

THE "IN BETWEEN FESTIVAL"

Visiting the "RDV Marionnettes J-365" in Charleville-Mézières in September 2018 –
Thoughts about Germany and the Rest of the Paper Theater World*

BY RAINER SENNEWALD



"Great Small Works" and their evergreen
"The Short, Entertaining History of Toy Theater"

Prologue

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, HALL "LE FORUM": "The Short, Entertaining History of Toy Theater". John Bell performs this "History" singing and with illustrative movements, accompanied by Trudi Cohen on the toy piano, and the chorus describes "the five most important things" of this art form:

This is what Toy Theater is:
Got an Arch
It's miniature
Made of paper
And it's flat
And you can do it yourself.

Everybody in the hall sings and moves, and between the refrains the "singing professor" shows historical pictures. Parallel an actress translates into French – a rousing, inspiring lecture. Then follows "Oda A Las Cosas / Living Newspaper".



The “Rendez-vous”

EVERY TWO YEARS CHARLEVILLE-MÉZIÈRES IN NORTHERN FRANCE hosts the world’s biggest marionette theater festival, the “Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes”, and the last times Alain Lecucq and Narguess Majd organized their “Rencontres Internationales de Théâtres de Papier” as part of the big festival.

For some time now there is an additional „J-365“ between the „Festivals Mondiaux“, this year in cooperation of «RITP» and «J-365» showing about 40 performances from 15 companies including 4 paper theater companies, the others with object, shadow and puppet theater.

Moreover, Alain Lecucq and Narguess Majd presented the UNIMA workshop, a big exhibition “Théâtres de Papier en France” and lectures about the “Futur du théâtre de papier”.

The festival was a great success with almost all performances sold out in advance.

“Rendez-vous Marionnettes J-365” – official program booklet

The paper theater performances

“LE FORUM”: A FORMER CINEMA HALL, LARGE AND DARK, with 500 seats. About 100 plastic chairs are set up in front of the one and a half meter high stage for the paper theater shows. The basic equipment of all venues in Charleville-Mézières include sophisticated lighting and sound technology.

In the small-format program, the four paper theater performances are provided with an extra button.



ON THURSDAY ALAIN LECUCQ, one of the great innovators of the genre, begins his legacy: “Histoire fragile du Théâtre de Papier” (The Fragile History of Paper Theater).

In the mighty, magnificent work, we are taken along on an entertaining journey through all stages and forms of play, accompanied by Narguess Majd as a comic assistant.



THEN ON FRIDAY THREE PERFORMANCES of the play “La Vie secrète des Chats” (The Secret Life of Cats) by the Mexican ensemble “Huellas en Venus”.

For more than 50 minutes the performers Ana Cordelia Aldama and Miguel Angel Morales act behind a table, on which they constantly set up and dismantle a plethora of paper cats in all imaginable variations. Quote from the program: “Flying cats, giant cats, extra-terrestrial cats ... over a hundred paper characters come to life under the eyes of the public ...”

The translation of the Spanish text cascades into French is constantly projected on a screen: focusing on reading and understanding, it’s impossible to simultaneously track the actors. So if you decide on the spectacle, you have to realize in frustration that distance and the steeply rising viewing angle make it impossible to understand what is happening on stage.

Thus, due to inappropriate conditions, the secret life of cats remained hidden to a large part of the public ...

**Rencontres
Internationales
de Théâtres de
Papier**



The former cinema hall "Le Forum", in the foreground the mixing consoles for light and sound

SATURDAY: "YASE TAMAM" FROM IRAN – three performances of "La Poussière et la Couronne" (Dust and Crown). Quote from the program (free translation): "Author and director Zahra Sabri ... chose in her new play the form of paper theater to approach the phenomenon of power hunger and to describe the tremendous efforts of certain people in the struggle for their ultimate goal: to obtain the crown. Inspired by William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "Macbeth", the play takes us into the story of these men and their lives crushed by this quest. In the end remain only the crown and a pile of dust."

The performers Saeed Abbak and Fahimeh Barotchi in black dresses, the stage, the hall, everything in black. In the beginning big paper tears fall out of the eyes of the mute actors, who are bent over a corpse made of paper. As they rise, light ribbons stretch over the shoulders: the fate threads?

Not visible from the bottom: these elastic bands are laid on the stage floor, and throughout the entire play, the performers move in pantomime with a bow-strapped band over their shoulders. Music and sounds from the speakers and above all the suggestive play of the backstage oud player Ahmad Heidari create a magical atmosphere.



Narguess Majd and Alain Lecucq
in a scene of their
"Histoire fragile du Théâtre de Papier" –
photo from the program booklet



The ensemble "Huellas en Venus" from Mexico: Miguel Angel Morales and Ana Cordelia Aldama (actors), Gerardo Castillo (dramaturgy and assistant director), Mauricio Martinez (director and music) (from left to right) – photo from the program

Paper cranes, paper corpses, paper masks, paper crowns, paper swords shine brightly in the dark room, love, struggle, death, grief, desperation, anger: blood-red colored elements flash again and again. After an hour, the spectators emerge as if out of hypnosis.



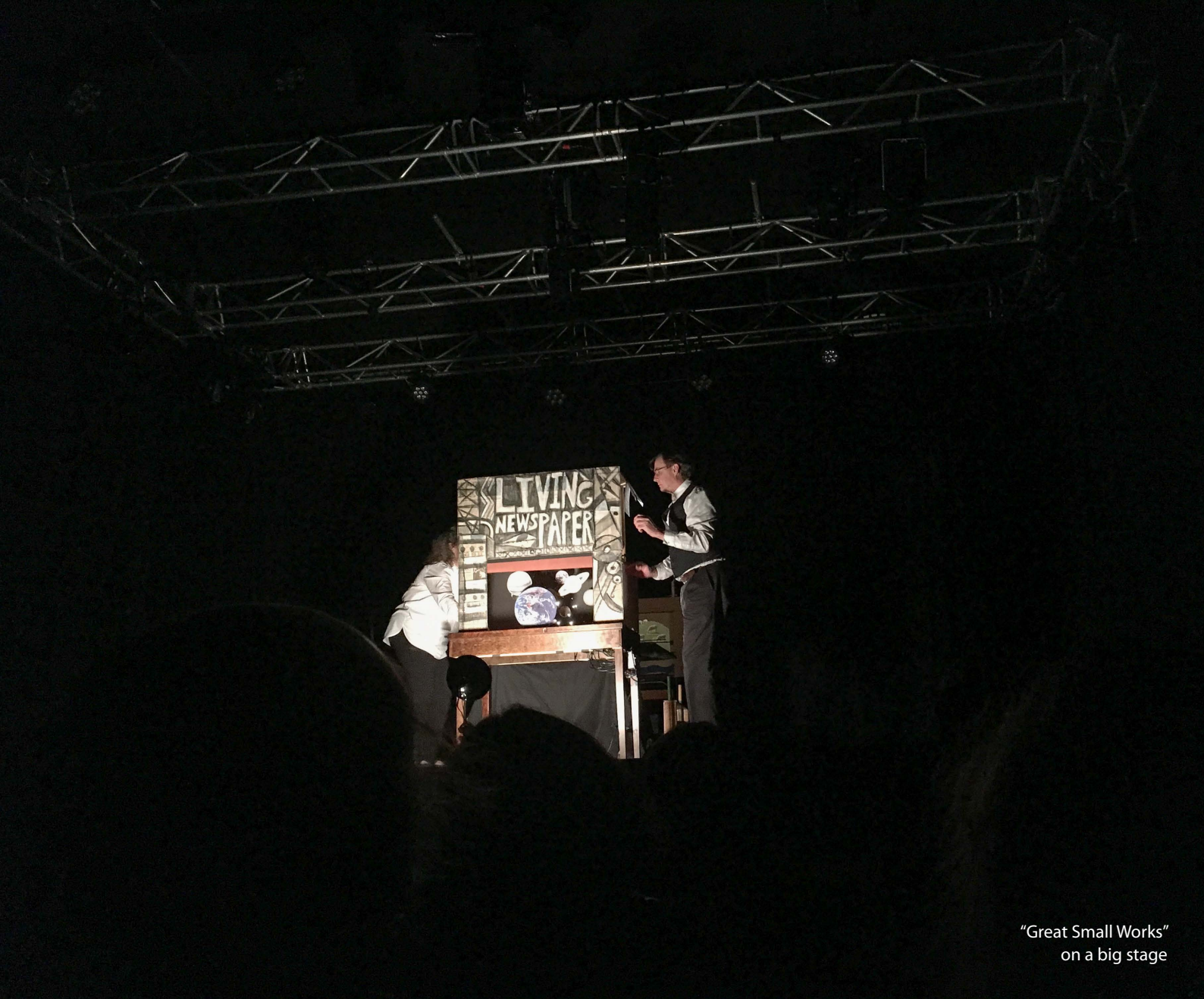
SUNDAY: "THE SHORT, ENTERTAINING HISTORY OF TOY THEATER / Oda a las Cosas / Living Newspaper". As a second piece, John Bell and Trudi Cohen from the New York based theater collective "Great Small Works" – founded in 1995 – perform a poem by Pablo Neruda. Mauricio Martinez presents the words in the Spanish original, translated into French by the actress. John Bell softly plays the accompaniment with his guitar, while Trudi Cohen turns the "cranky", the rolling background, which in turn shows the simply drawn objects, the poem's "cosas".

The first two shows are quite effective in the large hall with its raised stage.

The third one is "Living Newspaper – Episode Two: Sidewalk Ballet".

The Theater: a large cardboard box painted around the stage as newspaper headlines. The performers manipulate from the sides, everything is set up for spectators at eye level.

But unfortunately there is not much magic left of the show in "Le Forum". The whole time we look in the disorderly ceiling, and through the view from below, the performers get a disproportionately big presence in their concentrated reading of the French text. The illusion, originally captivating in its simplicity, fails to work. "C'est un crime – That's a crime", says a spectator at the end of the performance about the venue.



"Great Small Works"
on a big stage

ON MONDAY MORNING we saw a "Spectacle visuel and musical avec marionnettes": "L'Arbre" (The Tree), played by the "Compagnie Via Verde" from France. In the "Médiathèque Voyelles" we experienced the perfect venue: a compact stage, 140 comfortable armchairs in semicircular rising rows, and there was the feeling of closeness and immediacy that small theaters need.



Scene from
"L'Arbre"



Detail view "La Poussière et la Couronne" – photo from the program booklet
Audience on stage at the theater box of "Great Small Works"





Workshop and “Débat”

ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON WE WERE INVITED to see the results of the workshop organized by UNIMA: “Paper, Puppet, People – When Youth Re-invent Heritage: Exploring roots of paper theater”.

Alain Lecucq and Narguess Majd had worked with 17 participants from many countries on William Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”.

For exemple, three women had built a pinball machine out of cardboard and paper: they were the witches, using Macbeth as a ball.

There were impressing stages in construction and design, and the enthusiasm of the newcomers was delightful to watch.

The high level of work in the design of theaters, characters and texts and the performing were amazing. And finally: In the spacious studio room we had ideal conditions for a good view.



SATURDAY MORNING 9:00 AM: “Débat sur le thème: Futur du théâtre de papier, ouvert aux amateurs ou découvreurs.” (Debate on the topic: The future of paper theatre, open to amateurs and discoverers.) – a series of lectures followed by a general discussion.

Who would attend this event on an early Saturday morning?

We were amazed when the seminar room in the “Espace Festival” was almost completely filled, especially by the students and participants of the past workshop, but also by one or the other amateur and discoverer.



Alain Lecucq welcomes the audience to present the workshop results – participants show “their” Macbeth



Trudi Cohen and John Bell: "Political engagement; Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow"

In the beginning, John Bell talked about "Political engagement; Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow" with surprising examples from the early 19th century. Trudi Cohen talked about her time as the director of the New York "International Toy Theater Festival".

Marlis Sennewald, director of the "Pretzer Papiertheatertreffen", gave her talk on artistic development: "30 Years of Evolution; in which Direction?"

Alejandro Benítez lectured on the economic aspects of his "Festival Internacional de Teatro de Papel de Ciudad de México": "Economical Crisis; a Barrier to Break Down".

Narguess Majd had a look at the big picture with her guidelines: "More Interest in Paper Theatre; through which Means?"

At the end, Barbara Steinitz talked about her professional connection to paper theater: "Capacities; an Illustrator's Viewpoint".

The future of paper theater? First of all, it was more about the past, but whoever wanted, could learn from the lectures about future developments.

At any rate, the listeners were eager to take notes and were fully committed getting into the medium themselves.



Narguess Majd: "More Interest in Paper Theater; through which Means?"

Germany and the rest of the paper theater world

This is what Toy Theater is:
Got an Arch
It's miniature
Made of paper
And it's flat
And you can do it yourself.

ALL OVER THE WORLD, what has come to be known as “paper theater” has long since evolved from these “five most important things”, since the revival in England in the 1960s, and in Preetz at the end of the 1980s. Collectors began to take off their historical paper theaters from display and to perform historically.

And on the technical side even the toughest traditionalist today will be quite relaxed when it comes to sound from the CD player, LED lights, Photoshop with inkjet printing and hot glue gun.

Meanwhile, mostly everywhere in the world

- ▶ paper theater is played openly;
- ▶ this results in dimensions beyond “miniature”;
- ▶ many different materials join the paper;
- ▶ therefore contemporary theaters are only partially flat,
- ▶ and it is hardly possible for the amateur to keep up with claim and effort of the professional.



FRANCE: FROM THE UNIQUE PROMOTION OF CULTURE IN THIS COUNTRY also benefit small theaters beyond the major stages, and anyone who has ever experienced one of the many festivals, such as those in Charleville-Mézières or Avignon, is overwhelmed by the quantity, diversity and class of the shows. There are book-like “notebooks” for the official program, similar thick brochures for the unofficial, the “Off programme”, besides to the official and the unofficial street program.

Usually, the organizers try to specify a category: puppet, shadow, children, youth, object, paper theater. In doing so, the forms have long since merged and complemented each other, albeit not with Alain Lecucq and Narguess Majd with their “Compagnie Papierthéâtre”, although their style of staging has moved far from the historical origins.

In order to be able to live from their art, they are dependent on playing with a full-length program in front of a big audience. The “Histoire fragile du Théâtre de Papier” occupies the space of a large theater stage in breadth and depth, in the current production “Un secret de rue” there are three large windows in a stage-wide black wall in which five actors – “Jeu et manipulation” – move a variety of large photo characters. The construction took three years, two small trucks are needed for transport.



MORE HUMANS – LESS PAPER: A visit to the 5th International Paper Theater Festival in Mexico City in 2018 showed that actors there discover the medium for themselves. Instead of waiting more or less in vain for engagements, they are able to offer their own theater without much effort and go touring. In their shows its no longer paper which carries the story, but mainly the actor. Paper serves as an illustration at best, and the usually verbose lecture makes the paper material appear largely superfluous.

Of course there are quite convincing “mixed forms” with strong acting – three examples from different countries:

- ▶ Cartoonist Ham Khan from Argentina and his ensemble “Hamishibai” works in “Los cuentos absurdos de Ham” (The absurd stories of Ham) with full physical effort: roars, dances, jumps and directs the attention of the spectator to the large cardboard boxes with their drawn ones “Absurd stories”.
- ▶ Yulya Dukhovny from the USA presents – on her refined little revolving platform – haunting paper installations in her play “Into the Rice Fields”. She uses the entire stage space in choreographed movements in the style of the traditional Japanese Noh theater.
- ▶ Steinitz+Kollin from Berlin show great personal presence in “The Winged Tailor”: Musician Björn Kollin “plays” in a double sense, and Barbara Steinitz repeatedly enters into dialogue with her characters and thus joins the crowd of paper-based performers.



Group photo at the closing party of "J-365" (above); the two actors Fahimeh Barotchi and Saeed Abbak of "Yase Tamam" (bottom left); Narguess Majd, festival director Anne-Françoise Cabanis, Alain Lecucq, Marlis Sennewald (bottom right)

OPEN PLAY: Originally it meant that the player at his traditional stage is not hidden behind a curtain. In the 1980s pioneers such as Alain Lecucq began moving around their characters on a table and over the years countless varieties of open playing emerged, right up to to “Yase Tamam”, whose performers pantomime their way with paper objects in hand or attached to the body – and the three workshop participants with their Macbeth pinball machine.



GERMANY, DENMARK, AUSTRIA: Nowhere else in the world there is a comparably lively amateur scene, here you will find mainly a historical way of performing.

Storytellers, hobbyists, constructors, craftsmen, opera directors, theater managers, musicians, puppeteers, – professionally trained (such as artists, art teachers) or not: they mostly create new variations of the traditional medium – without too much pressure to serve a public market.

Dirk Reimers who likes to refer to his stage as the “boulevard of paper theater” remains with his wife Barbara deliberately on a level that can inspire visitors to create their own paper theater show.

And if you look from close up at the stage of e. g. Uwe Warrach it is hard to believe that you can create so much illusion with such casually glued cardboard boxes and the simplest lighting installation.

On the other hand, there are companies such as “Haases Papiertheater”, “Das Wiener Papiertheater”, “Papirniks Papiertheater”, which achieve the highest virtuosity with their special forms and ingenious technology.

The general repertoire still includes fairy tales, operas and other traditional materials, but also fascinating new shows, for example:

Robert Jährigs “Papiertheater Heringsdorf” has effectively staged “SOS Italia”, a radio play from 1929 based on a true story. With “Philemon and Baucis” Family Römer and their “Privattheater” offer a highly amusing contemporary social comedy. “Goldberg” by the “Théâtre Mont d’Hiver” is a fictitious, satirical docudrama about the genesis of Bach’s Goldberg Variations.



PAPER THEATER LIVES! in Germany, Denmark, Austria: as discipline on it’s own with the exiting opportunity to bring individual skills to the stage with fairly modest effort.

In the rest of the world professional pressure but also the urge for something new have long since led to the dissolution of any conventions.

The “Preetzer Papiertheatertreffen” has grown over decades as an attractive forum for performers and spectators. This year a pure object theater production was presented besides the many paper theater shows: “BANG!” by the “Compagnie Volpinex” from France. It was an audience record. What is the implication for the local community? Everyone has to find his own answer.

THE END

***AUTHOR’S NOTE:** Having visited various festivals in Germany, France, Mexico, and exchange with players and enthusiasts, I want to describe my personal observations. There is a variety of other aspects and there also in Germany is great openly played paper theater – as this year in Preetz by Sarah Schiffer with her “Bluebeard” - and I apologize to everyone who feels unjustifiably not mentioned or misjudged.

Related Links

[Video recording of "The Short, Entertaining History of Toy Theater" from 2012](#)

[Official booklet 2018 "Rendez-vous Marionnettes J-365"](#)

["Histoire fragile du Théâtre de Papier" in Preetz 2016](#)

["Ode to Common Things / Living Newspaper" in Preetz 2017](#)

[Announcement of the UNIMA workshop "Paper, Puppet, People"](#)