

Travelling exhibition of the Museum of Puppetry Arts

# The magical world of theatre puppets



**Nukuteatri-  
museum**



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# The magical world of theatre puppets

The Museum of Puppetry Arts is located in the Old Town of Tallinn next to the Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences, and is home to more than 800 theatre puppets that have once performed on stage. For the first time, the travelling exhibition takes the Museum of Puppetry Arts to places across Estonia. The travelling exhibition is a short form of the Museum of Puppetry Arts' permanent exhibition and similarly offers insight into the history of puppetry as well as a chance to play with puppets and learn about the process of producing a play.

The art of puppetry, or the art of animating an inanimate object, is an ancient practice that for thousands of years belonged to the world of adults. It is only in the last hundred years or so that puppet theatre has come to be regarded as children's theatre. Puppets usually have possibilities of performing on stage that are different from human actors: a puppet can cross the boundaries set by the human body and is able to do things that humans cannot: fly, turn from animate to inanimate, disappear in a second, etc.

The life of a theatre puppet begins with the puppet maker. Puppet makers create puppets by hand, based on the designer's sketches. The puppet finally comes to life in the hands of the puppeteer. To illustrate this process, the exhibition displays design sketches through seven decades; visitors can themselves try to design a theatre puppet and examine tools and materials needed for creating a puppet. Everyone can also try what it feels like to be a puppeteer and to bring the puppets to life.

Similarly to the Museum of Puppetry Arts' permanent exhibition, the travelling exhibition also introduces most widespread puppet types like shadow puppets, table top puppets, glove puppets, rod puppets and marionettes. Each puppet type is represented by one or more examples of the Puppet Theatre's (today's Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences) past productions. They are mostly copies of valuable original puppets, made specifically for the travelling exhibition by the puppet makers of the Theatre for Young Audiences. Puppets were chosen for the exhibition from various decades and the choice reflects the Puppet Theatre's past and present artistic directors and head designers.

**HAPPY PLAYING!**

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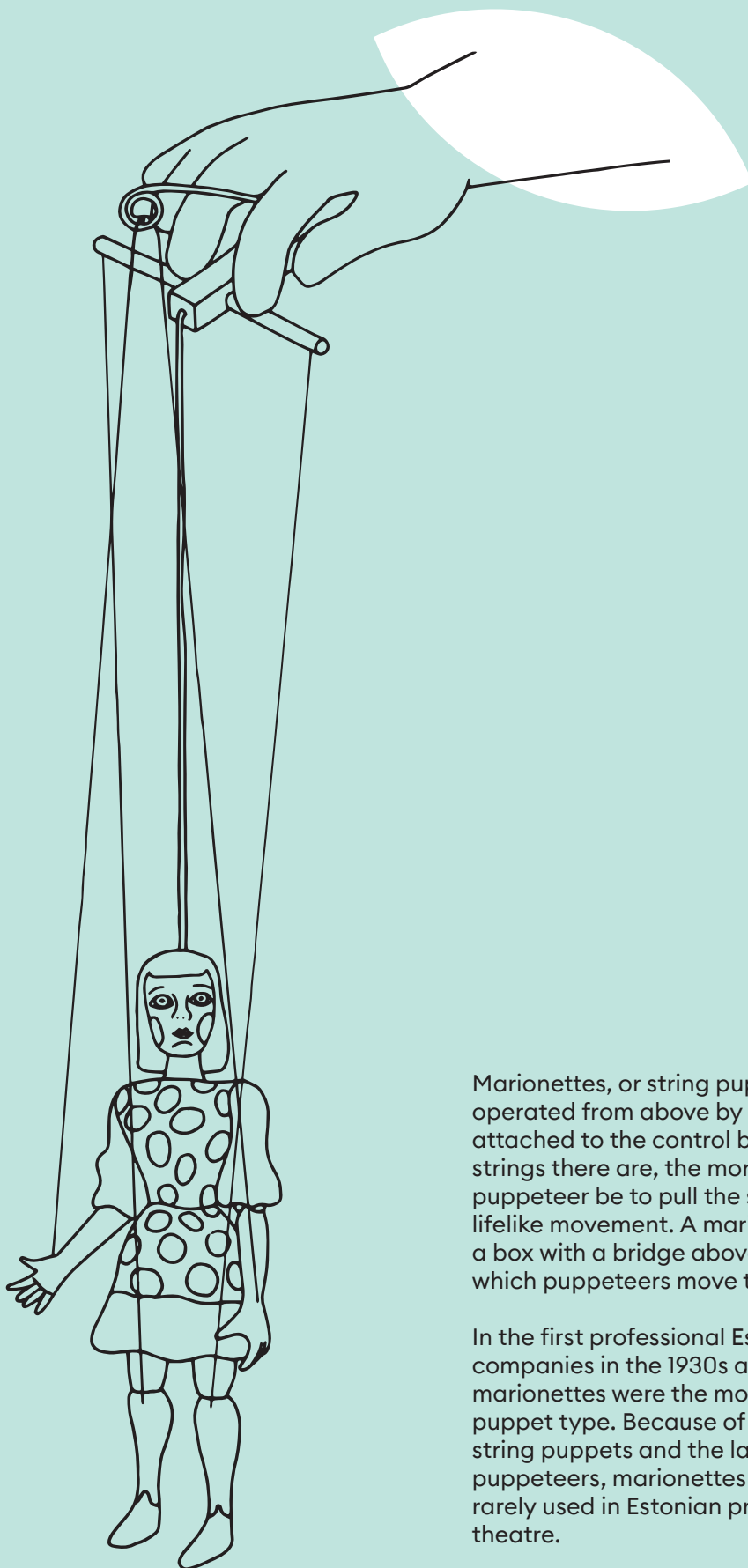
**BROCHURE DESIGN:** Helmi-Elfriede Arrak

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**GRAPHIC DRAWINGS OF PUPPETS:** Laura Linna

**WE THANK:** Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences, Theatre and Music Museum

# Marionette



Marionettes, or string puppets, are operated from above by strings or wires attached to the control bar. The more strings there are, the more skilful must the puppeteer be to pull the strings and create lifelike movement. A marionette stage is a box with a bridge above the stage, from which puppeteers move the puppets.

In the first professional Estonian puppet companies in the 1930s and 1940s, marionettes were the most widely used puppet type. Because of the complexity of string puppets and the lack of marionette puppeteers, marionettes are nowadays rarely used in Estonian professional puppet theatre.





## THE DEWDROP FAIRY

### *The Dewdrop Fairy*

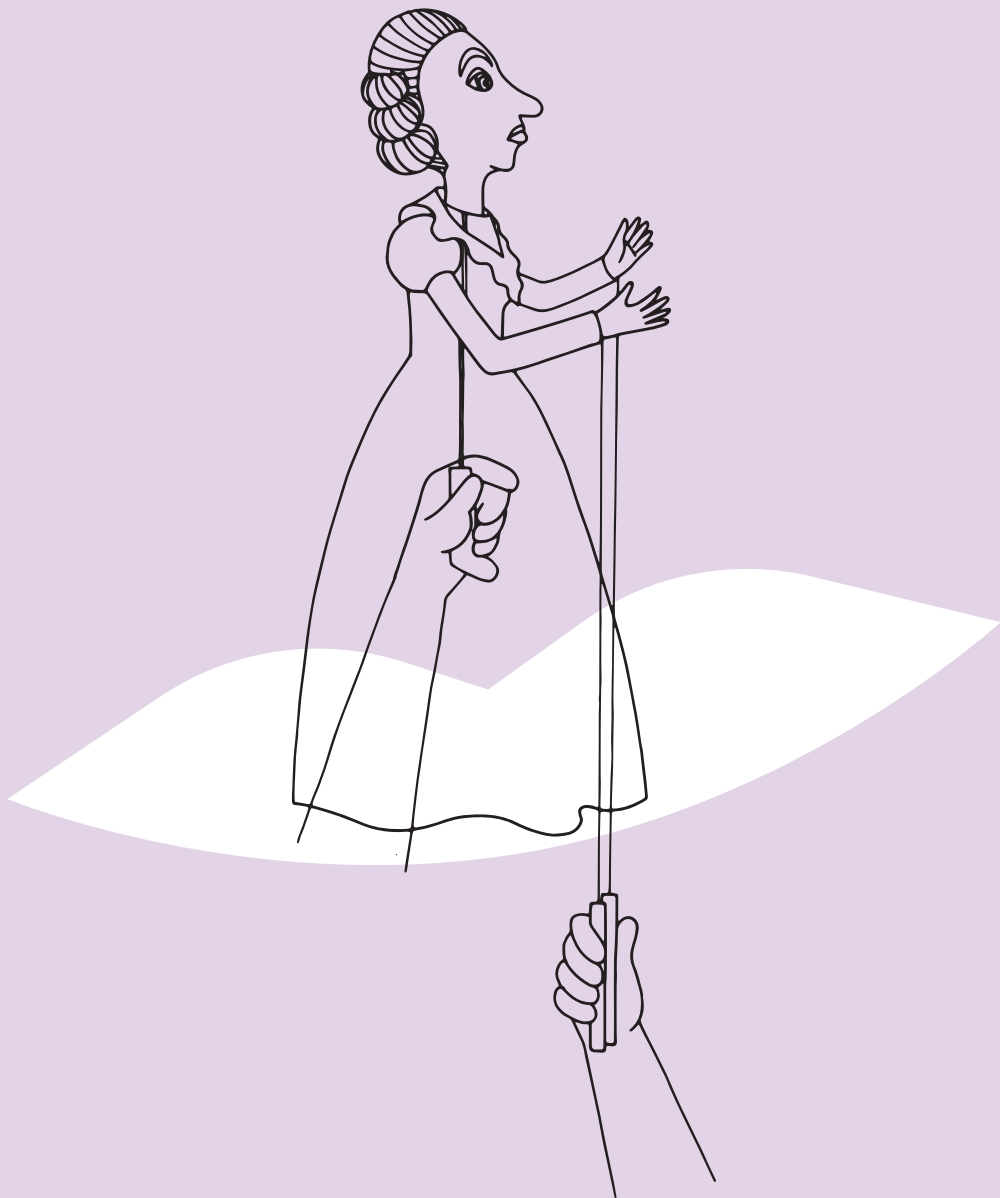
Marionette  
Copy from 2023  
Production of the Estonian Drama Theatre's  
puppetry group  
Premiere: 19<sup>th</sup> Feb 1944  
Author: Lo Tui  
Director: Oskar Seljaru  
Designer: Lo Tui

### THE OLDEST PUPPET

The Dewdrop Fairy is the oldest puppet in the Museum of Puppetry Arts' collection. It is even older than the Puppet Theatre. The story of The Dewdrop Fairy took the viewers into a fantastical fairy tale world of talking trees and birds, mist ladies and fairies. The Dewdrop Fairy lost her magic veil and went to search for it, venturing into the realm of underground bugs, then on to the stars, the Rainbow Boys and finally to the Mist Lady. The production was praised for its spiritedness, completeness and high level of puppetry.



# Rod puppet, or Javanese puppet



The birthplace of the rod puppet is believed to be the Indonesian island of Java; they are therefore also called Javanese puppets. The origin of the rod puppet is traced back to the shadow puppet, which was also operated by rods.

Rod puppets are played with on a screen that hides the puppeteer. Any concealing wall or fabric can be a stage for rod puppets. The audience sitting in front of the screen cannot see the puppeteer.

The rod puppet is controlled by a central rod and several smaller ones. The central rod supports the body and the head; two thinner rods control the arms. The puppet's

head and arms are its main means of expression. A rod puppet does not walk but rather slides above the screen. Even if it does have legs, they usually just dangle and are only used in the show for specific purposes.

There are simple single-rod puppets as well as those with complex additional features, such as mechanisms attached to the central rod that enable to move the puppet's head, body, shoulders, neck and mouth.



Rod puppet  
Copy from 2023

## STEPMOTHER

### *Cinderella*

Premiere: 30<sup>th</sup> Jun 1956  
Author: Tamara Gabbe  
Director: Ferdinand Veike  
Designer: Raivo Laidre  
Composer: Vladimir Tarkpea

### THE OLDEST PRESERVED PUPPET OF THE ESTONIAN STATE PUPPET THEATRE IN THE COLLECTION OF MUSEUM OF PUPPETRY ARTS

The Stepmother puppet from the 1956 production *Cinderella*, which had been passed on as a gift for decades, found its way back to the museum in 2018. When the puppet's owner Inga Sünt identified Stepmother by its control rods as a theatre puppet, she brought it back to its home – the Museum of Puppetry Arts.

*Inga Sünt: "I got the puppet from a relative in the early 1990s, when I was still a child. I played with it for a few years; then it moved to the attic in a bag and has not been used for more than 20 years now. My relative had been given the puppet when she was in primary school, so in the late 1960s. She was extremely happy about the puppet, because toys were hard to come by in the Soviet times. She got it from a neighbour who worked in the Puppet Theatre at the time. The said puppet had been written off in the theatre, so it was not needed there anymore."*



Rod puppet

## SHEEP

### *Babe*

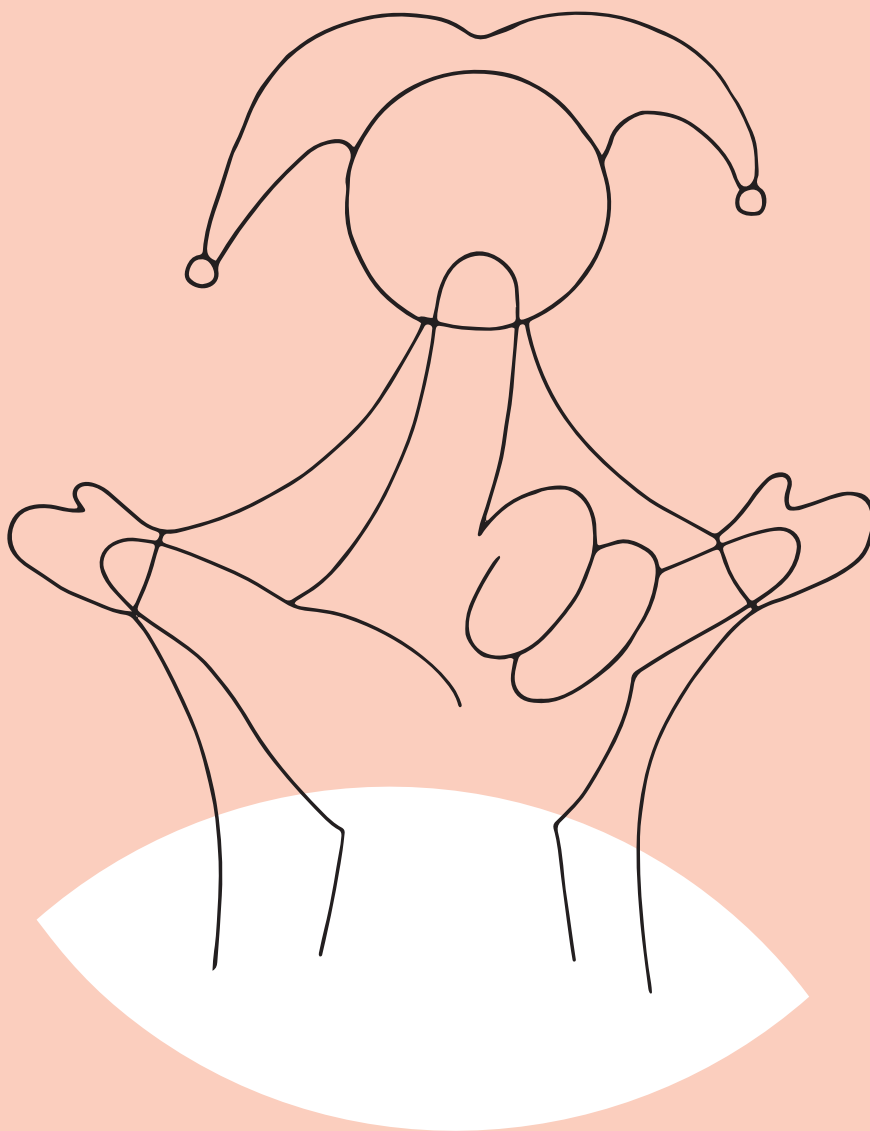
Premiere: 16<sup>th</sup> Mar 2001  
Author: David Wood  
Director: Eero Spriiit  
Puppet designer: Rein Lauks  
Designer: Mari Ann Ahas  
Composer: Tõnu Raadik

### FAMOUS FILM CHARACTERS BECOME PUPPETS

The piglet Babe won the hearts of young viewers in 1995, demonstrating his sheep-herding skills in a film of the same name. The beloved characters of the film were first brought to the Puppet Theatre stage in 2001, when Eero Spriiit staged the family show *Babe*. The director Spriiit described the production as a true family show that warmed the hearts of children and made the fathers laugh too. Everyone found something in the piglet Babe to identify with.

In the show, the piglet called Babe came to live on a farm, winning the hearts of farm animals and people. The friendly piglet warded off thieves and protected sheep from feral dogs. He also filled his master's dream by winning first prize at the sheep herding competition for sheep dogs.

# Glove puppet



Similarly to rod puppets, glove puppets are played with behind a screen that hides the puppeteer. The audience sitting in front of the screen cannot see the puppeteer. When playing with a glove puppet, the puppeteer's hand is inside the puppet and their fingers move the puppet's hands.

In Europe, glove puppets became popular in the *commedia dell'arte* shows in 17<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The most famous of such glove puppet characters was the long-nosed Pulcinella, who travelled to France with itinerant actors and took on the name Polichinelle.



Glove puppet  
Copy from 2020

## HARLEQUIN

### *The Golden Key, or the Untold Adventures of Buratino*

Premiere: 14<sup>th</sup> Sept 2008  
Author: Ibragim Shauoh  
Director: Evgeny Ibragimov  
Designer: Lucia Skandikova  
Composer: Jaak Sooäär

### SIX BURATINO TALES ON THE PUPPET THEATRE STAGE

The story of Buratino has been staged six times in the Puppet Theatre. The main character of Uno Leies's first play *Buratino Flies to the Moon* (1962) became the symbol of the 1960s Puppet Theatre. In addition to playing in shows, Buratino was also a television and radio reporter and a journalist advertising the Puppet Theatre's activities. All that, of course, with the help of Ferdinand Veike, the founder and first artistic director of Estonian Puppet Theatre.

The sixth version of the Buratino story, directed by Evgeny Ibragimov, premiered in 2008. This was a new version of the wooden boy's adventures, in which Buratino along with his beloved Malvina and friend Artemon, tried to free their home town from Carabas Barabas's oppressive rule. The fast-paced music-filled show was a symbiosis of high-level puppetry and acting in live plan.



Rod puppet  
Copy from 2020

## SUPER RABBIT

### *Garbage Wolf and Super Rabbit*

Premiere: 02<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2011  
Author: Wimberg  
Director: Vahur Keller  
Designer: Britt Urbla Keller  
Musical director: Kaire Vilgats

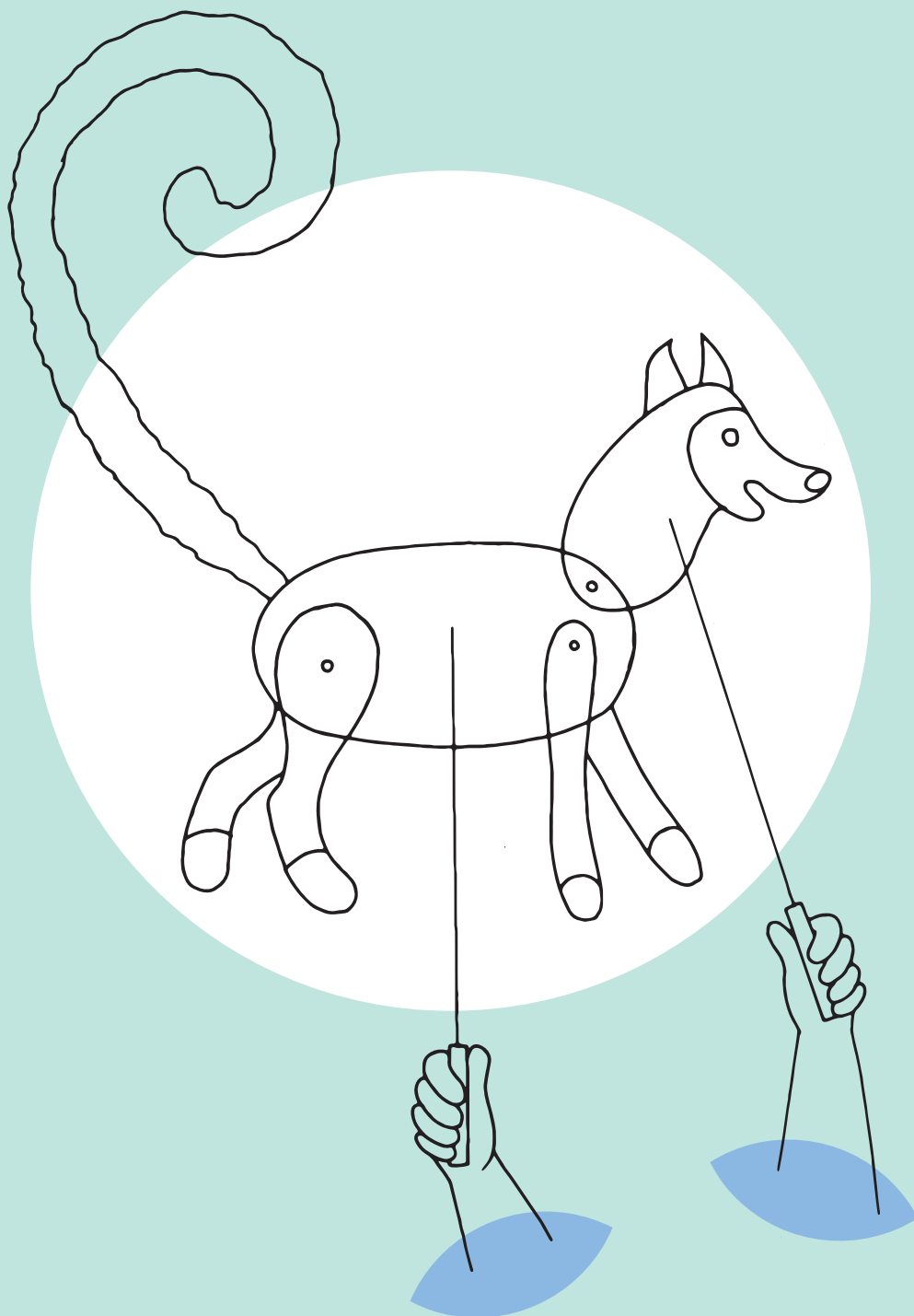
### THEATRE PUPPETS THAT SAVE THE NATURE

The protagonist of the show was a wolf who was chasing a rabbit in the forest – the way it always has been. But this time was different. People had carried so much garbage into the forest that it was hard for forest creatures to even move around. The animals decided to form a forest patrol to confront litterbugs. An ordinary wolf became the Garbage Wolf and an ordinary rabbit a Super Rabbit.

The puppet show *Garbage Wolf and Super Rabbit* spoke of nature conservation and ecological thinking. Performances were followed by discussion rounds, which included not only the Garbage Wolf and the Super Rabbit, but also Ferda the Ant as well as various environmental organisations and initiatives, which were partners of the project.



# Shadow puppet



The shadow puppet is believed to be the oldest puppet type of all. It is said that tens of thousands of years ago, hunters sitting around bonfires illustrated their hunting stories with shadows. Shadow puppets are more widespread in the Orient – China and India. They are not often used in Estonia.

A shadow theatre stage is made up of fabric, some other translucent material or a wall surface. The puppet is placed between a light source and the stage. The size of the shadow changes as the puppet is moved closer to or farther from the light source. In the past, the light sources were oil lamps, candles and torches; nowadays, shadow puppets are often illuminated with stage lights or flashlights.



Shadow puppet  
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## DOG

*Wisdom or Fear of Life*

Premiere: 09<sup>th</sup> Apr 1998  
Author: Vladimir Tarasov  
Director: Eero Spriiit  
Designer: Kalju Kivi  
Music: Tõnu Raadik

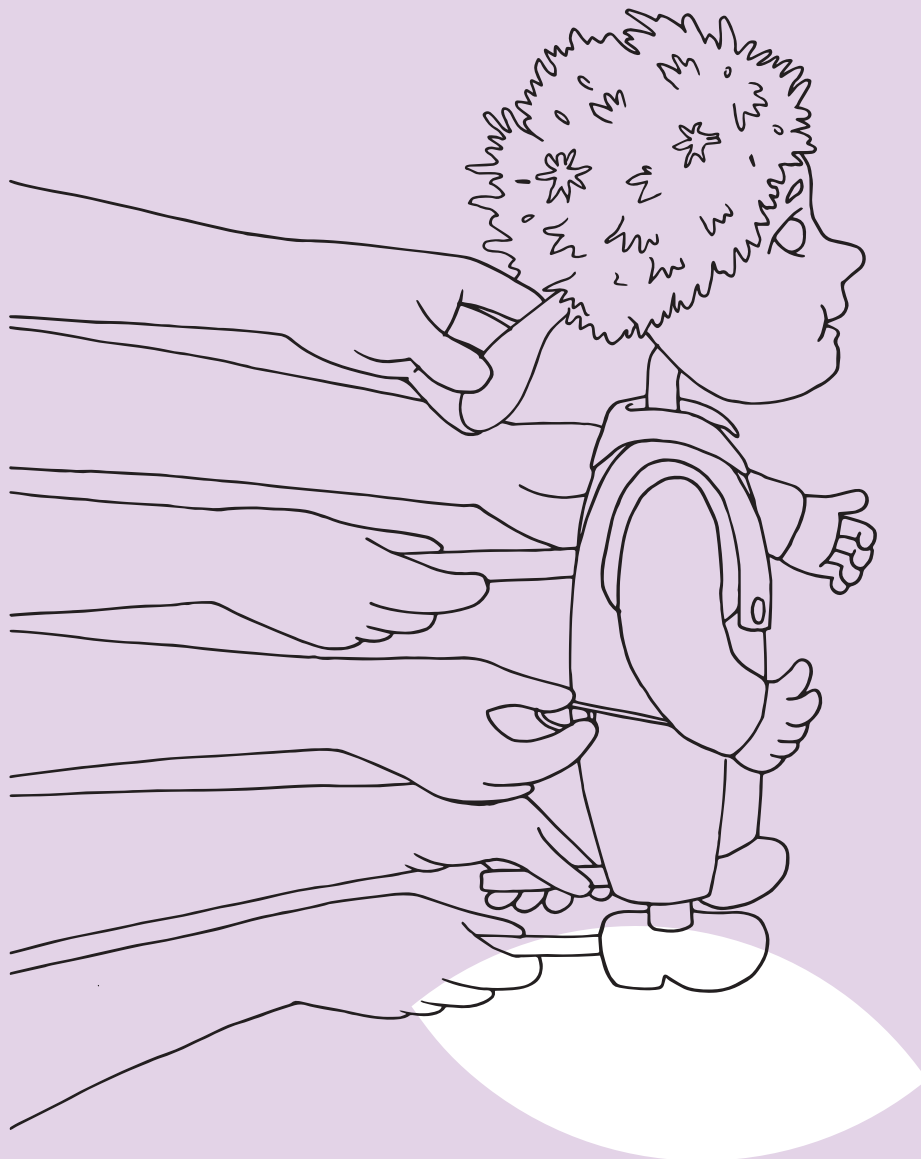
### SHADOWS TEACH GROWN-UPS THE WISDOM OF LIFE

The show for adults was based on Vladimir Tarasov's *Book for Heroes*. The production used various forms of play, such as mime and, for the first time, Chinese shadow theatre. The playing style alluded to Japanese Kabuki theatre, which also inspired the costumes and mask play. A special stage structure was ordered from Germany and the stage design was in the Japanese style. The production boasted very colourful life-size puppets and masks. The shadow theatre scenes were regarded as especially eye-catching.

The oriental tale on the Puppet Theatre stage was filled with allegory. The story took on an especially powerful meaning in its time – how to find the right path in your life, how to stay on that path and how to help others in finding their paths.



# Table top puppet, or puppet operated from behind



The table top puppet is the most widely used puppet type in Estonia. The puppet is usually manipulated simultaneously by three puppeteers, the first controlling the puppet's feet, the second its head and right arm, and the third holding its body and moving the left arm.

Puppeteers playing with the puppet stand behind it, which is why this type is also called 'puppets operated from behind', but also 'black cabinet puppets' and '*Bunraku*-type puppets'.

Table top puppets are played with inside a stage box bordered by black screens on a surface similar to a table top. Lighting

creates an area on the stage that leaves puppeteers dressed in black outfits hidden in the darkness. The playing surface is not restricted to tables, but often involves the floor, parts of the scenery or other actors.

Nowadays, any type of stage is suitable for table top puppets as the puppeteers are often also visible, so the light is on the puppet as well as the puppeteer. Whether the puppet and the puppeteer are equally in the foreground or the focus is on the puppet depends on the director and what they want the puppet to convey to the audience. It is important that the puppeteer follows the puppet with their eyes; this keeps the viewers' attention on the puppet as well.





Table top puppet  
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## ILLIMAR

### *Little Illimar*

Premiere: 04<sup>th</sup> Oct 1975  
Author: Friedebert Tuglas  
Dramatizer and director: Rein Agur  
Designer: Jaak Vaus  
Composer: Raimo Kangro

### **A PUPPET PRODUCTION WITHOUT THE PUPPET SCREEN**

*Little Illimar's* road to the stage was long and toilsome. Only after it had run for a season and received praise at international festivals did the local audience approve *Little Illimar* as a good production.

*Little Illimar* differed from conventional puppet theatre. Viewers found it too complicated and even impossible to understand. The play was performed without the puppet screen. At times the actors on stage became the same character as their puppet, and then again played the character with the puppet. The range of staging techniques and means of expression was extremely versatile; nothing of the kind had ever been seen in Estonian puppet theatre. For the first time, the production used not only ordinary small puppets, but also huge oversized puppets to represent grown-ups.



Rod puppet  
Copy from 2023

## HANS

### *Emma and the Time Stone, or Theatre of the Puppets*

Premiere: 04<sup>th</sup> May 2014  
Author and dramatizer: Mihkel Ulman  
Directors: Mirko Rajas, Taavi Tõnisson  
Designer: Rosita Raud  
Composer and sound designer: Ekke Västrik

### **A PRODUCTION USING MULTIPLE PUPPET TYPES**

*Emma and the Time Stone, or the Theatre of the Puppets* was a grand puppet fairy tale about the love story of a prince and a marionette puppet. It was in the theatre's repertory from 2014 to 2017. The play took place in a kingdom where the prince fell in love with a marionette puppet called Emma. In the course of the story filled with black magic and fantasy, the puppet Emma gradually became a human.

The production cast included sixteen actors, which meant almost all of the actors in the theatre, and there were seventeen puppet characters on the stage. In reality, there were three times as many puppets, as many characters were made in different sizes and both as table top as well as rod puppets.

# 1952

- Founding of the ESSR State Puppet Theatre.
- Ferdinand Veike became the theatre's first artistic director (until 1980).
- The first performance was given on 2<sup>nd</sup> January at 10 a.m; it was Samuil Marshak's *Little Hut*, intended as a New Year's play.
- Raivo Laidre became the theatre's first head designer (until 1967).
- The first new production of the Puppet Theatre – Sergey Mikhalkov's puppet play *The Smarty-Pants Bunny* – premiered on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1952.

# 1954

- Parts of the Lai St 3 building in the Old Town of Tallinn, which housed the Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Air Force and Navy (ALMAVÜ), were allocated to the Estonian State Puppet Theatre – the hall, the foyer and the vestibule with a small cloakroom.

# 1955

- Buratino (played by Uno Leies) stepped on the Puppet Theatre stage for the first time. He quickly became a symbol puppet of the Puppet Theatre.



# 1991

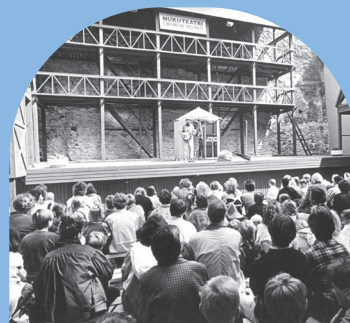
- The theatre was renamed the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.

# 1992

- Ülo Vihma became the artistic director (from Jan to Aug 1992).
- The summer court was turned into an open-air performance venue.

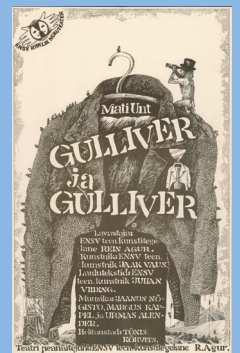
# 1990

- The whole of Lai St 1 building came into the hands of the Puppet Theatre. The stage underwent extensive reconstruction.



# 1982

- Rein Lauks became the head designer (until 1995).



# 1993

- Eero Spriit became the artistic director (until 1997).



# 1996

- Kalju Kivi became the head designer (until 1999).

# 1997

- Allan Kress became the artistic director (until 1999).



# 1958

- The theatre was named the Estonian SSR State Puppet Theatre.



# 1961

- The premiere of *The Devil's Mill* – the first puppet play for adults.



# 1962

- The puppetry department of the Theatre Association's study studio was created as part of the Puppet Theatre.

# 1963

- Fire broke out on the stage and in the hall, after which the theatre part of the building underwent thorough renovation and reconstruction.

# 1981

- Rein Agur became the head director (until 1992).



# 1973

- Rein Agur staged *Little Red Riding Hood*, which was the first production using open play instead of a concealing puppet screen.

# 1971

- Jaak Vaus became the head designer (until 1980).



# 1999

- Evald Hermaküla became the artistic director (until 2000).



# 2000

- Andres Dvinjaninov became the artistic director (until 2006).
- Opening of the youth studio, where many present-day actors and cultural figures have studied over the years.



# 2001

- Kalju Kivi became the head designer again (until 2009).

# 2001- 2003

- Renovation of the theatre house.

## 2004

- The theatre launched the playwriting competition "Attic" for children and the young. The best plays were also staged.



## 2006

- The theatre was renamed the Estonian Puppet and Youth Theatre.
- Opening of a new performance venue – the courtyard was covered with a temporary roof, thus creating a performance hall with more than 600 seats.

## 2007

- Tallinn Treff Festival was launched with a goal to bring world-class puppet productions to Estonian audiences and to develop puppetry in Estonia as well.
- The theatre sent seven young people to study professional puppetry at the Arts Academy in Turku, Finland.



## 2011

- Graduates of the Turku Arts Academy joined the theatre as actors and directors.
- Vahur Keller became the artistic director (until 2013).
- The theatre was renamed the NUKU Theatre.
- Britt Urbla Keller became the head designer (until 2017).

## 2010

- The theatre expanded into the Nunne St 8 building, where the museum and centre for puppetry arts were opened; the theatre, museum and centre were joined under the name NUKU.

## 2013

- Taavi Tõnisson became the artistic director (until 2017).



## 2016

- A new extension with the 400-seat Ferdinand Hall was opened between the theatre and the museum buildings.



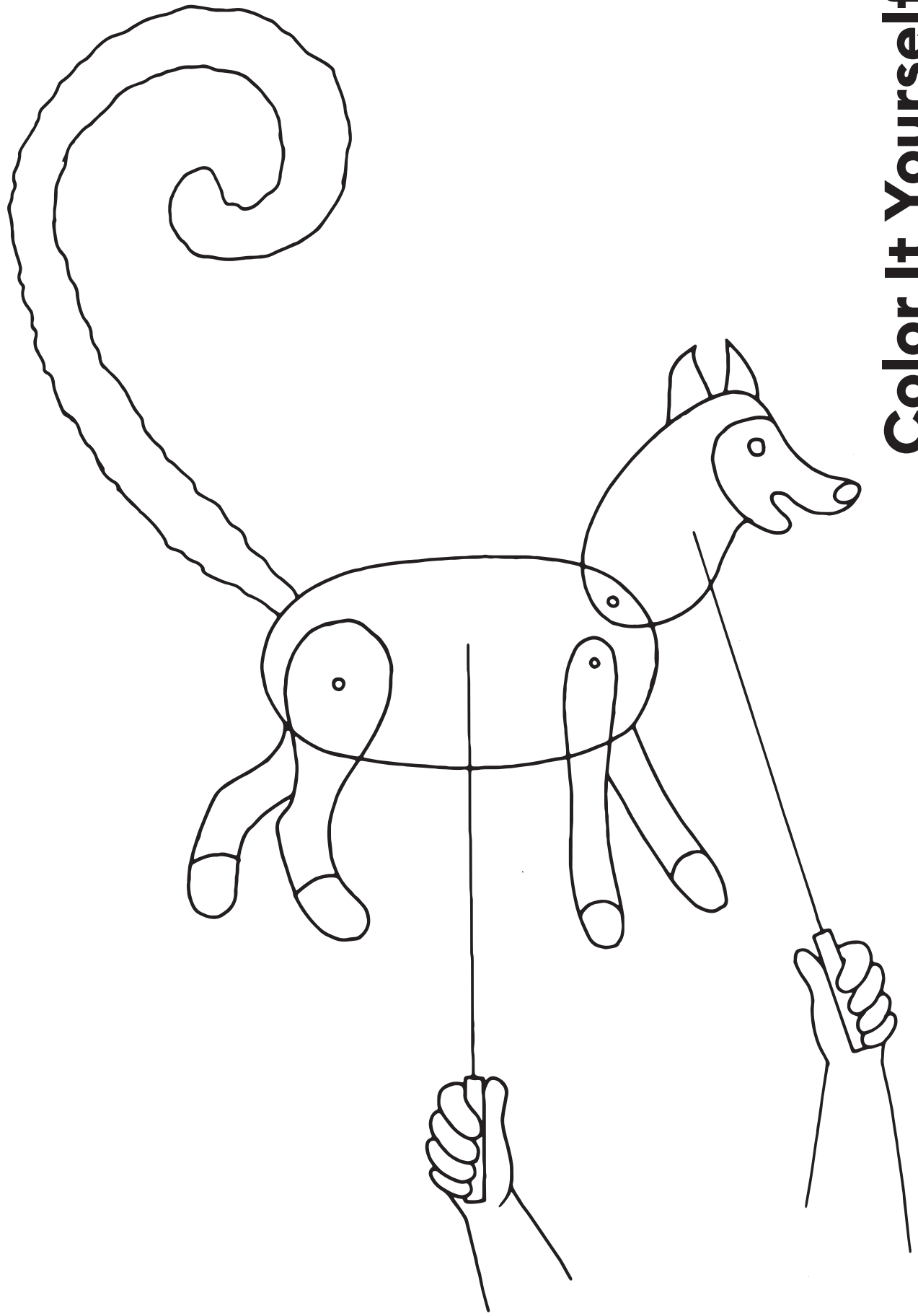
## 2017

- Mirko Rajas became the artistic director (until today).
- Rosita Raud became the head designer (until today).

## 2020

- The theatre was renamed the Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences.





**Color It Yourself!**



# Museum of Puppetry Arts



Part of the Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences, the Museum of Puppetry Arts is a memory institution that introduces Estonian and world puppetry. The Museum of Puppetry Arts was opened on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2010 and is an integral part of the theatre. The museum researches, exhibits and introduces puppetry and visual theatre in a wider sense, as well as the history of puppet theatre in Estonia. There are educational and theatrical programmes, meetings, lectures and workshops. The museum continues a dialogue with the audience, opens the background of theatrical productions and analyses what has been seen onstage.

The permanent exhibition of the Museum of Puppetry Arts takes the visitor back to the year 1952 – the founding of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre (today the Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences). The exhibition tells the story of the seven decades of Puppet Theatre on the corner of Lai Street in Tallinn, exhibiting snippets of the theatre's history from the 1950s to the end of the 2010s.

The second part of the permanent exhibition introduces various puppet types; visitors can play along with table top puppets, rod puppets, glove puppets and marionettes. They can also hear about the life and work of Ferdinand Veike, the Puppet Theatre's first artistic director, and see rare footage of the Puppet Theatre's people and productions. A true flight of fantasy begins with a walk above the head of a seven-metre-tall puppet. The Museum of Puppetry Arts develops creativity and expressive skills by introducing the method of puppet thinking as a means of personal development.



# A funding programme supporting museum visits

It is also possible to attend the educational programmes of the Museum of Puppetry Arts with the help of a funding programme.

The funding programme covers the costs of participating in an educational programme (e.g., a guided tour, a workshop, or a *Meet the Actor and Puppet* event for a group of children from a school or a preschool institution. It is even possible to apply for funding for participating in several educational programmes during one visit.

The programme was launched by the **Riesenkampff family**, who are patrons of the Museum of Puppetry Arts and annual bright-eyed visitors of the museum themselves. The Riesenkampff family is one of the Baltic German families whose ancestors came to the Baltic states in the 16th century and lived here for about 400 years, up to the year 1939, when the majority of Baltic Germans were taken to Germany. Nevertheless, the family never forgot its Baltic roots and especially Estonia, where most of their ancestors come from. The family has founded a non-profit

organisation called Riesenkampff Stiftung, which is run from Berlin and the purpose of which is to support activities connected to children in the Baltic states, focusing particularly on Estonia.

As former Baltic Germans, the Riesenkampffs care about Estonia as well as Estonian children and young people. This is why it is their wish to offer the opportunity of visiting the Museum of Puppetry Arts and attending its educational programmes to the students who would otherwise not come to the Museum of Puppetry Arts.

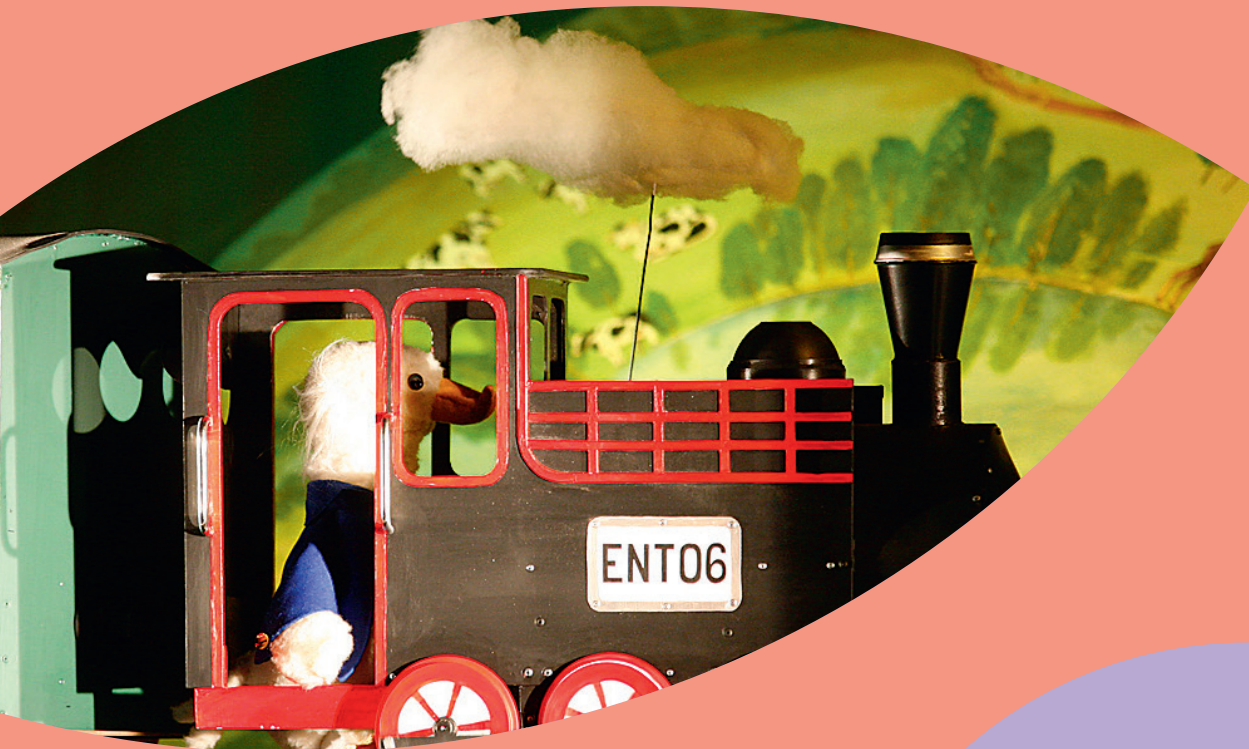
## Conditions:

- groups of children from a school or preschool who live outside of Tallinn and thus have fewer opportunities;
- group size 15–25 children or young people, accompanied by 2–3 adults.

# Puppet and visual theatre productions in the Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences







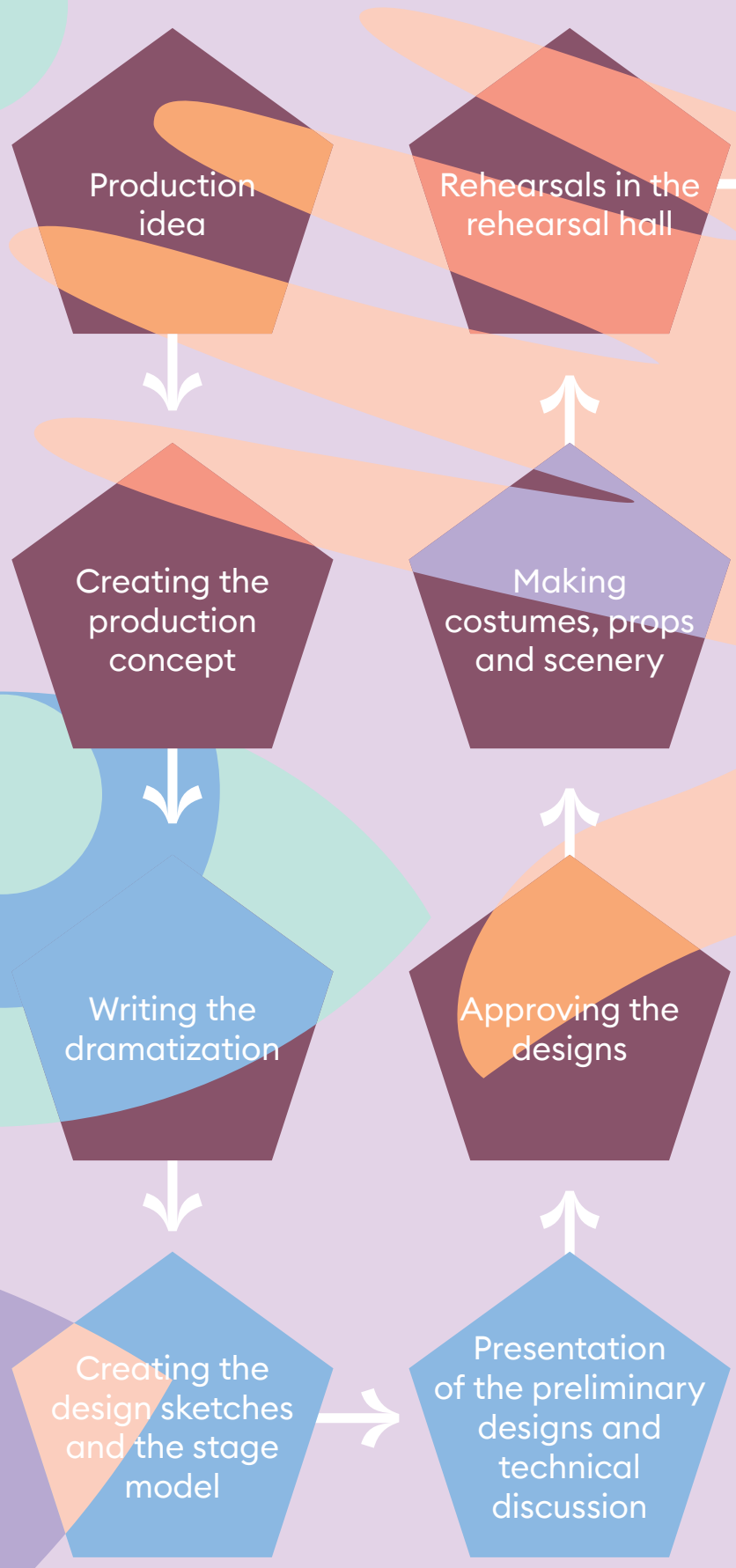
Estonian Theatre for Young Audiences is the only theatre in Estonia that consistently includes puppet and other visual theatre productions in its repertory. Productions are created with the aim of finding a dialogue between the goals of content and visual forms of expression. Promoting visual theatre and preserving puppetry traditions is an integral part of the theatre's identity.

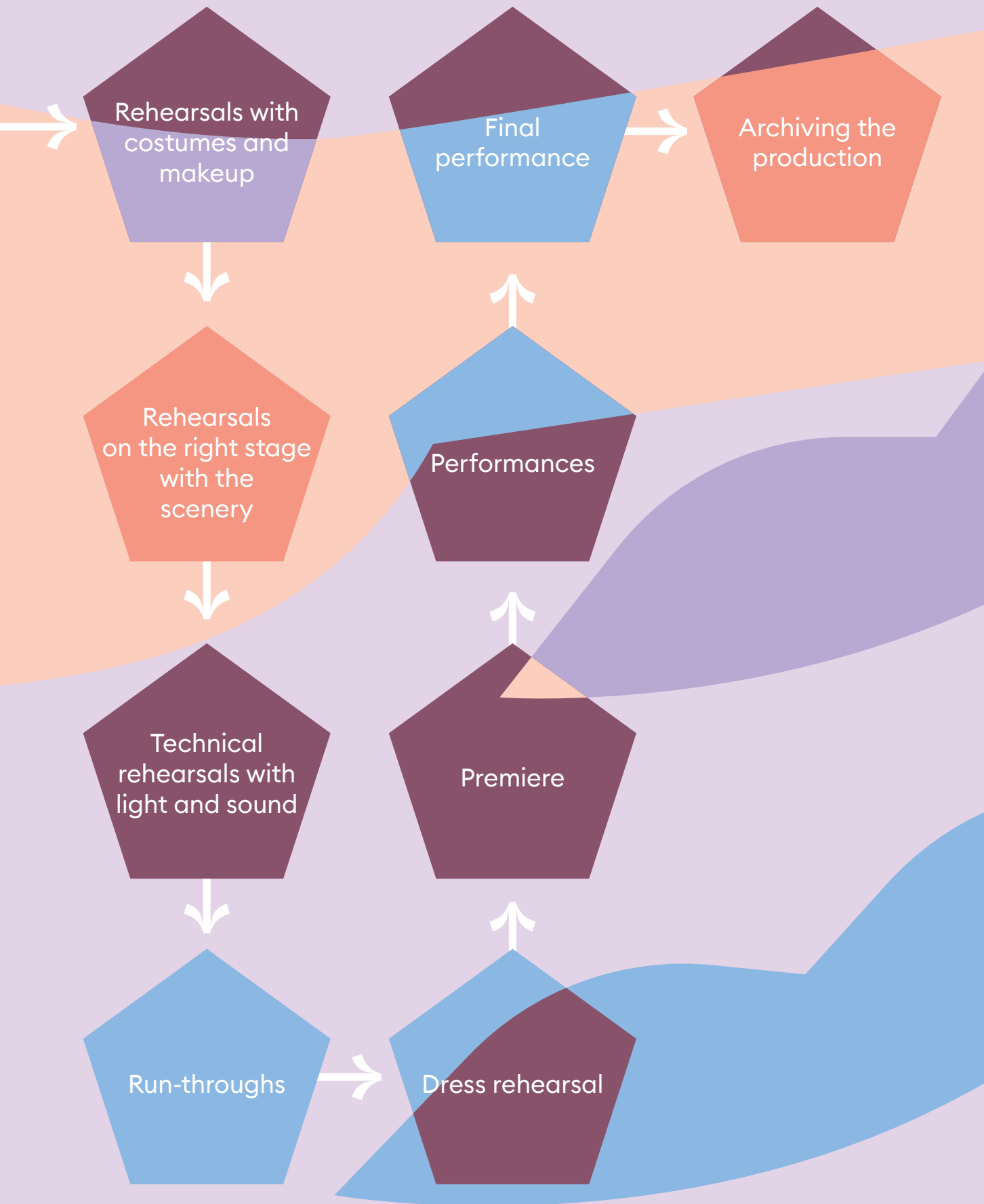
For the youngest viewers, the Theatre for Young Audiences' repertory offers plays written and staged by Helle Laas: *Choo, Choo, Choo* and *Homes*, which for over a decade have been the very first theatre experiences for many children. Other puppet and visual theatre productions for young children include *Weepies' Whispers* (directed by Maria Usk), *The Boy and the Butterfly* (directed by Leino Rei) and *Palle Alone in the World* (directed by Karl Sakrits and Mait Visnapuu), which combines puppetry with video art.

But elements of visual theatre and puppetry are also present in productions for older children, young people and adults, such as the adventurous *Ronja, the Robber's Daughter* (directed by Taavi Tõnisson), which is based on Astrid Lindgren's book of the same name; *Topsy-Turvy* (directed by Leino Rei), a staging of the Estonian animator Priit Pärn's 1980 comic book full of upside-down logic and dizzying word plays; and *The Overcoat* (directed by Daniil Zandberg) based on Nikolai Gogol's work of the same name.

The theatre also organises the international visual theatre festival Tallinn Treff. Over the years, the festival has become a meeting place for contemporary puppet, object, material, physical and multimedia theatre, which under the umbrella term 'visual theatre' looks for an inspiring dialogue of form and content, tradition and innovation.

# Production process








**The Museum  
of Puppetry Arts**

Tickets and bookings:  
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