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Science lifts the curtain on the history of European puppet theatre

EU researchers unveil the rich cultural legacy of European puppet theatre, exploring how marionettes have shaped continental identity and storytelling across centuries of performances.

“Puppets have helped to build a shared cultural consciousness across Europe. - Professor Didier Plassard, PuppetPlays

Professor Didier Plassard is a leading scholar in theatre studies and puppetry at Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 University in France. He has spent the last five years exploring the rich history of puppet theatre in Europe and its contribution to the development of a common European cultural identity.

“Puppets have helped to build a shared cultural consciousness across Europe,” Plassard said.

Puppet theatre compendium

Plassard is leading a six-year EU-funded project called PuppetPlays which aims to collect and study puppet and marionette plays from across Western Europe from the 1600s to the present day.

By collecting and analysing puppet performances that have travelled Europe over the past 500 years, gathering a repertoire of plays, and capturing and translating texts, Plassard is seeking to inspire further study and a deeper understanding of the art form.

By the time Plassard’s project is completed in 2025, it will have created a catalogue of around 1 000 referenced works from

Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the UK, and an online anthology of 300 unpublished or forgotten plays.

The growing online catalogue can be searched by language, country, author and type of animation – for instance, glove puppet, string marionette, shadow puppetry or object theatre.

Universal appeal

Visually striking, with an ability to convey emotions in a way that speaks to a wide range of audiences, puppets have held an enduring appeal.

Puppetry is one of the most ancient forms of theatre and has long been used to tackle complex and important themes through popular entertainment.

According to Plassard, part of the appeal is due to the accessibility of the medium.

“People are comfortable with puppet theatre, they don’t fear that they won’t understand it. Plays can be performed without words, purely through image and movement. Because of this, it can circulate easily between countries,” he said.

A notable feature of puppetry in Western Europe is its nomadic nature.

“Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, touring puppetry was the only form of theatre for people that were not living in big towns, and the only affordable option for many,” said Plassard.

European heritage

Puppetry used stories from theatre, performing plays by Shakespeare, the story of Don Quixote, Faust and many others, including comedies and dramas written by the puppeteers themselves.

“These performances were taken across the continent to people of all classes and ages, and contributed to the creation of the European identity,” said Plassard.

He cites the example of Angelo Cuccoli, a well-known puppeteer

from Bologna who gave daily performances in Bologna's Piazza Grande at the beginning of the 20th century. Working with simple glove puppets, he presented a large variety of plays, including tragedies by Sophocles, not as parodies but as dramas.

One of the most famously documented puppet theatres, listed as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2001, is the Sicilian puppet theatre, the Opera dei Pupi. This emerged in Sicily at the beginning of the 19th century and enjoyed great success among the island's working classes.

The intricate marionettes of the Opera dei Pupi stand sometimes over a metre tall. Their daily performances in villages throughout the island became a central part of Sicilian folk culture, telling tales based on medieval chivalric literature and other sources, such as Shakespeare's plays, the lives of saints and tales of notorious bandits.

Past to present

Part of Plassard's vision was also to bring together contemporary puppeteers working in Europe. One such puppeteer is [Marta Cuscunà](#), an award-winning Italian theatre artist who uses the power of puppetry to address socially and politically charged themes.

Her production of *It's Beautiful to Live Free* tells the story of Ondina Peteani, a female resistance fighter in the Second World War, who was from Cuscunà's hometown of Monfalcone. Cuscunà's work is now also part of the PuppetPlays digital catalogue.



“I think puppets help me to go beyond words.”-Marta Cuscunà, puppet theatre artist

Marta Cuscunà, an award-winning Italian theatre artist, uses the power of puppetry to address socially and politically charged themes. ©Marta Cuscunà

Cuscunà created a puppet of Peteani to join her on stage in her one-woman performance. This allowed her to tell the story of Peteani’s suffering at Auschwitz and portray her suffering more directly than with human actors.

“I think puppets help me to go beyond words,” says Cuscunà. “I was struggling with how to put that part of her life on stage, but I discovered that with a puppet you can do whatever you want – you can create symbols that are powerful because there are no limits.”

Like Plassard, Cuscunà also remarks that puppets are non-threatening to audiences, even if the subject matter is difficult.

“They are just puppets. They cannot hurt you. You can talk about tough themes in an indirect way,” said Cuscunà, who uses her personal cast of puppets to explore themes of feminism, politics and injustice.

For Cuscunà, the opportunity created by EU funding to meet

puppeteers from other countries and discover their work has opened up exciting new opportunities for collaboration.

Continual evolution

Puppetry has a rich tradition throughout Europe and its contribution to culture is continuing to evolve.

This is also seen in cinema today, where puppeteers have contributed to the birth and development of animated films. They are, for instance, part of the teams that bring imaginary beings to life through motion capture, such as Gollum in the Lord of the Rings.

Puppeteers have moved from the small stage to large-scale stage theatre successes, with innovative theatrical puppetry captivating audiences across Europe in shows like the Lion King and War Horse.

“Being simultaneously an object, and the image of a living being, puppets and marionettes are a source of inspiration for many visual artists,” said Plassard.

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