

Article in Teateravisen



A great performance ('Hotel de Rive') among good experiences: 'The Star Keeper' (top left), 'Puck' (bottom left), 'A Circus on Strings' (top right) and 'Mathilde' (bottom right) Fotos: Festival of Wonder

The choice is easy

Festival of Wonder 2013 in Silkeborg ended in the middle of an election campaign. That did not make much impression upon the well organized festival, which once again proved its worth. This is where, every other year, it is possible to meet the largest group of international animation theatres for children and adults in Denmark.

Teateravisen.dk was there and saw all of the international productions. That was a good choice.

By: Carsten Jensen

FACTS

- Festival of Wonder – also called Silkeborg Puppetry Festival – was held from November 7 – 10, 2013. A large number of closed performances in schools took place during the days before and after the festival.
- The festival presented 86 shows for children and adults from Portugal, France, Belgium, Holland, England, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Canada, Taiwan and Israel, as well as Denmark.
- There was also a Master Class, puppet workshops for children, back stage talks, film and exhibits.
- The festival is supported economically by Silkeborg Municipality, the Danish committee of scenic arts, and many funds, embassies and institutions.
- See more at www.dukketateaterfestival.dk

There was no way it could go wrong: ahead lay four days of festival with carefully chosen performances by international animation theatres, garnished with good Danish ones. All venues were centrally located in beautiful Silkeborg within walking distance of the hotel on the square.

But it did get off on the wrong foot. After arriving at the information desk in Medborgerhuset to pick up my tickets for ca. 20 shows, no one could find an envelope in either the editor's or the name of Teateravisens website. The name should speak for itself, even though it is net-based news, but the ticket seller insisted despite my protests that I must be from a theatre which had come to perform.

Sometimes life seems like a performance in which one is on stage for a short time before the dramatic and inevitable finale, but I do not think I should compete with professional stage artists, so finally after a phone call to the festival's logistics chief, Poul, we worked it out that my tickets, invitations, etc. would be waiting for me

at the hotel, where neither my arrival nor my errand in town caused much notice. So much for being a discrete representative for an otherwise conceited media world. The knots were sorted out and now everything was ready for a deluge of festival experiences.

In the middle of a political campaign

Festival of Wonder – also called Silkeborg Puppetry Festival – takes place every other year in November, and therefore every other festival takes place during a local political campaign. That is why the forest of posters in town were not accolades to the art of puppetry, but portraits of hopeful local politicians, and it was a bit distracting with all of the staring faces, while hurrying from one puppetry venue to the next. Local politics are seldom great art....

Even the hotel on the square was partly covered by a couple of huge banners which recommended that the viewer vote for a woman who turned out to be the owner of the hotel, on the ticket of the Liberal party. Not an unreasonable political party for the owner of a local business, who at this time, like other local Liberal party members, must use a lot of energy and words trying to explain the former Liberal prime minister who apparently has a rather careless attitude towards private consumption paid for by Danish tax payers.

Of course, the Liberals are not exactly the party with culture politics as its highest priority – though there has once been a Liberal cultural minister, Nathalie Lind, who had the position for a little over one year from December 19, 1973 – February 13, 1975.

Maybe local politicians in Silkeborg are different. At least they have Denmark's largest and without a doubt most interesting international puppetry festival to think about.

The campaign was actually brought on stage at the opening of the festival, in which emcee Klaus Andersen, kindly borrowed from Teatret Møllen, informed us with music, songs and texts that two of the evening's speakers, Silkeborg's mayor Hanne Bæk Olsen (S) and chairman of the cultural committee, Steen Vindum (V) were both running for mayor. Danish culture minister Marianne Jelved was unable to attend.

Puppetry on several floors

Maybe one could sit and think about that during the opening performance, the French Theatre du Rugissants 'In the Eye of Judas', which had an amazing set design with 5-6 levels, exciting musicians, wonderful puppet manipulation and puppets combined in an elegant story of a dying man's tale about the sins of the past, racism and lost love.

This beautiful example of an adult puppetry performance, supported at the festival by Queen Margrethe and Prince Henrik's Fund, seemed a bit long to some in the audience, allowing for a few nodding heads here and there in the dark in Jysk Musik- og Teaterhus.

But now the festival had begun with the international element out front, and during the following days, shows were presented from 12 different countries. Our host country participated with 15 theatres and performances, one was cancelled, and in all one could see about 30 different performances, a handful of which were only for adults.

All of the performances at Festival of Wonder are carefully chosen by artistic director, Ulla Dingsøe, who has spent the two years since the last festival traveling around the world to see animation theatre. (see the article 'The dead things living club')

Catastrophes, war and death.....

Ulla Dingsøe has as usual chosen to stretch the concept of animation theatre to extremes. This could be seen in the very unique and, in spite of its Holocaust theme, also humorous, 'The House by the Lake' with the Israeli theatre Yael Rasooly. The story is of three sisters whose childhoods have been stolen so that they must now hide in a dark room somewhere in central Europe. Despite the somber conditions, they live and play with creativity while they wait for a mother who never comes and the fate of a concentration camp. The performance had the form of a cabaret with puppetry elements, most used as props and not objects brought to life.

The 'king of Silkeborg' could not be accused of that. Dutch theatre icon Neville Tranter and his Stuffed Puppet Theatre captivated the festival in his usual grand style with two adult performances: 'Punch and Judy in Afghanistan'

and 'Mathilde', which both won over the audiences who have by now made Mr. Tranter a cult figure, thanks in part to his signature human sized puppets, loads of humor and grim stories.

During 'Punch and Judy in Afghanistan', an updated version of the preview from Tranter's visit of 2009 about maladjusted beings and the violence of war, the audience clapped after every scene and for each puppet, a rather distracting habit which is now seen in other theatres, but ought to be saved for jazz concerts.....

But the extremely professional artist had his many expressive giant hand puppets and the audience in the palm of his hand, including the group of 10-15 theatre people from inside and outside of Denmark, who shamelessly poured in ten minutes after the start of one of the performances attended by Yours Truly.

Tranter's newest show, 'Mathilde', a kind of thriller, takes place in the senior housing, Casa Verden, which is filled with the old, the sick and the dying, and where the money grubbing leaders tyrannize the death marked, while 102 year old Mathilde does gymnastics hanging on her railing.

It is both funny and disheartening to watch, the exact opposite of Danish Teater Meridiano's performance at the festival 'All the time in the world', about the lively 100 year old Victoria.....

Delicious brain food

Another of the very adult shows was dark – but at the same time my best experience of the festival, 'Hotel de Rive' with German Figurentheater Tübingen and French Compagnie Bagages de Sable.

The performance is an attempt to create a figurative poem, inspired by Alberto Giacometti's sculptur, drawings and three surrealist texts, 'Yesterday, Flying sand', 'A blind man reaches out the hand in the night' and 'The dream, the Sphinx and the death of T' as well as an epilogue from 'Paris without an end'.

The skeleton-like puppets were manipulated in front of the actors' faces, while each spoke the expressive words and moved around the stage.

It might sound a bit strained but the show lives its own mystical and hypnotic life, thanks to the unequalled German puppeteer and director Frank Soehnle, the French actor Patrick Michaelis and the two Swiss musicians Jean-Jaques Pedretti and Robert Morgenthaler, who play the large alp horns, among other instruments.

Frank Soehnle and Figurentheater Tübingen was also one of the great events of Festival of Wonder 2009 with 'Salto Lamento', in which, like 'Hotel de Rive' it was also necessary to concentrate in order to follow along, while several of the other festival performances were easier to understand.

Peeking through a key hole

Yours truly ordered tickets according to the premise: I will see everything possible – which meant all of the international shows, because I had already seen most of the Danish ones and reviewed them here at this site.

The first adult show I saw was a bit of a challenge, 'Mironescópio: The Love Machine' with the Portugese A Tarumba. It sounded promising and consisted of a peep show for about 10 viewers, who were welcomed with champagne and 6 decadently dressed actors who led us into the cave of depravity.

It was a show of diverse historical and modern forms of sex toys and 10 boxes with windows where the short erotic stories were performed for one or two viewers at a time. We could also draw a card which told of our sexual character, and eat wine gum penises. But in spite of the good idea and attempt at creating a burlesque atmosphere, it didn't quite work. The little peep shows were rather un-sexy and it did not help matters that some of the actors were somewhat sloppy manipulators of the flat puppet figures, which were stuck down inside the boxes while we the audience sat on small pillows and wore head phones to hear the stories.

I have seen more eroticism in bakery shops which at least have balls and buns, to cite a children's joke as old as some of the erotic toys used by Dr. Erotikone, Madame Gigi and the other participants.

This might have been a provocative performance in a Catholic country like Portugal, but the presentation in Silkeborg feels more like an ethnographic study than a theatre performance.

For the children

That is how I aired out my little sour old man during the festival....

Above is a little potpourri of performances for young people and (mostly) adults, but the greatest number of shows during the festival are for children of all ages.

As I mentioned, I was focusing on the international performances and managed to see almost all, but I also enjoyed some Danish shows, all of which have been reviewed here at earlier dates and therefore will not be discussed at this time, which gives space to focus on a couple of international animations performances.

The Israeli Train Theatre managed with 'Fool Moon', a sort of Polish 'story about not too bright country folk', to create an atmosphere in a huge page turning, very exciting set design.

A big pop up book was also the scenic background for Swedish SkogsTeaterns 'The story of Anki', in which Danish-Swedish Pytte Ravn, while playing with hand puppet Anki demonstrated her amazing talent of ventriloquism. It was a very simple story, but Pytte Ravn delivered it professionally and without sentimentality – slightly rough, unsweetened, breaking down illusions in a very competent, audience friendly way. It is not often I see this in shows for such small children (2-4 years).

Russian Viktor Antonov also demonstrated much ability in 'A Circus on Strings', in which he performed several traditional circus numbers with his fine small wooden puppets. And with a 'Thank You' as the final and absolutely only line during the performance.

Belgian Theatre Froe Froe presented a lively puppet theatre version of Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in a round tent building, with Satyr Puck in the middle. The puppets performed through openings at head height in the tent. It was fast with funny scenes, making up for the fact that Shakespeare in English is a bit advanced for the 'seven years old and up' target audience.

Finally I would like to mention the Canadian Theatre de L'oeil with 'The Star Keeper', which closed the festival Sunday afternoon Jysk Musik- og Teaterhus.

After a crazy start with a Pjerrot figure who was sweeping and crawled up to fix heaven but accidentally broke a star away. The character Pretzel notices that and must go through a lot before the star is in place again.

It was a show with much imagination and wonderful puppet manipulation of all sorts of objects in all sizes, with action at the back edge of the large stage and a dark room with long sequences suggesting sea and sky, a bit like and aquarium. One had to be reminded that this was animation theatre and not a movie on a small screen, especially for the audience in the seats at the back of the big room.

Award to Ulla Dengsøe

The final international children's performance I will mention was the main event Saturday evening, when the festival handed the stage to Taiwan, called 'A Taste of Taiwan'.

Tayuan Puppet Theatre Company presented 'The Wedding of the Mice' - and when would we otherwise see a children's show with four puppeteers, four musicians, plus a few technicians! In Denmark, possibly only Batida can match that number.

After the show there were taste samples galore in Medborgerhuset, delicacies magically created by the private chef of the ambassador of Taiwan.

During the evening there was also time to praise the artistic director of the festival

Ulla Dengsøe with UNIMA Danmark's annual award. Chairman Hans Hartvich-Madsen emphasized Ulla Dengsøe's great and ambitious work in developing Festival of Wonder to be the place where the major international animation performances and the many international puppet theatre enthusiasts meet.

Accompanying the words of praise was a carved wooden figure by Knud Brodersen, who presented the work to Ulla Dengsøe. Brodersen can be found in Det Blå Hus in Roskilde, where he has not only his puppet workshop, but a puppet theatre which has existed for over 30 years, with sporadic activity. Brodersen also had to take care of his job as atomic physicist at Risø until retirement.

Everything else

Once again Festival of Wonder had many visitors. Local audiences are used to enjoying the festival, attending the adult performances as couples, with children or grandchildren at the children's performances – and the rest of the venues are filled up with participants, visiting theatres, and festival organizers, etc.

The local audience is the most active in Denmark, with a 50+ group which has time and money and desire for culture. Several of the locals told me that they saw between 5-10 performances during the festival. It helps of course that ticket prices are as low as 40 kr. for children's performances and 75 kr. for adult performances. A few shows are actually free.

All shows are free for the many volunteers – about 100 – who work in a professional manner during this rather large festival.

Good experiences were definitely in the majority at Festival of Wonder 2013 – and that included the back stage talks which were rewarding additions to many of the performances.

One of the more unusual was the back stage tour with Matej Forman in connection with the interactive exhibit 'Theater in Movement - People and Puppets on Stage' at Kunstcenter Silkeborg Bad. Here we were led around in some of the quirky and grand stage sets from the Czech Theatre Forman Brothers, several of which have received awards. Some have been seen in Silkeborg, notably 'Obludarium' at the two previous festivals and here one could walk with Matej Forman among the sets and props which filled most of the art museum, and talk about reality and illusion and art and objects.

Choose the right ones

There were many inspiring experiences at the puppetry festival in Silkeborg: The meeting of people. And as I sit and talk about the festival and the shows and the medium and people, there is the most wonderful sound several tables away as I suddenly hear 'I read in Teateravisen.....'

Now Festival of Wonder is over and Silkeborg is back to thinking about life as usual. Or more correctly, the local election of county commission members.

The political campaign did not shift the focus from a good puppetry festival. But there were a lot of campaign posters lying in the streets, roads and in the stream, maybe because so many of them were hung at arm's height and were easy targets. But the choice in Silkeborg could be made without posters at all: It is about choosing those candidates who will support Denmark's greatest international puppetry festival...