similar shape. The puppet most commonly consisted of a head, a body and a rim (the

so-called flipping part, such as a skirt). The lower hem of this skirt was often weighted with pellets and when the part was lifted, the puppet underneath (that was connected to the upper, different part painted on the underside) was revealed; the manipulation was simple, done by two rod hooks (JIRÁSEK 1932: 157–8). Such a puppet was for one-off use during the production since its effect was naturally quickly given away. Amongst the most commonly used was the woman with a basket of flowers on her head; by lifting her skirt she turned into a man with a funny head or a flying hot-air balloon with a basket. Similarly, an ugly old woman turned into an attractive girl, a drunkard into a devil, or a while girl into a black man (VESELÝ 1918: 12).

One of the most popular attractions was the figure of the Stamping Man (*Dupák*). The classical marionette head, with a grotesque and somewhat menacing grinning expression (sometimes a Kašpar figure), was connected with two feet through a gathered textile sack, concealing a long wire inside that passed through the head as a manipulation lead with a hook at the end of it (ŠELLER 1934: 41–2). The upper part of the body, with the head attached to another hook, could loosely move along the wire; when the appropriate manipulating strings were extended, the originally, bizarrely crouched, figure enlarged practically to the upper reaches of the proscenium arch. During the lifting and lowering of the upper part of the body, the fabric of the costume folded like a concertina (JIRÁSEK 1932: 159–60). The noisy *Dupák* moved across the stage in leaps and bounds, and then, to the sound of raucous huffing and stamping, he started to grow upwards and lower himself down again. For a more grotesque effect, the marionettists would leave the head up at the top of the proscenium and pull the feet upwards to it (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 77–8). Czech collections hold a few special types of *Dupák* – originating in the marionettist family of the Flachs, especially with Jan Flachs Jr. (1855–ca.1940), and in the Sucharda workshop. These *Dupáks* have a second, small head, concealed inside a hollow of the primary head, out of which – as a final effect – the head surprisingly pops out (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: 76). The Chrudim Puppetry Museum (*Muzeum loutkářských kultur v Chrudimi*) holds in its collections a grotesque *Dupák* with a stylised head of the German emperor of the Brandenburg branch of the Hohenzollerns, Wilhelm II the Prussian (aka Wilhelm the Last) in a military helmet (VESELÝ 1920: 63–4). A frequent type of *Dupák* has two faces (a two-faced puppet), always stylised in a grotesque contrast so that the visual effect came with quick spins of the head that created a blurring visual composite of the two elements: a woman in front and a man in the back, a young woman in front and an old woman on the flip side, or a young aristocrat in front and an old one on the back.

Among the *metamorphoses* were also puppets that fell apart into individual components, especially the Skeleton (*Kostlivec*) (SKÁLA 1929: 18). The Skeleton was manipulated by means of an ingenious hook composed of three rods of different lengths so that the individual limbs could fly apart. By lifting the first rod, the head was severed from the trunk and hovered above, or disappeared behind the proscenium arch; lifting the





Fig. 5: The backdrop of *Kopecný's Puppet Variety Show – What Puppets Can Do*, from the puppet family of Kopecný, early 20<sup>th</sup> century. © Collections of Alena Vorlová.

second rod made the trunk hover, leaving the arms and legs wantonly dancing in mid-air, and, in a similar fashion, the Skeleton would reassemble in front of the astonished audience (JIRÁSEK 1932: 172–3). Another composite puppet was the Chimney-Sweep (*Kominík*) from which a party of small chimney-sweep figures jumped out. The writer and journalist Karel Horký (1879–1965) described such a puppet figure in an encore of the Maizners:



Fig. 6a+b: The *Dupák* (the stamping man), a marionette of South Bohemian provenance for the Dubský family, end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. 30–70cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.



Fig. 7a+b: The *Hot-Air Balloon Woman*, made by Jindřich Srba for the puppetry family of Janeček, the 1920s, Bohemia. Marionette. 70cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.





**Fig. 8:** A Chimney Sweep with little Chimney Sweeps, made by a folk maker for the travelling marionettists, Central Bohemia, early 19<sup>th</sup> century. 60cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

to the mighty music of Maizner's barrel organ it danced so long until an arm fell off and that turned into a little manikin that immediately also danced, then another leg, then both legs, and all these limbs turned into manikins that danced like mad, until a whale appeared that opened its ghastly gob and swallowed all the manikins. (HORKÝ 1925)

Of a like nature was the puppet of the furious Turk or of the Woman turning into a flying hot-air balloon. The puppet constructed in such a way that its upper part can be completely covered by the lower (the skirt). The arms are, from the hidden side, two miniature puppet heads. Since the puppet has no legs, its movements are limited to little skips. Firstly, a tug at the string unhooks the arms (the little puppets), they then turn upside down and stand on the floor. Next, the lower textile part flips over the body and the balloon basket, or a boat, appears. The little puppets on strings jump into the basket and the balloon with its passengers disappears in the clouds (JIRÁSEK 1932: 158–9).



**Fig. 9:** The contortionist, a variety marionette from the equipment of Antonín Kopecký (1856–1920), the great grandson of the legendary Matěj Kopecký. Carved by Bohumil Veselý, end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. 35cm.

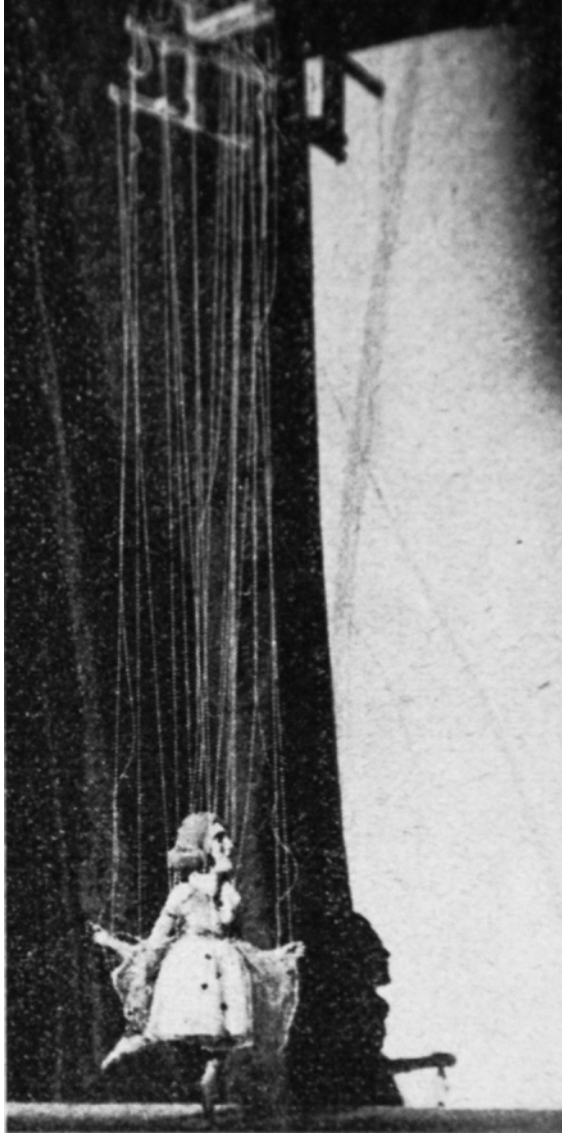
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## Variety and Trick Puppets of the Travelling Folk Marionettists

With the general rise of the travelling circus in the Czech lands since 1800 and cabaret during the 1870s and 1880s, which combined features of the circus (acrobats, aerialists, *chansonniers*, entertainers, illusionists, dancers, jugglers) with gastronomy, some of the acrobatic numbers executed with puppets can be seen among folk marionettists also. Later, early in the new century, the inspirations assimilated from the cabaret were combined with new characters from the music hall. Jindřich Veselý followed a number of the leading contemporary marionettists around 1910 as he was working on his puppetry exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum in Kinský Park in Prague and on the earliest publications on puppetry. He testifies to the trend:



**Fig. 10:** A dancer of the Sokol Association at Černá Hora in Moravia. *Naše loutky* 9 (1934): 5: 67.

The 'variety show' – that is, puppets (ballet dancers or a pair or two pairs of Mandarins) that danced to the sound of music (in earlier times the hurdy-gurdy, later the barrel organ) and made various juggling shows, such as throwing little balls, lifting chairs and balancing them on their noses, or engaged in pugilistic duels. His specialty was the Contortionist ('Serpent Man') whose body was ingeniously composed of a row of little chamfered blocks attached by strings. The Contortionist, dressed in a green vest decorated with many 'honours', always bowed ceremoniously and then strangely contorted his body – with a difficult turn the music would go silent to heighten the audience suspense. (VESELÝ 1918: 11)

The Contortionist was a variety puppet whose body under the costume was separated into five parts, conically cut and threaded on a string for maximum flexibility. The legs were attached to the hips in such a way that the puppet could lift its legs not only forward but basically in all directions (BACHMAN 1922: 67). The costume was generally made of leotard fabric to facilitate the manipulation of the elastic serpentine dances and movements of the puppet (JIRÁSEK 1932: 161–2).

The Dancer (*Tanečnice*) or Ballerina was based on a similar technology, sometimes even equipped with a hoop. This puppet was generally carved with naked feet and its arranged silk costume made it clear that it was a female dancer. Often it had articulated naked arms and legs. The body was often articulated, in the same manner as the Contortionist, to make it as flexible as possible (KOPŘIVA 1934a: 69–72). Sometimes, the Dancer even had its body equipped with a spiral of harder wire, concealed under the ballet costume. The arms and legs were generally attached extremely loosely to allow the maximum variety of movements. To make the dance effective, manipulating strings were also attached to the chest so that the marionette could make a deep backward bend (JIRÁSEK 1932: 164–5).

Another programme number of the almost every variety production of professional folk marionettists was the attraction known as Dancers, the Little Dance or Round Dance (*Tanečníci*, *Taneček* or *Kolečko*); this spectacle comprised an even number of essentially small marionette dancers (30–40cm) – four, six or even eight, always in male/female pairs (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: annexe 80). The hook had the shape of a cross, with four to eight arms; each of the arms was attached to one marionette with as many strings as the puppet was required to make movements. The arms and the legs of the marionettes were loosely attached to their bodies with a piece of fabric or thread to allow spontaneous streaming during the spinning movements. When the cross hook gave the marionettes (normally of country people, or Mandarins) a spin, they were capable of the following movements in the basic set up of the string system:

(1) Marionettes separate, loose; (2) all of them lift their right bent leg; (3) they all lift their left bent legs backward; (4) they hold hands and lift arms; (5) they lift their right straight legs and join them in the middle (hence the round); (6) only the pairs join hands – the



**Fig. 11:** A black dancer (Josephine Baker), by an unknown carver. Bohemia, the late 1920s. A variety marionette from the inventory of the travelling theatre of František Doležal. 45cm. © Collections of the MZM, Brno, L 722.



**Fig. 12:** A dance, by an unknown maker. Bohemia, 19<sup>th</sup> century. A variety set of marionettes for travelling marionettists. 38cm. © Collection of Alena Vorlová.





**Fig. 13:** An acrobat with spheres. A variety puppet from the inventory of the collection of Antonín Kopecký (1856–1920), the great grandson of the legendary Matěj Kopecký, 19<sup>th</sup> century. 40cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

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gentleman's right hand holds the lady's left; (7) the men hold hands (or legs) in the middle – the hand strings (or leg strings) of the men in the round; (8) the ladies into the middle – similarly. (JIRÁSEK 1932: 165–6)

These marionettes seem to dance in leaps and perform all their movements synchronised with a musical accompaniment (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 62).

An important category of variety puppets were Jugglers (*Žongléři*). Their early variant were circus acrobats (or Mandarins, or sometime Kašpars); later, especially after 1880, with the mass growth of the Czech Sokol Association (*Česká obec sokolská*), they were costumed as Sokol gymnasts (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: annexe 77). One of the most widespread variants of this genus was the Juggler with a rod or a dumbbell. The





**Fig. 14:** An acrobat with a chair. A variety puppet from the inventory of the collection of Antonín Kopecký (1856–1920), the great grandson of the legendary Matěj Kopecký, 19<sup>th</sup> century. 40cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

Juggler would often throw it up in the air and catch it, lay down on the floor with it, place it on his feet and lift it again. Similar was the function of the Juggler with a cylinder or a Juggler with a chair. A juggler with one sphere had not only the usual control strings and hook, but also an additional rod hook. The relatively heavy wooden sphere with an opening in the middle had two strings passing through it, which were connected to the hands and attached to the head. The ball thus leapt up and down, along the string, before coming back into the puppet's hand (JIRÁSEK 1932: 165–6). Sometimes the sphere was replaced with a juggling club (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 29). Another variant was the more complex Juggler with two spheres whose controlling strings for the balls were



**Fig. 15:** An acrobat with a cylinder. A variety puppet from the inventory of the collection of Antonín Kopecký (1856–1920), the great grandson of the legendary Matěj Kopecký, 19<sup>th</sup> century. 40cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

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attached to the opposite sides of the hook; the balls were alternately thrown up into the air, and while the strings were crossed, it created the illusion of the balls passing from one hand to another. Other variants had a sphere on the head or on the tip of the lifted foot. The Juggler with an umbrella was generally of an Oriental race – since this trick was performed with a Chinese (or Japanese) umbrella. The umbrella was made of metal plate and a tube to make it heavy enough and it was multi-coloured. Apart from the usual strings, the marionette also had strings through the rod of the umbrella attached to different parts of the body. Thanks to these rods, the umbrella could pass slowly from one place to another but it could also be juggled with the puppet standing, skipping or lying down on its back (JIRÁSEK 1932: 171). With all these juggling acrobats, everything depended on the mastery of the puppeteer, his imagination and skill in bringing these



**Fig. 16:** A juggler with a skittle, by an unknown maker. A variety marionette. 46cm.  
© Collections of Alena Vorlová.



**Fig. 17:** A trapeze artists, by an unknown maker. Bohemia, late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A variety marionette for travelling marionettists. 42cm. © Collections of the Theatre Department of the MZM, L 721.

puppet mechanisms surprisingly and illusionistically to life. The Acrobat on a Trapeze (*Akrobat na hrazdě*) was usually a circus figure, a Kašpárek (ŠVÁB 1921: 6) or an ape, only later it was a Sokol gymnast; the trapeze could be either loose or suspended and attached to the support board so that the strings did not get caught against the bar. The puppet was constructed with a view to attaining maximum freedom of movement; its head was attached only by a loop to allow not only spinning but also tilting (KOPŘIVA 1934b: 116–7). The legs had plummets (small moving weights) inside to make them heavier and more easily controllable. The tying of strings allowed a whole range of revolving routines with a trapeze (JIRÁSEK 1932: 173–4). Originating with the Flachs family, especially from Jan Flachs Jr., a series of acrobats and even apes on trapeze have



**Fig. 18:** Two acrobats. Variety puppets from the inventory of the collection of Antonín Kopecký (1856–1920), the great grandson of the legendary Matěj Kopecký, 19<sup>th</sup> century. 40cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

survived; these are controlled from below by means of strings concealed in the body of the trapeze (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 120).

The Two Acrobats (*Dva akrobati*) or Wrestlers (*Zápasníci*) were usually two similar men (often African in race) of a smaller size for an easier manipulation. The system of string allowed their coordinated movements: one of them lifted the other by the hands into a handstand and in this position the upper wrestler could do gymnastics or even do a headstand on the lower wrestler's head (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 119). Of a simple construction, yet theatrically effective, was the Unicycle Rider (*Jezdec na jednokolce*) with his feet firmly attached to pedals so that the spinning of the wheel animated the puppet's limbs.





Fig. 19: An ape on a trapeze, a variety marionette manipulated from below, belonging to the Flachs family. South Moravia, woodcarving. 19<sup>th</sup> century. 45cm.

Variety and acrobatic puppets were carved for the marionettists by a number of woodcarvers, from the oldest – such as the South Bohemian Mikoláš Sychrovský or Antonín Sucharda Sr. of Nová Paka – to the makers of the first half of the twentieth century, among whom was the outstanding Bohumil Veselý of Příbram (KNÍŽÁK 2005: 1058–9). Of outstanding quality are the late variety productions of Jindřich Srba; after his experience in collaborating with Jindřich Kopecký, he abandoned his original profession of painter and decorator during the Great Depression and, starting in 1934, he launched the career of a professional marionettist (KNÍŽÁK 2005: 853–4). He designed and made numerous original and ingenious types of variety puppets with unique mechanical solutions for the purpose of his specially equipped theatre. A collection of his puppets is in the possession of the Vorel family: an Invalid on Crutches who turns into a silver airship (*Invalida s berlemi, který se promění ve stříbrnou vzducholod*), a King



Fig. 20a+b: The King-Whale, made by Jindřich Srba for the puppetry family of Janeček, the 1920s, Bohemia. Marionette, 70cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

Turning Into a Whale (*Král, jenž se proměňuje ve velrybu*), a Pike that can devour all the smaller fish (*Štika, která dokáže pozřít všechny menší ryby*). Several of the variety puppets used by the Dubský family may be of his making; they are now deposited in the Theatre Department of the National Museum in Prague – such as the Camel Turning Into an Automobile (*Velbloud mění se v automobil*) (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 295). A unique document of the variety puppet production practices, held by the Vorel family, is an advertisement leaflet advertising 'Kopecký's puppet variety show – What puppets can do' (*Kopeckého loutkové varieté – Co loutky dovedou*), painted on a roll-backdrop canvas with a naïve drawing of a Dancer, a Gymnast on a trapeze, a Juggler, a Contortionist and an Acrobat with a chair.

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## Animal Puppets of Travelling Folk Marionettists

Only a few types of animal puppet of traditional folk marionettists in the Czech lands were characteristic of the ambivalence between variety puppet types and the dramatic types used in regular puppet plays. The realm of animal types, so richly populated in oriental puppet cultures, had just one representative in the Czech lands – the Hob-





Fig. 21: The Horse, by Micoláš Sychrovský, Mirovice, the 1850s–1860s.  
© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

byhorse (*Koník*), also known as *Šimlíček* or *Šimlička*, *Valášek* or *Havlášek*; this animal belonged to the stage clown Kašpárek (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 16, 45). Technologically, the *Koník* marionette was essentially simple: ‘The neck is inset with a dowel and the head attached to it in a similar fashion. The legs are usually inset into the body. The forelegs are articulated at the knees. Some of the horses have mobile lower jaws’ (JIRÁSEK 1932: 149).

The puppet was manipulated by several strings (head, jaw, neck, trunk, rump) with a plate hook. Kašpárek’s Hobbyhorse often had a richly carved mane and a tail made from genuine horse hair; it transformed from an acrobatic type into a dramatic one with the rise of modern amateur puppetry before the end of the nineteenth century – that is at the time when a new original repertoire for audiences at family and club puppet theatres was required. Here Kašpárek and his Horse gained immense popularity.



Fig. 22: The Dragon, a puppet for a club theatre, by an unknown maker, North Moravia, the 1920s, woodcarving. 90cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

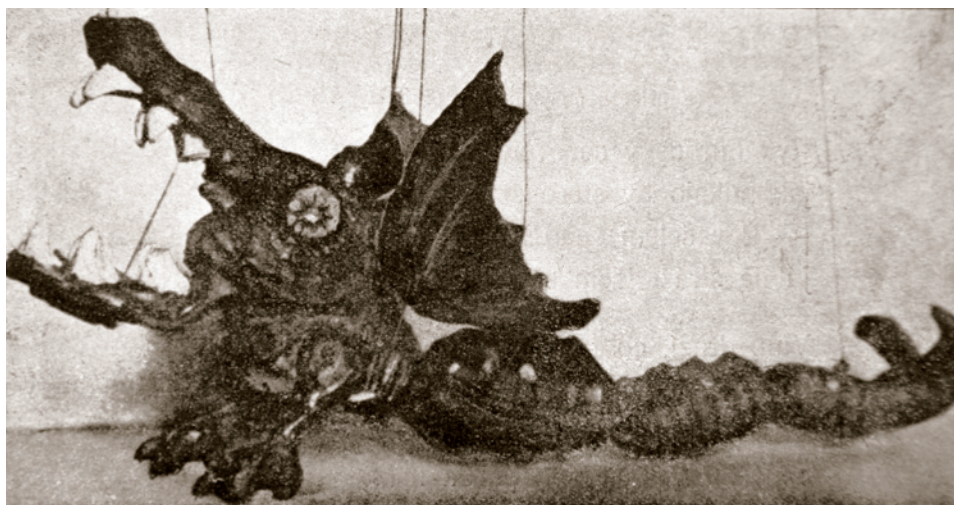


Fig. 23: The Dragon, for the series of *Aleš's Puppets*, by Karel Koblre, Beroun – Prague, the 1920s. *Loutkář 11* (1924–1925): 7–9: 137.







Fig. 25: Scenes from *Faust*. The Sea Fowl (*Morská drůbež*) of the marionettist Lagron, ca.1910. Jindřich Veselý. *Johan doktor Faust starých českých loutkářův (lidopisná studie)*. Prague, 1911: 62.



Fig. 26: Scenes from *Faust*. Faust playing at skittles, of the marionettist Karel Kopecký, ca.1910. Jindřich Veselý. *Johan doktor Faust starých českých loutkářův (lidopisná studie)*. Prague, 1911: 63.

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181). The second type was a dragon resembling a large newt, with its entire body divided into a series of chamfered blocks (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 44, 46). Of a similar construction, were the leg-less flexible Snakes (*Hadi*) and Catfish (*Sumci*). Puppets of dragons were later equipped with light bulbs in their eye sockets and in their mouths to make their expression on the dim-lit stage even more suggestive. Especially later, in the 1920s, many creators competed in making constructional specialties that would turn dragons into genuine stage monsters – such as the famous Kopenc’s Dragon (*Kopencův drak*) at The Puppet Theatre of Artistic Education (*Loutkové divadlo umělecké výchovy*) in Prague-Vinohrady (KOPENEC 1927: 179–81).

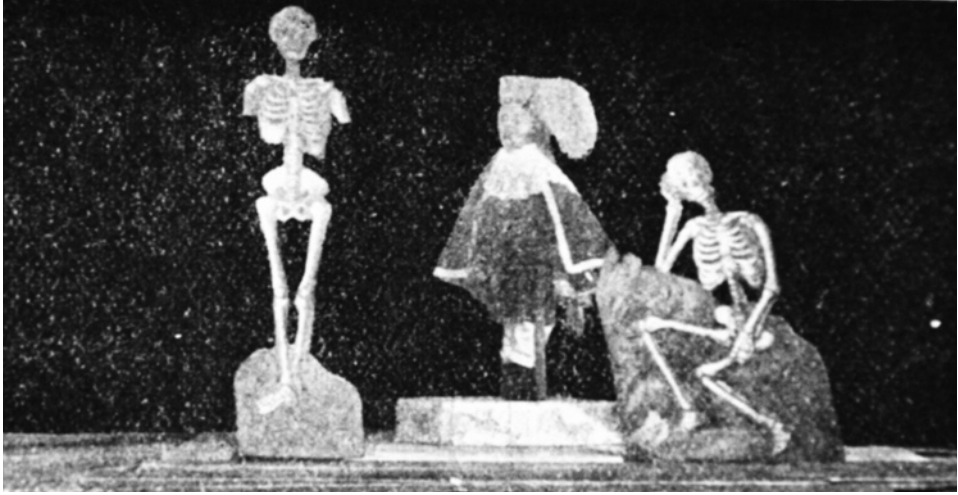


Fig. 27: Two skeletons appear to Faust. Jindřich Veselý. *Zvláštnosti Fausta loutkáře Dubského* (The specialties of the marionettist Dubský's Faust). *Český loutkář* 1 (1912): 5: 157.

## Travelling Folk Marionettists' Special Puppets for the Dramatic Repertoire

When in 1911, the young puppet theatre historian Jindřich Veselý published his ethnographic dissertation *Johan Doktor Faust of the Old Czech Marionettists* (*Johan doktor Faust starých českých loutkářův*; VESELÝ 1911), which compared the manuscripts of the families of Lagron, Maizner, Kočka or the more recent versions of Pek or the Knight Čeněk Celestýn of Freinfeld, he managed to accompany it with twenty photographic illustrations that include contemporary marionettist posters, a gallery of puppet devils and especially the a selection of 'scenes from *Faust*' of the folk marionettists Antonín Lagron, Karel Kopecký, Karel Novák and Josef Pek. It was namely the setups for Lagron's 'Sea Fowl' (*Morská drůbež*), Kopecký's 'Faust playing at skittles', Pek's 'Sea Fowl' or Karel Novák's 'Taking the Torn-Asunder Faust into Hell' (*Odnesení roztrhaného Fausta do pekla*) that testify to the mass usage of special puppet effects in the standard repertoire (VESELÝ 1911: 62–3, 65, 95).

Lagron's, Pek's and Kopecký's manuscript versions describe the Sea Fowl scene of *Faust*, presenting the *mermundr* or *velmundr* (as the marionettists called sea monsters) during a storm:

Mermaids, monsters, water sprites swimming on the sea; fishes flying through the air; various spirits appearing etc., all to the sound of music and storm. [Or:] A storm on the sea; water, animals swimming, a mermaid and a merman, serpents, buffaloes, a rhinoceros, a shark, a bull and other sea beasts, when they passed, Faust comes, a sphere in hand, dropping it down. (VESELÝ 1911: 62)

In this case, these were special planary, generally painted figures of a frightening kind, representing miscellaneous monsters made of cardboard – only exceptionally carved (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 28); these would generally emerge onstage from the animated surge. Such illusionistic scenery was usually the pride of marionettists and they like to highlight it on their publicity flyers.

Tomáš Dubský, for instance, advertised:

‘A tempest on the sea with great hailstorm, diverse sea and earth beasts are to be seen and a Faust playing at skittles on the sea.’

František Dubský was promising:

‘A Bengal fire and a hellish din at which large earth and sea monsters shall be presented to the honourable audience like alive.’

Karel Kopecký claimed that:

‘Various beasts shall be presented, including – a wild carp!’

(VESELÝ 1911: 62)

Czech marionette collections preserve a few sets of these extraordinary planary puppets of the ‘Sea Fowl’. The Puppetry Museum Chrudim possesses the planary puppets originally belonging to Jindřich Veselý himself (DUBSKÁ 2012: 16, 22–3). The West Bohemian Museum – Ethnographic Museum of the Pilsen Region (The *Západočeské muzeum – Národopisné muzeum Plzeňska*) owns an outstanding collection of Faustian planary puppets originating with the central Bohemian marionettist Jan Nepomuk Laštovka and later with Karel Novák of Pilsen (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: annexe 80); the Moravian Museum (*Moravské zemské muzeum*, or MZM) has acquired a set of similar puppets from the legacy of František Pflieger of Brušperk (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 117).

The repercussions of these Faust scenes lasted until the Great War when the renowned *Stage Sets by Czech Artists (Dekorace českých umělců)* for family toy theatres series was created. After their first series of 1913, the painter and illustrator Adolf Kašpar created the ‘Sea Fowl from *Faust*’ on one of the lithograph folios (BLECHA 2009: 34–50). As late as 1920, Antonín Münzberg’s Prague-based puppetry company offered in its catalogue a set of another eight sea monster that were to complement Kašpar’s stage designs (MÜNZBERG 1920).

It has to be added that even the common types of carved marionettes are relatively often equipped with mechanical and illusionistic features, namely their heads. These were most commonly the opening and clapping mouths, known as ‘clappers’ (*klapačky*) (JIRÁSEK 1932: 113–4), that were usually part of the Kašpárek marionettes (DUBSKÁ 2012: 56), as well as very often in the frightening devil figures (sometimes even having avian beaks), the foulmouthed peasants Škrholas, or the ghastly Skeletons. Sometimes marionettes’ faces could be animated by mobile eyes; marionettes could have a mechanism that allowed them, thanks to a hollow hook, to smoke a ‘Virginia cigar’ (*veržinka*) or even a pipe (*fajfka*). Such elementary mechanical principles were known essentially





**Fig. 28:** The goat-devil with a clapping beak, a marionette for travelling marionettists by Antonín Sucharda Jr. Nová Paka, end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Woodcarving. 77cm.  
© Collections of Alena Vorlová.



**Fig. 29:** The Water Sprit (*Vodník*); a marionette for club theatres or travelling marionettists, allegedly by Adolf Kopp, Podlesí u Příbrami. Inspired by the *Vodník* types of Alois Šroif, the 1920s. 73cm.  
© Collections of the Theatre Department of the MZM Brno, L 1000.

by all the more accomplished carvers of the time. However, the most ingenious mechanisms concealed in the marionette heads were from the Suchard workshop of Nová Paka (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 26–38) or some of the older puppets from the Flachs family settled in Vlásenice (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 50–1).

Naturally, all these puppet typologies and mechanical technologies did not originate with the Czech marionettists. The phenomenon of planary puppet had been known in Asia for thousands of years, and the other acrobatic types and mechanical tricks of the larger marionettes had been spread, since Baroque times, not only in the whole of central Europe (McCORMICK 2005, 2009, 2011) but also, of course, on the British Isles – as



Fig. 30: The Germs (*bacily*), marionettes for Karel Driml's play *The Germ-Boy* (*Bacilínek*) after Karel Štapfer's design, by an unknown maker. Bohemia, the 1920s–1930s. Wood and textile. 22–23cm. © Collections of the MZM Brno.

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is testified by the collection of one of the last Victorian puppet theatre makers Ambros Tiller, deposited at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (McCORMICK 2004: 27–9). This, however, does not change the fact that in the Czech lands these puppets acquired a range of specific features, not only in their visual styles and technologies but also in their performative and dramatic deployment.

## Changes in Special Puppets in Family and Club Theatres of the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century

With the end of the nineteenth century, the interest in the traditional professional folk marionettists in the Czech lands was inadvertently shifting toward puppetry amateurs. They came with private efforts to set up home-based intellectual or family theatres – such were the initiatives of personalities like the families of Mánes, Scheiner or Frič, who



Fig. 31: Long, Wide and Sharp-Eyes (*Dlouhý, Široký a Bystrozraký*), by Jan Král, the 1920s. *Loutkář 11* (1924–1925): 2: 43.

were an avant-garde of sorts of the later tradition of family toy theatres. On the other hand, there were efforts to establish ‘amateur’ theatres out of leisure – and those were of varying quality and orientation. School-based companies were among the earliest such ensembles; a conducive environment for puppet theatre was created with the foundation of the Czech Sokol Association (*Česká obec sokolská*) in 1862, later (from 1897) to be joined in emulation by the Workers’ Gymnastic Union (*Dělnická tělocvičná jednota*) and finally the Catholic ‘Orel’ (DUBSKÁ 2011: 151–94). Most historians give the name Puppetry Renaissance to the era of new impulses and initiatives in puppet theatre between the start of the new century and the end of the Great War (MALÍK 1948: 11). Gradually, during this phase, the influx into puppet theatre of new educated personalities turned the conception of puppet theatre into an ‘artistic’ endeavour. The change was brought about in three spheres: family toy theatre, club puppet theatres, and the theatre of the so-called programmatically ‘artistic stages’ – with the number of family and club theatres enjoying incredible growth, particularly after the Great War. Historians refer to this

new phase as the ‘amateur era of puppet theatre’; it lasted until World War II. The era is also known as the time of ‘visual artists’ hegemony’ – since it was mainly the educated visual artists who initiated the renewed interest in puppets. However, calling it an ‘amateur era’ refers to the legal and production status of contemporary puppet theatre (and that only in retrospect, from the vantage point of the post-WWII professionalisation of puppetry). Many of the interwar artists aimed at a serious artistic programming in their puppetry activities, and succeeded in achieving excellent results. Their ‘amateur’ status merely points to the fact that puppet theatre was not their exclusive source of living, or their trade (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 97–8). The inter-war period was also a time when the influence of outstanding German and Austrian theatre companies inspired Czech theatre visual artists to experiment with various types of puppet theatre – from hand-puppets, through shadow theatre to new technical designs for marionettes. Simultaneously, puppet repertoire was changing, aiming initially towards child audiences; this focus brought to the visual dimension of puppet shows not only many new types and characters, but also rich opportunities for scenographic puppetry effects.

A typical example of the changed puppetry typology is the series of the first Czech modelled puppets for toy theatres (in families and clubs) – the legendary ‘Aleš’s Puppets’. These were produced from 1912 and contained, on the one hand, types taken over from travelling marionettists, including the extremely expressively stylised Water Spirits and the Dragon for *Faust*; on the other hand, they also contained a number of new fairy tale types – the Wizard (*Čaroděj*), the Witch (*Čarodějnice*), the Water Sprite (*Vodník* or *Hastrman*), the Hercules or the Rubezahl (the Mountain Spirit *Krakonoš*) (MÜNZBERG 1915). Among those that could be grouped with the category of new special puppets are especially the Czech fairy tale characters Long, Wide and Sharp-Eyes (*Dlouhý, Široký a Bystrozraký*) from the eponymous fairy tale collected and published by Karel Jaromír Erben in his 1865 collection *A Hundred Slavic Folk Tales and Legends in the Original Dialects (Sto prstonárodních pohádek a pověstí slovanských v nářečích původních)* (ERBEN 1865). While Sharp-Eyes was characterised basically only with his emphasised eyes, Long and Wide gave their makers opportunities for various mechanical constructions (JIRÁSEK 1932: 162–3). So to lengthen the body, the Long of Jan Král’s puppetry firm made use of a system of two inset cylinders that allowed the figure to extend its height to twice its size (the *Dlouhý, Široký a Bystrozraký* figures of 1924). However, other constructions were also in use, stemming from the construction of the *Dupák* figure. The static figure of Wide in extending his girth generally made use of the inflatable rubber bladder of a football, which was concealed in the puppet’s body under a specially made costume; the bladder was inflated by the puppeteer through a rubber tube (JIRÁSEK 1932: 163–4). The costumes for these puppet types were also standardised by the designs and illustrations made by Artuš Scheiner and Josef Wenig.

An example of a truly modern special puppet (one unconnected with folk tales or European literature) was *Bacilínek* (The Germ-Boy), a little marionette for a 1922 early





Fig. 32: The Water Sprite (*Vodník*) and the Devil, by Alois Schroif. *Loutkář* 7 (9) (1922–1923): 2–3: front cover.



Fig. 33: The Ghost and the Witch, marionette heads, by Alois Šroif. Prague, the 1920s. Woodcarving. 11 and 12cm. © Collections of Alena Vorlová.



**Fig. 34:** The Water Spirits, Aleš puppets, an unattributed design. Prague after 1912, produced by A. Münzberg. Woodcarving, 25cm.

© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

applied drama medical puppet play by the physician Karel Driml that informed children of the principles of tuberculosis prevention (ŠTAPFER 1922: 87). Made out of a tube, completed with little twig sticks, flat feet and woollen hair in fiery red colour, it was originally designed by the diligent scenographer Karel Štapfer (BLECHA 2013: 18). Later Modernist designs that were morphologically also making use of metal springs were made by the progressive puppeteer Jan Malík (MALÍK 1934: 110–1). Another of the plays by the same author, *King Asinus* (*Král Asinus* 1927), involving a grotesque ruler



Fig. 35: The Rooster, a marionette for family or club theatre, produced by the workshops of the Modrý a Žanda company, Prague around 1920. Woodcarving. 20cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirášek.



Fig. 36: The Fly, a marionette for club theatre, by an unknown maker, the Rosice area, South Moravia, after 1930. Wood and leather. 30cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirášek.



Fig. 37: Speckles the Ball (*Míček Flíček*), by an unknown maker. East Bohemia, the late 1930s. A marionette for Jan Malík's eponymous play, for an unattributed club theatre. Polychromed woodcarving. 23cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

with donkey ears, gave a chance for the creation of a marionette of a clownish king with long ears, a clapping mouth and rolling eyes.

Family and club toy theatres often deployed various types of fully carved Devils and Water Sprites of ingenious constructions (such as those by Alois Schroif and Josef Chochol) or Spirits and Bugbears. These fairy tale creatures commonly had only a head attached to a wooden block and arms on wires. The streaming costume or a translucent chiffon cloth in swift movements achieved the desirable effect (JIRÁSEK 1932: 156–7). Of similar popularity were Animals (*Zvířátka*) that became standard types of the puppet repertory during the 1920s. Contemporary puppetry firms – especially Antonín Münzberg, Jan Král and Modrý and Žanda – offered in their catalogues a whole range of carved or turned puppets of various and imaginative constructions: apart from the obligatory Dragons and Hobbyhorses, such collections also included wolves, dogs, bears, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, as well as wild deer, owls, storks, swans (JIRÁSEK 1932: 147). There were also mechanically ingenious frogs (VYŠEHRADSKÝ 1937: 3–5). As late as the 1940s, Antonín Münzberg with his in-house artist Eduard Christian, aiming to satisfy the great call for animal puppets and the tastes of many producers of family



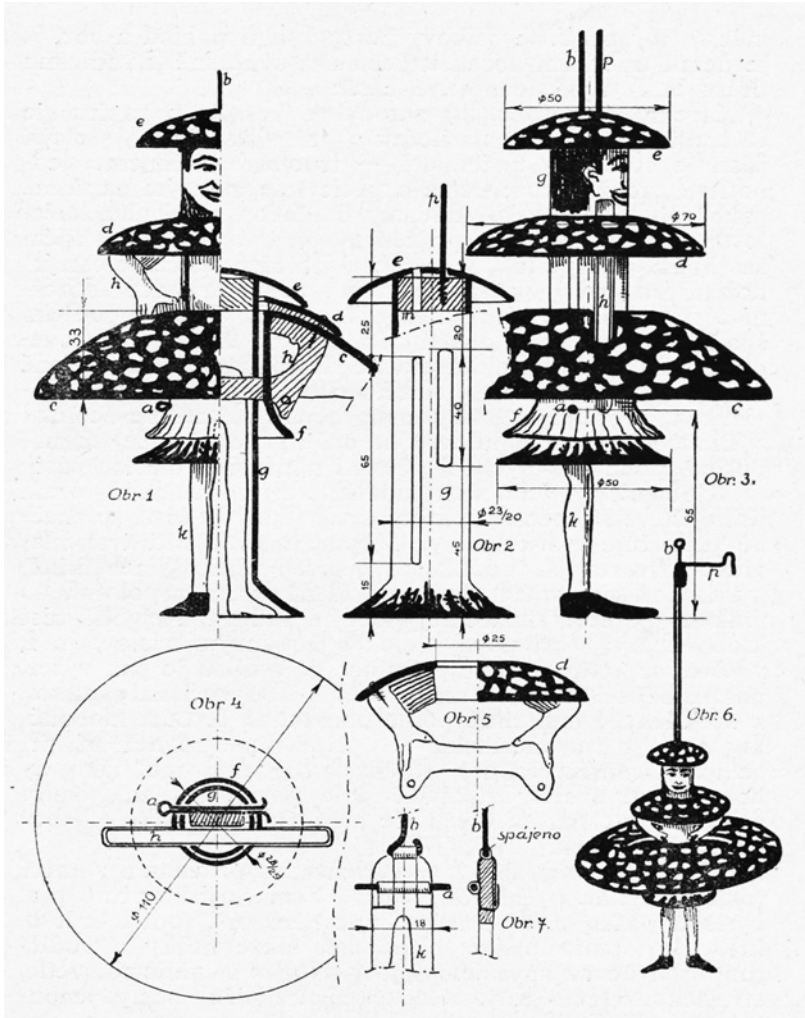


Fig. 38: The Toadstools (*Muchomůrky*), the technology of the dancing toadstools, by Oskar Nezbeda. *Naše loutky* (Prague) 12 (1937): 6: 71.

toy theatres, published lithographs of Animal Models (*Předlohy zvířátek*) for the home making of planary animal puppets (produced by Münzberg, 1940s). Another element of this trend were dancing objects, such as Dancing Toadstools (*Tančící muchomůrky*; NEZBEDA 1937: 70–3), stones or pies (SUCHARDOVÁ 1959: 43) or revived flowers and clouds. These puppet props were usually equipped with a hidden mechanism of little legs inside the body that could be easily extracted and the object could start to dance mysteriously. Dancing curd, or cheesecake type pies were often visually designed so that raisins and almonds on the cheese top formed a face.

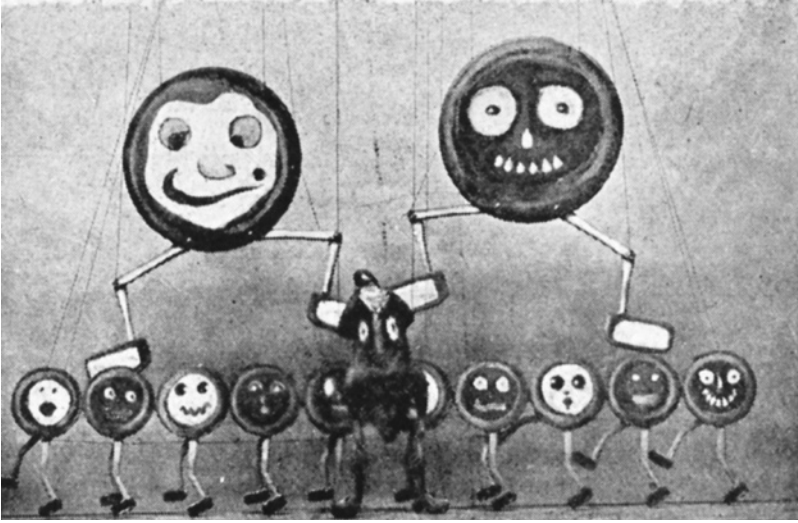


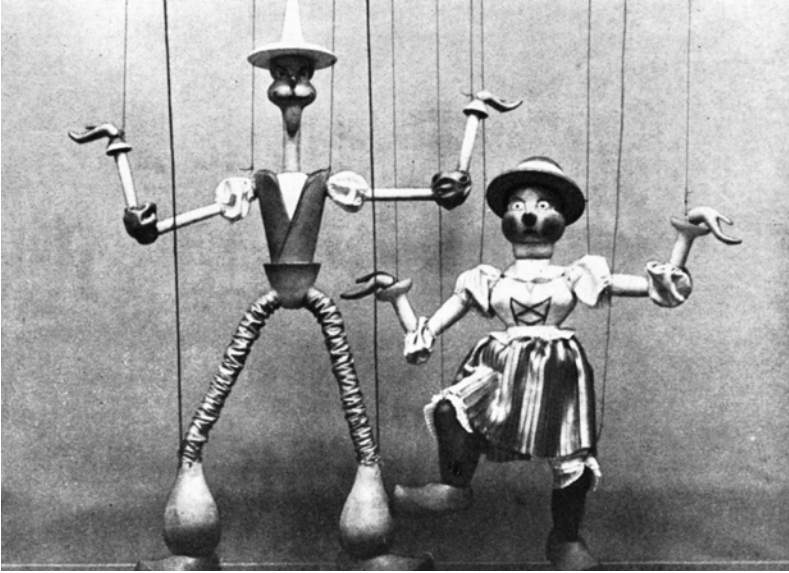
Fig. 39: The Dancing Pies, for the play *About Honza (O Honzovi)*, created by Vojtěch Sucharda and Anna Suchardová-Brichová. Říše loutek Theatre, 1930. *Československý loutkář* 9 (1959): 2: 43.

Czech puppeteers of the 1920s were very well informed of the divers technologies of puppet making, of the hook types, materials, tricks as well as special and variety puppets – principally thanks to the journal *Loutkář*, which had among its authors the leading Czech puppet scenographers and technological innovators of the time (such as František Jirásek, Josef Kopenec, Vít Skála, Vojtěch Sucharda and later Jan Malík). Apart from the co-authored publication *The Puppetry Reader (Loutkářská čítanka)* of 1925 (see also JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 290), other indispensable handbooks for family and club toy theatres were the publications by the Prague-based teacher and puppetry amateur František Jirásek, namely his book *The Unveiled Mysteries of Puppets, (Odhalená tajemství loutek, 1932)* – a volume that records with meticulous care widespread puppetry technologies from the nineteenth-century to contemporary Modernist innovations (JIRÁSEK 1932).

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## Variety and Acrobatic Puppets of Artistic Stages During the 1920s and 1930s

A truly unprecedented boom of creative energies in Czech puppet theatre came after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. At the time, puppets were considered a cultural medium that had a charged national character; they accordingly became objects of admiration, respect as well as of experimentation by many significant Czech artists. In the 1920s the leading force of this development were the ‘artistic puppet theatres’ that defined themselves in opposition to



**Fig. 40:** The Dupl and the Dupla, Vojtěch Sucharda's puppets (Prague, 9 January 1931), scenography for Anna Suchardová-Brichová's *Cinderella* (*Popelka*). Říše loutek Theatre. In Jan Malík. *Loutkářství v Československu* (1948): 42.

other types of puppet entertainment by the programmatic quality of all components in their productions. The earliest was The Puppet Theatre of Artistic Education (*Loutkové divadlo umělecké výchovy*), which was established in Prague-Vinohrady as early as 1913. It was soon joined by others. In 1918, Liběna Odstrčilová, an actress at the National Theatre, established The Artistic Puppet Stage (*Umělecká loutková scéna*), a directory associating leading personalities interested in puppet theatre. In 1920, Vojtěch and Anna Sucharda's Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*) theatre started to operate in Prague, focusing mainly on child audiences. In 1917, the visual artist Josef Skupa was invited to collaborate with the Pilsen-based Marionette Theatre of the Holiday Resorts (*Loutkové divadlo Feriálních osad*), also known as Holiday Camp Theatre; Skupa was, soon to become the leading figure of the company. Of exceptional quality was also the activity of the Sokol Puppet Theatre in Liberec (*Loutkové divadlo Sokola v Liberci*) in the late 1920s, which found inspiration in the large stages and in Josef Skupa and orientated themselves towards a cabaret repertoire for adult spectators (DUBSKÁ 2004: 167–206). The sudden surge of artistic puppet theatres was, on the one hand, influenced by the contemporary rapid developments in live actors' theatre and in cabaret, and on the other by the interest of the epoch in puppetry projects abroad – firstly the closest German ensembles; but, later, by means of established contacts between Czech puppet theatres and significant puppeteers from around the world, including Georg Deininger of Stuttgart, Richard Teschner of Vienna, Alfred Altherr of Zurich, Theodor Nastasi of Romania, Harro Seigel

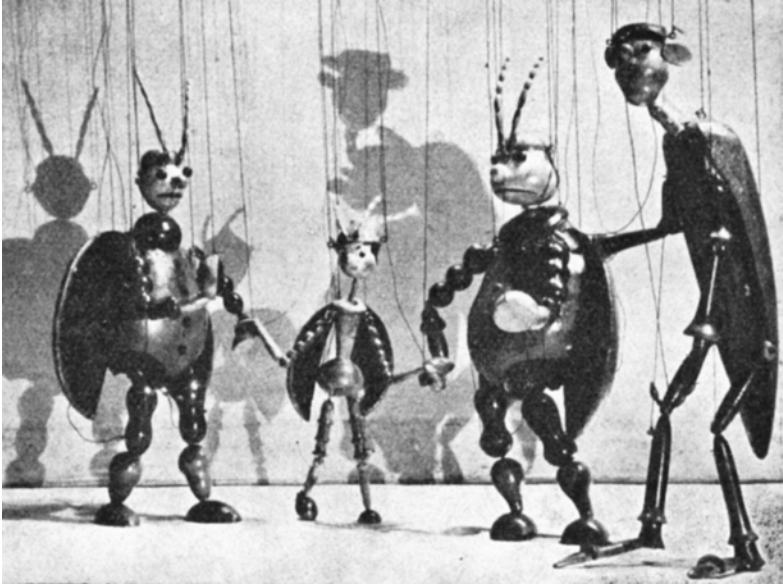


Fig. 41: Midsummer Beetles (*Svatojánské broučci*), Vojtěch Sucharda's wood-turned puppets for the eponymous play. LD Říše loutek Theatre, Prague 1938. *Loutkář* 25 (1938–1939): 1: 3.

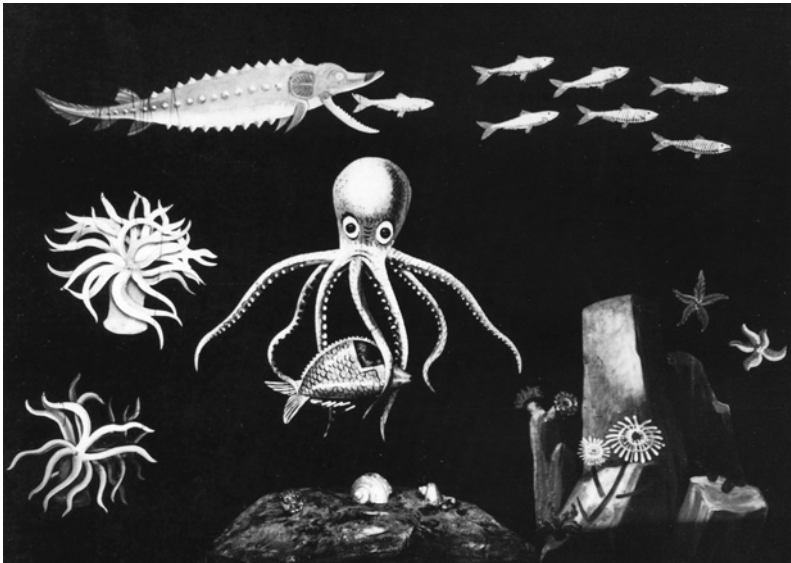


Fig. 42: Vladimír Šmejkal, Josef Staněk, *Heroes of our Time (Hrdinové naší doby)*.  
Scenography by Anna Suchardová-Brichová, Vojtěch Sucharda. Říše loutek Theatre, Prague 1937.

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Fig. 43: Čumrhanzl, a cabaret puppet by Jaroslav Kopenec. *Loučkář* 12 (1925): 1: 13.

of Berlin, Sergei Vladimirovich Obraztsov of Moscow and Waldo Lanchester of Britain (JIRÁSKOVÁ 2012: 98–112). For this generation of puppet scenographers it is symptomatic that they were mostly academically educated visual artists who naturally cared for the quality of visual and construction elements, of both puppets and stage environments. Alongside the new repertoire these designers initiated a revolution in the morphology of the puppets, including new ways of manipulation, and a revolution in scenography and stage technologies. Naturally, each of these creators had their signature styles.

A puppet theatre that bridged tradition and Modernism was the Realm of Puppets (*V říši loutek*) company with Vojtěch Sucharda (1884–1968) and his wife Anna Suchardová-Brichová (1883–1944) as their leading personalities. Vojtěch Sucharda came from the renowned family of Nová Paka; he carved puppets and stage properties, as well as backcloth frames; polychrome painting of the puppets was undertaken and stage sets and costumes were designed and made by his wife. Both of these artists remained faithful to the notion that puppets substituted for live actors; many puppets were manipulated traditionally on long wires; but their cultivation and stylisation far exceeded the usual standards. During their long careers Sucharda and Suchardová-Brichová

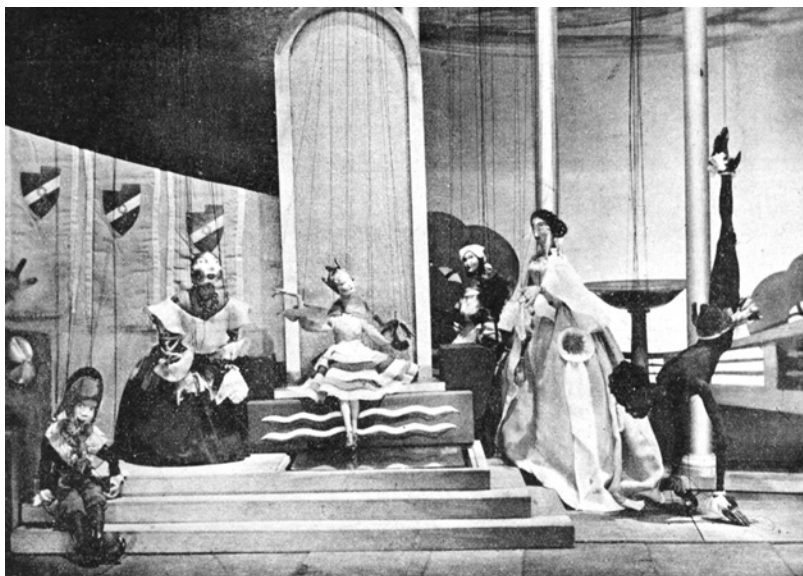


Fig. 44: Bohumil Buděšínský, *The Fairy Tale Law* (*Pohádkový zákon*). Prague 1932. Scenography for Karel Mašek's play, directed by Erik Kolár. *Loutkář* 29 (1932): 4: 67.

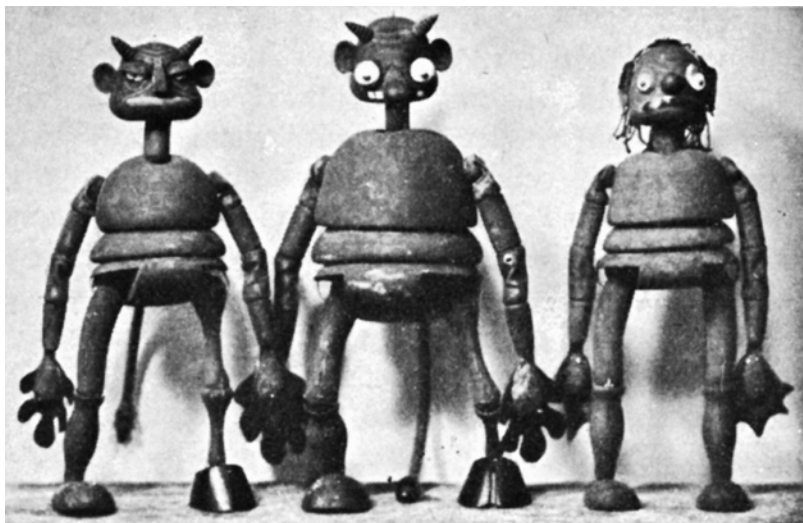


Fig. 45: Wood-turned puppets, designed by Jan Malík, produced by A. Plešner, Týn nad Vltavou, 1936. 50–55cm. *Loutkář* 22 (1935–1936): 8: 119.

created a number of various special puppets. Their opening production of *Long, Wide and Sharp-Eyes* (1920), dramatising Erben's fairy tale, presented puppets of the protagonists in an extraordinarily Secession style (DUBSKÁ 1997: 22–62). Although most of this company's puppets were essentially conservative – even referring back to the Nová Paka woodcarving tradition in their cursory-glance Baroque-like features and carving styles, and the apparent efforts at emphasised character achieved through humour, or a caricature-style exaggeration in facial physiognomy – the situation was very different with their puppets of fantastical characters. These types brought opportunities for a high level of stylisation and new movement possibilities, as well as for symbolic levels of meaning (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 235–8). Among the first puppets to break away from the tradition were the extensible Cubist/Futurist and tersely stylised Moon People (*Měsíčané*) from the play *How Kašpárek Got to the Moon* (*Jak se dostal Kašpárek na Měsíc*, 1922). Further progressive carved types were the stylised puppets of cabaret and revue types, inspired by contemporary avant-garde movements. One of the earliest were *Náci* from Bedřich Wunderlich's play *Who is Náci* (*Kdo je Náci?*, 1927), the dancing couple Dupl and Dupla from the 1931 fairy tale *Cinderella* (*O Popelce*) or the jesters Flik and Flok of 1932. A distinctive inspiration drawn from the repertoire of the Liberated Theatre (*Osvobozené divadlo*) came in Miloš Pilát's revues *?W.H.O.?* (*?K.D.O.?*, 1931) and *Company Unlimited* (*Společnost s ručením neomezeným*, 1932) in both productions' central clown couple of Oktavián and Dalimil; with them appeared Kašpárek in a circus arena besides various animals and objects.

In 1929 Vladimír Šmejkal (1902–1957) joined the Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*) Company and immediately became one of the most progressive creators of the ensemble. His inspiration in the work of the contemporary Czech avant-garde figure, E. F. Burian are visible in his writing and stage directions. As the theatre's historian Linda Mašátová writes, besides dramatisations of classical or original fairy tales, the core of his work were:

short playlets and scenes combined into cabaret series performed as part of a New Year's Eve programme – *Kašpárek's Merry New Year's Eve* (*Veselý Kašpárkův Silvestr*), *Kašpárek's Journey to Laughter* (*Kašpárkovo putování za smíchem*), *Kašpárek's Fancy Dress Ball* (*Kašpárkův maškarní ples*), *Kašpárek's New Year's Eve* (*Kašpárkův Silvestr*) [...]. The core of the sketches is usually a petty anecdote developed *ad absurdum* – *Moon People on a Swing* (*Měsíčané na houpačce*), *The Little Rococo Opera* (*Malá rokoková opera*) – a circus number or a fairground attraction – the double-act of Flik and Flok throwing knives, a female circus rider, a bear balancing on a large sphere – or an action based on the puppet's specific possibilities that function in the given situation with an unexpected effect – an old woman with an old man creating patterns with piece of old cloth, a caricature of singing poultry, a dancing, bodiless dancer. In performing these short pieces, Šmejkal showed great courage in experimenting and implementing ever-new practices.

He worked with personified objects, animals, parts of the human body (using human hands or faces for acting), and constructed ingenious contraptions that enhanced puppet action (such as stunts on a motorcycle) [...]. (MAŠÁTOVÁ 2006: 39)

A testimony to these trends is the extraordinary Dadaist marionette figure deposited in the Theatre Department of the National Museum in Prague; it is made of stylised pill boxes and was designed for Šmejkal's eventually unrealised Surrealist play *The Sanatorium of the Trickster Isomat* (*Ozdravovna šprýmaře Isomata*) (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 383).

A performance specialty of the Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*) company were their planary puppets, excelling in their unique visual realisation. They were used in several productions, first in the play *The King of the Himalayas* (*Vládce Himalájí*, 1934), in which they represented contemporary technical achievements.

The airship on which the action took place became a legend. The scene in which the airship collides with an aircraft has been captured by documentarists for the *Czechoslovak Film Newsletter*. Besides the planary puppets the play also deployed models of aircrafts and small *maquettes* of parachutists. (MAŠÁTOVÁ 2006: 49)

Solid cardboard or plywood planary puppets on a dark background had various movable parts. They were manipulated from above, suspended on a variously long strings; the illusion of plasticity was achieved by means of lighting. The culmination of this technological trend was the production of Vladimír Šmejkal and Josef Staněk's 1937 play *The Heroes of Our Times* (*Hrdinové naší doby*) with the subtitle 'The Adventure of Two Boy Scouts from Saturday to Sunday in Thirteen Scenes' (*Dobrodružství dvou skautíků ze soboty na neděli o třinácti obrazech*). In their dream, the boys joined Kašpárek on an adventurous journey in the name of science and progress, visiting outer space, deep sea, Japan and its underground jail. They met the Milky Way, the Big Dipper, Saturn, the Sea Fowl... all of which by means of exceptional planary puppets, constructed in a Poetist<sup>2</sup> aesthetic.

The Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*) company also hold the prime position for a Czech company using wood-turned puppets on larger stages. In the fairy tale *Kašpárek and the Witch* (*Kašpárek a čarodějnice*, 1922), the meticulous mechanisms of wood-turned

2 Poetism was an important Czech avant-garde school of the 1920s and 1930s. It had its roots in a Czech organisation called *Devětsil* (founded in 1920), which attempted to fuse Cubo-Futurism and Dadaism on the one hand, with Constructivism on the other. The Poetists embraced all new art as a supreme act of human expression and deliberately evoked the Classical Greek term ποιησις (*poiesis*), which is etymologically derived from the verb ποιέω ('to make'), in order to demonstrate that, at the root of the modern word 'poetry', was first a verb that describes all actions that transform and continue the world. At first, Poetism was a strong rival to Surrealism, but the movements may be seen to have fused in a Czech context by the early 1930s. One of the greatest theorists and exponents of the movement was Karel Teige (1900–1951); practitioners included the theatre directors E. F. Burian, Jindřich Honzl and Jiří Frejka, and theatre designer František Muzika.





Fig. 46: František Jirášek unveils the mysteries of the puppets. *Loutkář* 20 (1933–1934): 4: 70.

puppets of an insect music band played on realistic miniatures of musical instruments, which led to a wave of popularity of these heroes on the Czech puppet stage. Their morphology and stylisation were inspired by the home-grown puppetry experiments of Ladislav Sutnar or Josef Jelinek (KOLEKTIV 2004b, JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 276) as well as by the avant-garde puppetry and scenographic advances of the *Bauhaus* (CONZEN 2015; BERGDOLL 2009). A return to wood-turned puppets in the 1930s was the Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*) dramatisation of Jan Karafiát's *Beetles* (*Broučci*, 1938), in which the scenography was based on accurately executed wood-turned figures of the insect world set on a minimalistic stage. The insects' bodies were made of various geometrical shapes, joined by wires, coloured to match the fairy tale nature of the production. In 1942, Anna Suchardová-Brichová capitalised on the success of Karafiát's *Beetles* in her production of *The Cricket Violinist* (*Cvrček houslistou*); here the pattern of outsize



Fig. 47: The title page of František Jirásek's *Unveiled Mysteries of the Puppets* (*Odhalená tajemství loutek*). Prague: J. R. Vilímek, 1932.



**Fig. 48:** Variety puppets, a showcase of various variety types from the puppetry exhibition at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Workers' Olympiad, Prague 1934. *Loutkář* 21 (1935): 7: 11.



**Fig. 49:** The Dancer, a variety puppet. The Sokol Puppet Theatre Liberec.  
Catalogue *Marionnettes et guignols en Tchécoslovaquie*. Prague 1930: 14.



plants fittingly corresponded with Sucharda's wood-turned puppets – such as the rather hyperbolised militant Black Ants (BLECHA and JIRÁSEK 2008: 228–9).

The Theatre Department of the National Museum in Prague holds several unrealised designs by Anna Suchardová-Brichová; these include designs of puppet heads, a *Twelfth Night* (*Večer tříkrálový*) of 1925, figures for a *commedia dell'arte* or an avant-garde rendering of a robotic character. Her figures are particularly imbued with a Cubo-Expressionistic tension, combined with Art Deco design. The visual language of Suchardová-Brichová uses stylised geometric shapes and primary colours. The design for puppet heads show references to the visual style of the Liberated Theatre (*Osvobozené divadlo*) or even international inspirations, such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp (KURZ 2010). The culmination of Anna Suchardová-Brichová's Modernist efforts is perceived in the futuristic robotic figure made of wooden segments with a naked movement mechanism made of steel springs. These designs show her inspirations in the contemporary modern much more clearly than her realised scenographic work (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 170–3, 454).

Synchronous to the Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*), grotesque variety shows and wood-turned puppets appeared on other artistic puppet stages; for instance, in the work of the new generation of Prague-Vinohrady's Puppet Theatre of Artistic Education (*Loutkové divadlo Umělecké výchovy*) the initially highly cultivated Secession expression of the artists Ladislav Šaloun, Hanuš Folkman, Ota Bubeníček and Vít Skála gradually turned into a clear Modernist style. In 1925, year after Josef Kopenec (1882–1957) joined the company – originally as a stage technician – he not only organised the refurbishment of the theatre's stage construction into a modern system of manipulators' bridge, he also started collaborating in the making and construction of puppets. For instance, in the 1929 production of *Revolution in a Village* (*Revoluce na vsi*) he completed the consistently anthropomorphic concept of the puppets with genuine human hair. Unique are also the excellent live shoes and shoemaker's tools that he made for Charlotta Habersbergerová's play *Vašík's Decision, or What the Shoes Talked About* (*Vašíkovo rozhodnutí aneb Co si boty povídaly*, 1929). Other of his extant puppets, such as Rakataputa (National Museum Prague), a puppet designed for his own play *In the Realm of Wonders and Legends* (*V říši divů a bájí*), or the photographic documentation of another puppet, Čumrhanzl, of the 1920s, demonstrate his mastery in grotesque stylisation in cabaret-like figures, which can be seen in particular in his outstanding execution of exaggerated body parts, predominantly heads and hands. In the early 1930s he used the same style in introducing Pat Sullivan's and Otto Messmer's originally silent film animated cartoon *Felix the Cat* (*Kocour Felix*) to the stage of the Puppet Stage of Artistic Expression (*Loutková scéna Umělecké výchovy*) (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 144–9).

In 1930, the company presented a new stripped Modernist stage with exceptionally well stylised wood-turned and elongated puppets in fine polychrome style for Offenbach's *Song of Fortunio* (*Fortuniova píseň*); these figures were made by architect

Bohumil Buděšinský (1890–1945). Buděšinský next set designs, for Mašek's play *The Fairy Tale Law* (*Pohádkový zákon*), were an example of outstanding modern design developing the experiments of the 1920s. This play also had wonderfully stylised and technically executed puppets, carved by Josef Ringes in such a way as to allow them special movements characteristic of their type: for instance, the courtiers had a movable index finger that they could lift when protesting, the servants had extensible necks and the Knight of Amorous Desire (*Rytíř Milostné touhy*) had a belly that was inflated during singing and then deflated again (MALÍK 1945: 60). In the years 1934–1936, the leading puppeteer of the time Jan Malík (1904–1980) collaborated as a guest of the Puppet Stage of Artistic Expression (*Loutková scéna Umělecké výchovy*). He designed puppets for the play *Dragon Bride* (*Dračí nevěsta*) or produced his own play – the fairy tale series *Speckles the Ball* (*Míček Flíček*) of 1936 with the crafty marionette of the naughty Speckles; the play turned into the most successful original puppet plays of its era. At the time, Malík started to collaborate intensely with Alexander Plešner's firm that launched serial production of his 35cm and 50cm tall wood-turned puppets (MALÍK 1936: 118–20). These expressively economical puppets in the functionalist style (with grotesque flexibility and an entirely stripped, almost architectonic spirit), are, even to the present, unique specimens of Czech puppetry. In the post-war years (1947) he followed with another set of wood-turned hand-operated puppet heads, and later he produced a set of turned marionettes, produced from Malík's designs by the Prague-based company of Jindřich Gref.

## Clowns and Acrobats of Puppet Cabarets and Variety Shows in the 1930s and 1940s

František Jirásek, the author of the book *The Unveiled Mysteries of Puppets* (*Odhalená tajemství loutek*; JIRÁSEK 1932), which is still in high demand today for its graphic descriptions, was not among the prominent puppet artists of his time. As a teacher he set up a puppet theatre Kašpárek's Home (*Kašpárkův domov*) in the girls' school in Praha-Karlov in 1925; his interests were mainly the practical aspects of puppetry. From 1928 onwards, he participated in a number of puppetry classes around the whole country – including Slovakia and in Uzhhorod, the centre of Transcarpathian Ruthenia which belonged to Czechoslovakia at the time – and gave lectures to amateur puppeteers on the practical questions of stage direction and scenography for puppet theatre, focusing consistently on contemporary puppetry practices. He published his rich experience in books: *The Puppetry Handbook: 300 Properties for Puppet Theatre* (*Loutkářská příručka. 300 rekvizit pro loutková divadla*; JIRÁSEK 1928), *The Unveiled Mysteries of Puppets* (*Odhalená tajemství loutek*; JIRÁSEK 1932), *The Construction, the Stage Direction and the Lighting of Puppet Theatre* (*Stavba, režie a osvětlení loutkového divadla*; JIRÁSEK 1930), and *Puppet Theatre Staging* (*Scénování na loutkovém divadle*; JIRÁSEK 1935).



**Fig. 50:** Karel Driml. *King Asinus (Kráľ Asinus)*, 1924. The marionette of the Ass King with extensible ears and a clapper, made by an unknown maker for a club theatre, the 1920s.

© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

It is all the more surprising what range and type of sources Jirásek was using in writing his books in the early 1930s: his natural sources were of course the older issues of the Czech journals *The Puppeteer (Loutkář)* and *Our Puppets (Naše loutky)* as well as a number of contemporary publications from all over the world – such as *The Tony Sarg Marionette Book* (McISAAC *et al* 1921), *A Book of Marionette Plays* (STODDART and SARG 1927), the journals *Popular Mechanics Magazine* or the volumes *The Buxton Scrapbook*, especially *Puppets: How to Make and Operate Them* by Frances Augustus Rapp (JIRÁSEK 1932: 6). It shows how profoundly Czech puppeteers were confronted with international puppetry either by correspondence or through touring productions – thanks to UNIMA (*Union Internationale de la Marionnette*), established in Prague on 20 May 1929. Prague was visited by the renowned Italian puppeteer Vittorio Podrecca (PODRECCA 1928; JIŘINA 1930) or by Ivo Puhonny (VESELÝ 1924) with a variety repertoire. The journal *Loutkář*, the platform of the general office of the UNIMA in Prague, brought regular news and photographs from all around the world, including the revue productions of Tony Sarg from the US or Waldo Lanchester from the UK. For instance, issue 17 of the *Revue des marionnettes Loutkář* (1930–1931) brought information and photographs of *Les Waltons Marionnettes*, of Waldo Lanchester in London, of the Viennese Richard Teschner, of Georg Deininger of Stuttgart, of Harro Siegel of Berlin, of Theodor Nastasi of Romania, of the Zurich-based Alfred Alther and many others.

This was also an era in which Czechoslovakia had its internationally renowned modern puppeteer, Josef Skupa (1892–1957), who achieved this fame with his ensemble



**Fig. 51:** Old Codger Vočáhlo (*Kmotr Vočáhlo*), carved by Alois Schroif after Josef Skupa's design. LDFO Pilsen, the 1920s. A detail of the leg mechanics. 60cm.

© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.





**Fig. 52:** Biscuit (*Piškot*) of the Workers' Gymnastics Unions in Pilsen  
(*Dělnické tělocvičné jednoty v Plzni*). *Loutkář 12* (1925–1926): 1: 14.



Fig. 53: Clowns Koko and Kiki, by Jiří Trnka, Prague 1946. Marionettes for the Puppet Theatre of Spejbl and Hurvínek. *Loutková scéna 4* (1947): 2–3: 38.

at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup> During his studies at the School of Applied Arts (UMPRUM) in Prague, Skupa met the young artistic bohemian in the middle of the burgeoning of Futurism and Dadaism, which influenced his taste for pranks, parody, the grotesque and improvisation. During the Great War, he started collaborating with the Marionette Theatre of the Holiday Resorts (aka Holiday Camps Theatre; *Loutkové divadlo Feriálních osad*, LDFO), led by the traditional travelling folk marionettist and the pupil of Jan Nepomuk Laštovka, Karel Novák, who had been invited to work there by a group of Pilsen teachers to set up a professional company. Skupa inherited Karel Novák's and his son Ludvík's unique features: a cultivated and pure Czech, a perfect and extraordinary art of manipulating puppets as well as a sense for meticulous scenography and the choice of repertoire (MALÍK 1962). Soon Josef Skupa would become the artistic leader of the Holiday Camp Theatre (*Loutkové divadlo Feriálních osad*), making scenographic designs, puppet designs, directing and writing. This was a phase of impulses that transformed Czech puppet theatre into a modern theatre art. In the sphere of special puppets, the crucial impulse was Skupa's orientation towards new writing – dramatisation of fiction as well as original plays or improvisations (including cabaret and variety) that required new puppet types endowed not only with visual poetics but more and more also a modern way of movement and manipulation.

3 For an account of the life and work of Josef Skupa, please see Pavel Jirásek's essay in this volume.

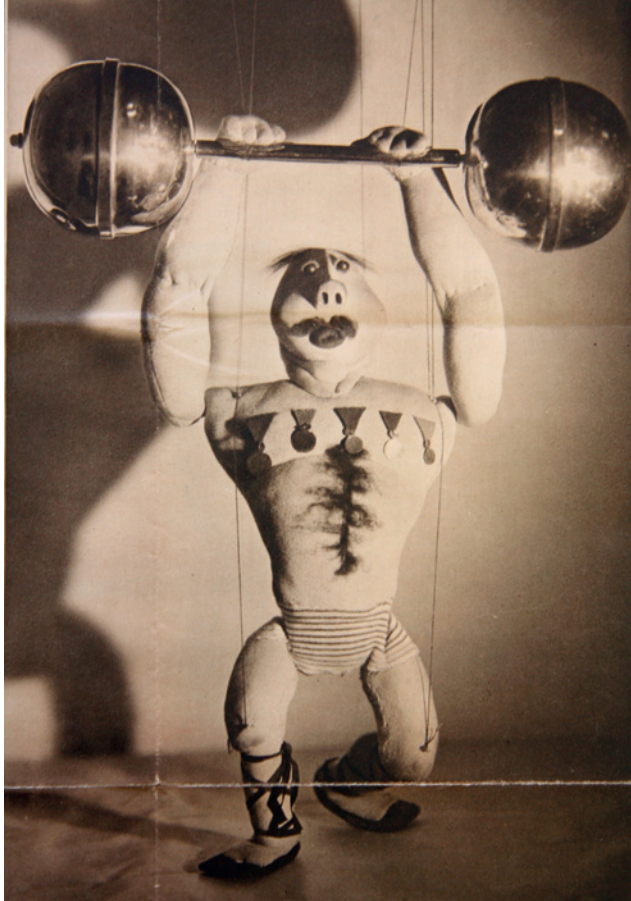


Fig. 54: Šimšula the Athlete, by Jiří Trnka, for the Pilsen Puppet Theatre of Prof. Skupa, the early 1930s. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

At first Skupa's puppets were marionettes on wires, although with utterly modern visual stylisation with a strong tendency towards caricature: among the first was the 1917 puppet of Rainbow the Sweetcorn Man (*Duha Kukuřičňák*), a caricature of the voluntary guard of the public order; in 1923, the 'cunning bourgeois Seeligmánek' (designed by Skupa, carved by Alois Schroif); or Kuba (carved by Gustav Nosek), which was a variation of the dumb peasant Škrhola; the Granddad (*Dědoušek* – allegedly designed and carved by Skupa himself), inspired by the ruralist novels of J. V. Rais; Kmotr Vočáhlo (carved by Schroif); the excellent Good Soldier Schweik (*Dobrý voják Švejk*) and other characters from the novel (wonderfully carved by Gustav Nosek); or Slezáček of the *Tip-top revue* (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: 28). After 1920, having worked with the carver Karel Nosek, it was obvious that Skupa's scenographic designs necessitated even



Fig. 55: Maestro Nosarini, an equilibrist and universalist, by Jiří Trnka for the Pilsen Puppet Theatre of Prof. Skupa, the early 1930s.

© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

more modern puppets. Skupa invited Nosek's nephew Gustav Nosek (1887–1974) to join the company; their collaboration lasted till 1938. The puppets that Skupa commissioned from Nosek were often expressed verbally only as a mere type, while the shape and the artistic expression was left to the carver; these modern puppets that were conceived in a simple, stripped style and were excellently constructed mechanically, were already manipulated by strings rather than by wires. It was in this way that in 1919 Gustav's uncle Karel Nosek carved a weird figure after Skupa's design; later it got the name of Spejbl and appeared onstage first as a trapeze gymnast; later it exchanged witty dialogues with Kašpárek. Gustav Nosek sensed the need for a more stable partner for Spejbl and of his own accord made a smaller figure seven years later (1926); this new character, Hurvínek, was derived from Spejbl but brought a number of new technical amenities – such as a system allowing the marionette to turn its eyes, wiggle with them and turn them upwards (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 328–35). New articulation of the arms enabled





Fig. 56: Insect music band (*Hmyzí kapela*), by Jan Vavřík-Rýz, Plzeň 1937. Puppets for Josef Skupa's and Frank Wenig's play *Hurvínek among the Beetles* (*Hurvínek mezi broučky*). Jan Malík. *Národní umělec Josef Skupa*. Prague: SNKLU, 1962: 88.

great flexibility and spreading of the arms as well as a more lively expression through movement (kicking or stamping the heel). Finally, new methods for tying its strings gave the puppet broader possibilities of gesticulation and movement in general. The disputes of the somewhat half-assed father Spejbl and his cheeky son Hurvínek kept growing in popularity and eventually made the two most original Czech Modernist puppet types and variety puppets at the same time. In the 1920s Gustav Nosek influenced other theatre companies in the Pilsen region through his carving of variety puppets; after the design of Antonín Procházka he made the flexible dance Josefina Baker or the grotesque duo Biscuit and Chaplin (*Piškot a Čaplin*) for the theatre of the Workers' Gymnastics Union in Pilsen (KOPENEC 1925: 8–16).

It was characteristic of Josef Skupa that he always drew around himself outstandingly able collaborators; it is all the more true about the puppet creators of his ensemble. In 1921 Jan Vavřík-Rýz made his first puppet types of Emánek, Emilka and Hanzí for Skupa's company. As a wonderful comical actor he had an extraordinary sense for dynamic and expressive grotesque puppet types – for instance his Grasshopper, Bumblebee and Caterpillar (*Kobylka, Čmelda a Housenka*) for Frank Wenig and Josef Skupa's play or an insect musical band for their play *Hurvínek among the Beetles* (*Hurvínek mezi broučky*). His excellent variety show group puppets of a later date were *The Mad Town of Kocourkov's Teachers after Fifty Years* (*Kocourkovští učitelé po padesáti letech*), *Tambourine Players* (*Tamburaši*), *A Trained Piglet* (*Cvičené prasátko*), *The Balalaika Players* (*Balalajkáři*)



Fig. 57: The clown Dupák, by Rudolf Řiha and Adolf Šrůtek, around 1945.

A marionette for a club theatre. Wood, textile. 44cm. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.



Fig. 58: The Jazz Band, made by Zdeněk Podhůrský for the Divadlo S+H, Prague, the 1940s. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

and *Minstrels* (*Šumaři*). The variety puppet to win him greatest popularity was the 1939 community gossip Mrs Scuttlebutt (*Paní Drbálková*) for which Jan Vavřík-Rýz not only spoke but also sang (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 336–9).

During his studies at the UMPRUM, Jiří Trnka (1912–1969) started to collaborate with Skupa; with his technological help he made a number of variety puppets for the *Loutkové divadlo Feriálních osad* – the clown acrobat Koko, the august Kiki, the juggler Nosarini, the unicyclist Vrtinožka, the weightlifter Šimšula, a skate-dancer and a tragic pianist. His variety puppets are characteristic for their balanced proportionality and gentle faces, coloured in a simple illustrative stylisation that was all the more effective (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: annexe).

Skupa's company was basically the only theatre that remained faithful to the marionette and the technologies of special and variety puppets in their original sense even during the 1940s and 1950s. From the late 1930s, Skupa's and Trnka's names as scenographers of Professor Josef Skupa's Puppet Theatre (*Loutkové divadlo prof. Josefa Skupy*) was joined by another name: Adolf Šrůtek (1914–1985), who continued to work with Skupa until 1943. Afterwards, he returned to Červený Kostelec and collaborated with the puppet maker Josef Jirásek and with Rudolf Říha; they not only started performing in their theatre company Výraz but also designed outstanding variety puppets – mainly musicians (trumpeters, pianists, drummers) and gymnasts (acrobats, contortionists) (ŠTĚPÁŘ 2003: 31–2). Among the young technologists and visual artists working with Skupa was Zdeněk Podhůrský, the maker of the Black Jazz Band, or the outstanding constructionist Radko Haken; his variety figures for the cabaret and circus repertoire, alongside the exceptionally technically ingenious puppets of the group SALAMANDR at the Spejbl + Hurvínek Theatre (*Divadlo S+H*) made for the 1959 production *Circus in the Theatre* (*Cirkus v divadlo*) and Arch-Grand-Theatre Spejbl (*Velegrandteátr Spejbl*), became a culmination of sorts of a significant tradition. With them ended a certain continuity of theatre practices that had started with the travelling marionettists. It cannot be said that these practices would disappear from the post-war Czech puppet theatre but their usage in the professional puppet theatre became part of completely different contexts.

The European tradition and continuity of technology and poetics of special and variety puppets, which included in the Czech lands an extraordinarily wide range of standardised types, maintained for decades and centuries and passed down from generation to generation, was forcefully discontinued in 1948 in the radical change of the political climate and its product: the Theatre Law. On the one hand, this law professionalised puppetry but, on the other, it made Czechoslovak puppet theatre until the 1960s subject to the cultural ideology of Socialist Realism. The mouthpiece of socialist puppetry style Jan Malík deflected completely from the outstanding level of visually stylised Czech theatre of marionettes and, rather than with his own long-lasting experiences and with the achievements of other Czech modern puppet scenographers and directors (to whom he undoubtedly had himself belonged), he was inspired by the work of the Soviet Moscow Central Puppet Theatre of Sergei Vladimirovich Obraztsov that toured Czechoslovakia in the years 1948–1949. Immediately, under the Soviet influence, he introduced as an obligatory type the Indonesian *Wayang Golek* puppets – light puppets manipulated by a rod from below; this directive act is often derisively called 'The Rod Revolution' (KOLEKTIV 2004a). The puppetry trade licences of the old traditional families were forcefully discontinued and a number of club stages and artistic theatres disappeared or underwent transformation. Czechoslovak puppetry, once open to the whole of Europe, found itself in isolation as a result of the fifty years' seclusion it experienced, separated from the international community; as a result, the knowledge and the experience of the tradition of special puppets rapidly faded away. The rediscovery and return of these



scenographic principles have been gradually occurring in the Czech milieu since the late 1960s, with a new generation of puppetry artists who created the fundamentals of the so-called synthetic puppetry scenography of the 1970s and 1980s.

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## Summary

This article brings an analysis of the history and development of variety and trick puppets in the Czech lands between 1850 and 1950 together with a discussion of the extant artefacts, with a particular focus on the mechanics of these special puppets and their innovations during the Modernist decades in a European context. Variety and trick puppets were also significant components of the traditional marionettists' productions and complement, and the article also considers the extant ephemera surrounding that tradition of performance.

## Keywords

Czech puppet theatre, marionettes, traditional theatre, folk theatre, travelling theatre, variety puppets, trick puppets, Modernism

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Czech Republic and abroad. He has published a number of books, including *Česká loutka* (*The Czech Puppet*, with Jaroslav Blecha, 2008). With his wife Marie Jirásková, they have published a collection of puppets and decorations of family and social puppet theatres; the volume is one of the most complex compilations ever assembled in the Czech Republic. Since 2009 he has been an assistant professor in the Audio-Visual Department of the Theatre Faculty at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts, in Brno.

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