

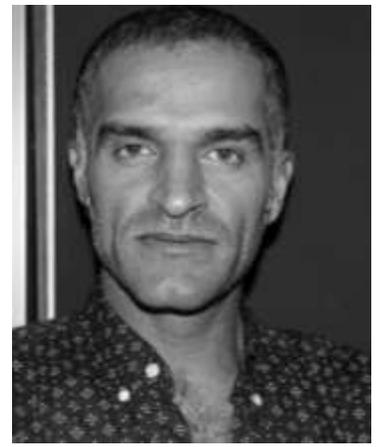
## What's Puppetry Good For?

**Grantee:** Mahmoud Hourani

**Project:** Puppetry workshop in Tunisia.

Story collected by Zena Takieddine, November 1st, 2012

People usually think that puppetry is for children. Actually, they could not be further from the truth. The art of puppetry has always been a critical and satirical form, created by adults, for adults, to address their daily life concerns. Even in the medieval period, it served as a kind of proxy speaker on issues relating to public policy and civil awareness. A puppet became a symbolic character that can express the hopes and frustrations of a people.



What sets puppetry apart from other performance arts is its flexibility and mobility – you can take a puppet with you anywhere you go! You can also design your own puppet quite easily. There is an incredible amount of freedom in that, as it does not necessarily require too much cost. A performer can write a story, create as many characters as he wants, and set up a little puppetry performance in a public space, coffee shop, or street corner, without requiring a theater hall or an extensively large production or a cast of actors. It is truly an autonomous form - a people's art, one that can reach anyone and be created by anyone, with the humblest of means. Of course there are some huge puppetry productions that are also amazing. There's no denying that. But it is important to remember its self-sufficient and grassroots origins as essential to its form and content.

A story that resonates with people gives the puppet's character great weight. It becomes a character that crosses all boundaries. It can speak what people may not dare to say in public. Personally, it is my favorite form of performance and I have dedicated to this field my past 15 years.

Puppetry is a beautifully versatile form that combines all kinds of disciplines together, music, fashion, story-telling, sculpting, stage-design and performing, a mix of animation and acting. Its strength lies in metaphor. A piece of cloth, wood, sponge or clay can be simply molded together to represent something else. It is an abstract visual reference laden with meanings. What a great way to open up imagination! A puppet is mirror, reflecting on our lives. It could be longer or shorter than us, with a big nose, with a dramatic face, but people love looking at it because it is acting out our lives, like a newspaper caricature but in 3-D and with lively presence!

Puppetry is indigenous to the Arab region. In modern times, we have imported so much of our culture from the West: cinema, photography, painting, sculpting. Puppetry, however, is totally a local art. We can find its roots in our neighborhood "hakawati", the local storytellers, and in our famous shadow plays. Shams Al-Din Mohammad bin Danyal al-Moussli became a famous comic poet and shadow puppetry master across the Arab region in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD (7<sup>th</sup> Hijri) particularly because he used his art form to represent the every-day lives of regular people, imitating their different accents and dialects, bringing the diversity of the region to life.

Professor Farouk Saad has published an important resource on the history of Arab shadow puppetry (Khayal Al-Thill Al-Arabi), which ought to be brought to people's attention. He reminds us of this cultural legacy and the great creative expression and social critique that come with it. There was a famously tall puppet in Algeria, for example, which played the powerful hero, strong enough to strike back and destroy the colonizers. In the coffee shops of Jerusalem, Jaffa and Haifa, Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo were many puppets and storytellers. And of course there's the famous Karakoz figure, which means 'Black Eyes' in Turkish. Karakoz was the name of the puppet; he represented a local tough guy (abaday) with tattoos on his arms and a prominent moustache. This puppet-character became so famous that we now use the name of Karakoz to mean puppetry itself.

Despite its former glory, the art of puppetry has experienced a sharp decline - suppressed not only in the Arab region but in Europe as well – and relegated to folkloric use and children's fables. This decline in the art of puppetry, however, now is being slowly revived.

The Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation – APTF – was founded in 2008 in Lebanon by a group of five artists, including myself. Our activities are mainly residencies, which take on the shape of mobile colleges. We've so far been to

Tunisia, Yemen, Kuwait, Egypt and Damascus. Our curriculum is quite advanced; you can say we are almost an academic institution. We teach both theory and practice. Not only how to create and manipulate puppets, but also how puppetry can be used for relevant issues today, analyzing of the strength and flexibilities in this art form.

In the past, for example, there was no such thing as drama therapy for abused children. It was not part of theatrical practice to think of a puppetry character to raise awareness on sexual harassment, for example, or environmental awareness, or human rights. But now, issues of social development are at the forefront and so our curriculum aims to cover not only the history of puppetry but also the contemporary practices of puppet theatre. Puppetry today is also being incorporated into multi-media projects. Contemporary cinema, animations and installations are eager to use the visual and performance effects of puppetry to enrich their stories and include a different level of creativity and imagination in their projects.

Lastly, an important component of our program is training the trainees. Students that sign up for our academy are adults often employed in theatre, education and in social work. We advocate the use of puppeteering in community contexts. Every school, library and refugee camp ought to have a puppet character and a trained puppeteer to address issues that might be difficult to talk about directly or that call for a sense of playfulness or particular guidance. It is not difficult to accomplish such a thing and we are eager to train more people and to raise awareness on the value and the many possible uses of puppetry. We've had five annual residencies to date and over 40 workshops across the Arab region. Our workshops are designed according to demand. Sometimes they're for children, sometimes for teenagers, sometimes for educators. We can also focus on puppet types – say string puppets, hand puppets, shadow puppets and masks. To conduct our APTF Residency in Tunisia this year, we applied for AFAC funding.

It was the first time that Tunisia hosts a puppetry art residency. The ages of the participants were between 20 and 40 years old, men and women, from rural and urban neighborhood of Tunis. We were altogether 5 teachers and 16 students, a great ratio for intensive capacity building. Our participants came from all over the country and it was a fantastic way to revive the capital city's old puppetry theatre - 'Al-Masrah al Watani al Tuni lil 3arayess' - so a lot of press and radio coverage was there too. Our residency was dedicated to teaching the young people new ways of using puppetry in terms of social development for a better future. Some of our student came from Sfax, a big region in Tunisia with little cultural platforms and no theater what so ever. As a result of our residency, they are now inspired to launch a small initiative in their own town, and possibly to set up a touring puppet show. We are currently in touch with them to help them carry through these ideas.

The residency concluded with a final performance involving live puppet making and story telling. The progress our residents experienced and their eagerness to keep going is very inspiring for us and we are looking forward to conducting a second cycle next year. They have big hopes for a new emerging Tunisia and are eager to engage with more audiences, contributing to their sense of community. There is great optimism!

