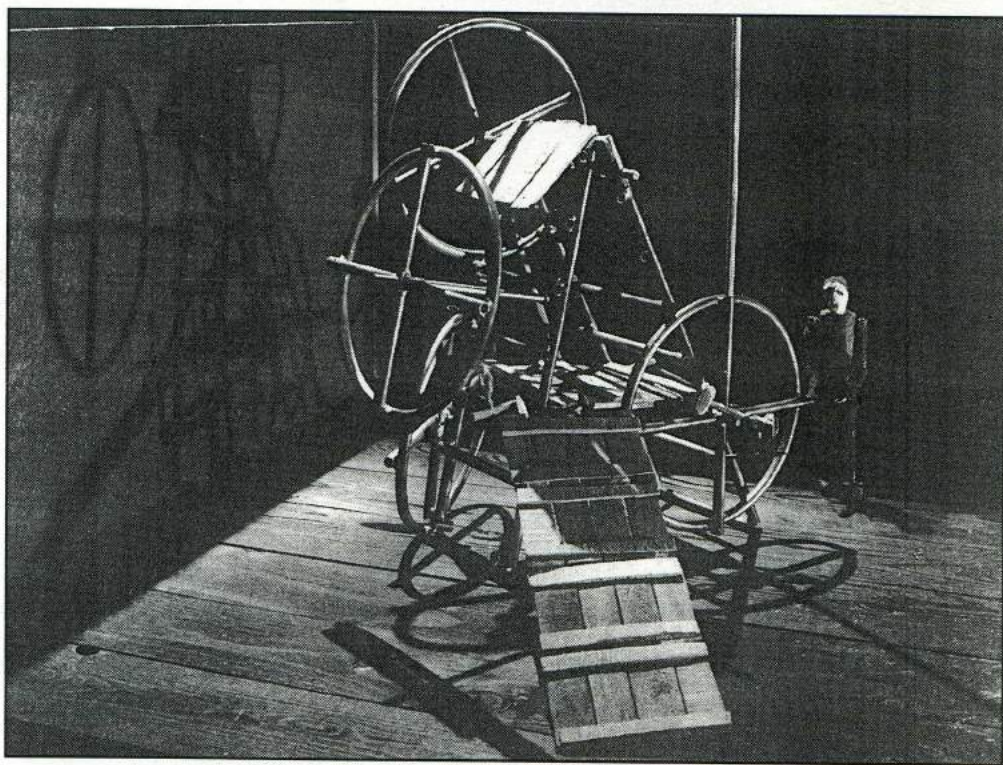


# Powerful puppets

With No Strings Attached



The Thunderbirds are gone, The Muppets creator Jim Henson is dead, Punch and Judy are punch drunk and Mr. Squiggle has run off with Miss Jane, so where does that leave puppetry audiences? Well in March 1995 Adelaide audiences will witness a unique Australian puppet theatre premiere, a collaborative production between Australian

and Czech Republic artists. This year Carousel Theatre Company, South Australia's only professional puppetry theatre company, will celebrate its tenth birthday. For the occasion Carousel's artistic director Wojciech Pisarek has invited Josef Krofta from the Czech Republic to direct 'Don Quixote', based on Miguel de Cervantes' classic story.

It is to be a major theatre highlight of Come Out '95, South Australia's biennial Youth Arts Festival.

Josef Krofta is internationally acclaimed as one of the true masters of modern puppetry. He is the artistic director of Theatre Drak (Dragon) and is the head of Prague's School for Alternative - Open Forms and Puppet Theatre DAMU (Academy of Performing



Arts). In 1986 he became a permanent staff member of the Institut International de la Marionette in France.

Pisarek and Krofta first met in May 1992 when Carouselle were invited to the 15th International Puppetry Festival in Poland. During this festival Pisarek saw two productions directed by Krofta. Pisarek says that of the two productions 'Pinnocchio' stood out: "...when I was looking at 'Pinnocchio' I had the feeling I was looking at a masterpiece, an absolutely amazing use of puppetry and visual theatre... exceptional actor puppet operation...in terms of good theatre I can compare it to Peter Brook's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' or Jerzy Grotowski's 'Apocalypsis Cum Figuris.'" After seeing this production Pisarek says, "It made me really think how to get this man

here to direct Carouselle for its tenth anniversary."

The notable trademark of Krofta's productions is the visible presence of the actor/ animator. Pisarek says, "Like no one else in the world he explores the relationship between the puppets and their operator. He started a trend which is now widely accepted. He was the first in the world to put puppets and puppeteers on the stage and search for the consequences of this meeting." Krofta asked the question, "Why should the text be played exclusively by puppets?" In his productions he keeps trying to answer this question and as a result the actor is an equal partner to the puppet on stage. Krofta exposes the animator (a name Krofta has coined for the puppeteer) to the audience. The actor/ animator works in the same space as the puppet,

sometimes in unison, but always maintaining independent status. The challenge is on the actor to not only maintain his/her own performance focus and credibility but also the puppet's. For this reason Krofta works with multi-skilled ensemble performers who are able to "give soul to an object, to endow with life." The critic Henryk Jurkowski notes that in Krofta's puppetry theatre there is a huge difference between the terms puppet manipulation and animation. "To animate does not mean 'to move' but 'to give soul.' To inspire soul into the object is not the same as to make a perfect copy of something. A good animator is not somebody who makes a puppet pick up a piece of spaghetti with a fork and wind it up. This is a skill. But an artist persuades us that everything he touches is alive and endowed with a soul."

Inviting Krofta to Australia Pisarek is anticipating many benefits to flow into the arts community. "My reason to invite Krofta here was to generally raise the puppetry standard in Australia." And Pisarek is convinced that 'Don Quixote' will be the production to raise this standard through Krofta's synthesis of theatrical mediums. The production will have a broad appeal and this is important for Pisarek, because with this he believes older Australian audiences will soon realise what young theatre going audiences have known for a long time, and that is, the imagery, fantasy, magic and expression found in puppetry has a very broad and universal appeal. Pisarek goes on to say, "I would like to work with him to create a performance which will make people aware that puppetry is a very serious art form in its own right. It's not what people normally think, that is, it is only for children, such as a Punch and Judy show.....in Australian audiences puppetry still waits to be discovered as a theatre art form." Krofta will be exploring two stories in this production. Pisarek explains: "Through 'Don Quixote' they [Krofta and the designer] intend to make a metaphor of the contemporary world. Machinery, mechanics and metal, are confronted with the idealistic world of 'Don Quixote', a

world of soft fabrics...represented by wooden puppets. The design concept is a clash between two worlds, the technical and the idealistic. It is also to re-examine if the so called 'Don Quixotary' - evil and noble values - are still needed in our rational orientated world. It's a big question.... 'Don Quixote' represents the artist who wants to behave unreasonably, against the rulings of the world, to have the right to go crazy, to fantasise... to express his/her own imagination and worries ...is this still needed in society? Does our contemporary world accept this sort of behaviour?"

Krofta's other directorial focus is one he has found in a very unusual seventeenth century Belgian court case. Pisarek explains, "A theatre group was put on trial because of political obscenities but the group was very popular and loved by Belgian audiences, the court case became very famous and was watched by many people. Finally the judge was not brave enough to ban them totally so the verdict was 'we burn the puppets or the puppeteers, the choice is yours!' Krofta is going to wrap up the theme of 'Don Quixote' around this court case. So we will have art on trial."

The Czech Republic with its changing politics, over the years, has had a close affinity with puppet theatre and other non-naturalistic art forms. The particular style of solid wooden carved puppets, to be used in 'Don Quixote', comes from traditional European puppet styles. Pisarek says, "At the back of each puppet there is a hole, a depression, they are hand held puppets with a stick to manipulate the head. This is a way puppets were created in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.....from the tradition of religious figures and mystery plays. In 'Don Quixote' the puppets, which stand up to 90 centimetres in height, are wooden carved figures, a very unusual craft, not often done here, carved from solid blocks of wood. The highly stylised puppets are sculptured by the designer, Jāna Krofta, his daughter." Josef Krofta will be working with his daughter who is studying sculpture and design at

the Prague Academy of Arts. The puppets faces have been carved from photographs of the Australian cast, consequently there will be a significant relationship between the puppets and the actors.

Australia's performing art cultural heritage is primarily tied up in naturalistic art forms. Pisarek is confident that Krofta's experience and expertise will be an active catalyst in bringing Australia up to speed in modern puppetry trends. Pisarek says that "puppetry is the Czech Republic's national hobby, on the street or in the shops you can buy puppets very cheaply." He points out that historically there were political reasons for this national hobby.

"When Czechoslovakia was under the Austrian Empire, live performances in the Czech language on stage were banned, but not in puppetry. The officials must have thought 'puppetry for the kids, why not.....lets make this concession'. The puppetry companies used that bit of freedom to speak to the public." The theatre was a dramatic tool for initiating public discussion. In the Czech Republic, and neighbouring countries such as Poland, this association between puppetry and politics has been a stimulus in formulating new trends.

In the mid 1960s when Krofta was a student at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts, Czechoslovakia was under Soviet Communist rule. As a student, there were restrictions on the content of the Academy's productions. It is no surprise therefore that politics have found their way into his work. As he did then, and continues to do now, he uses theatre to comment on social and political issues. In 1989 he became artistic director of the acclaimed Theatre Drak in Hradec Kralove, a town outside of Prague; its inception conveniently away from the political censors. Pisarek explains that "after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, when communism was abolished, in the now Czech Republic, Krofta, for the first time, was offered such a career (as teaching). During the communist occupation this was not possible, all teachers had to be faithful to the party and he wasn't a member of the communist party. After the

velvet revolution however he was offered a position at the Academy." Presently at the helm of both a leading company and teaching academy Krofta's work is seen internationally; America, Denmark, Finland, France, Japan, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland.

In 1994 Pisarek returned to the Czech Republic for the National Puppetry Festival. He was not only excited by the work of the Krofta family - Josef Krofta's son, Jakub, won the major award at the Festival - but also by the work of recent graduates of the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. These emerging artists are creating innovative work by picking up on modern western trends and melding them with East European styles and traditions, subsequently what is emanating from the old city of Prague is highly visual and intelligent theatre.

So what is the catalyst for this movement? "There are two" Pisarek answers, "one is the school under Krofta's direction and the other is political freedom. Poland and the Czech Republic are now more open for new western trends, they accommodate them and use them much more freely than was done before. It's not pure puppetry any more, its hybrid art, highly visual, the designer's role is equal to the directors."

In conjunction with the 'Don Quixote' production Krofta, through Carouselle, will be holding a series of workshops beginning February 1995. The series will consist of eight sessions over eight weeks. The sessions will be made up of hands on exploration of techniques, watching 'Don Quixote' rehearsals and discussions with Krofta.

An indication of the production's anticipated and potential success is in the number of interstate and international expressions of interest already made in touring this production. In the immediate future however, having taken two years to organise, Pisarek is predicting that the spark and vigour felt between himself and Krofta on their first meeting will likewise be felt between Come Out '95 audiences and Krofta's production of 'Don Quixote'.

**Stephen Noonan**

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