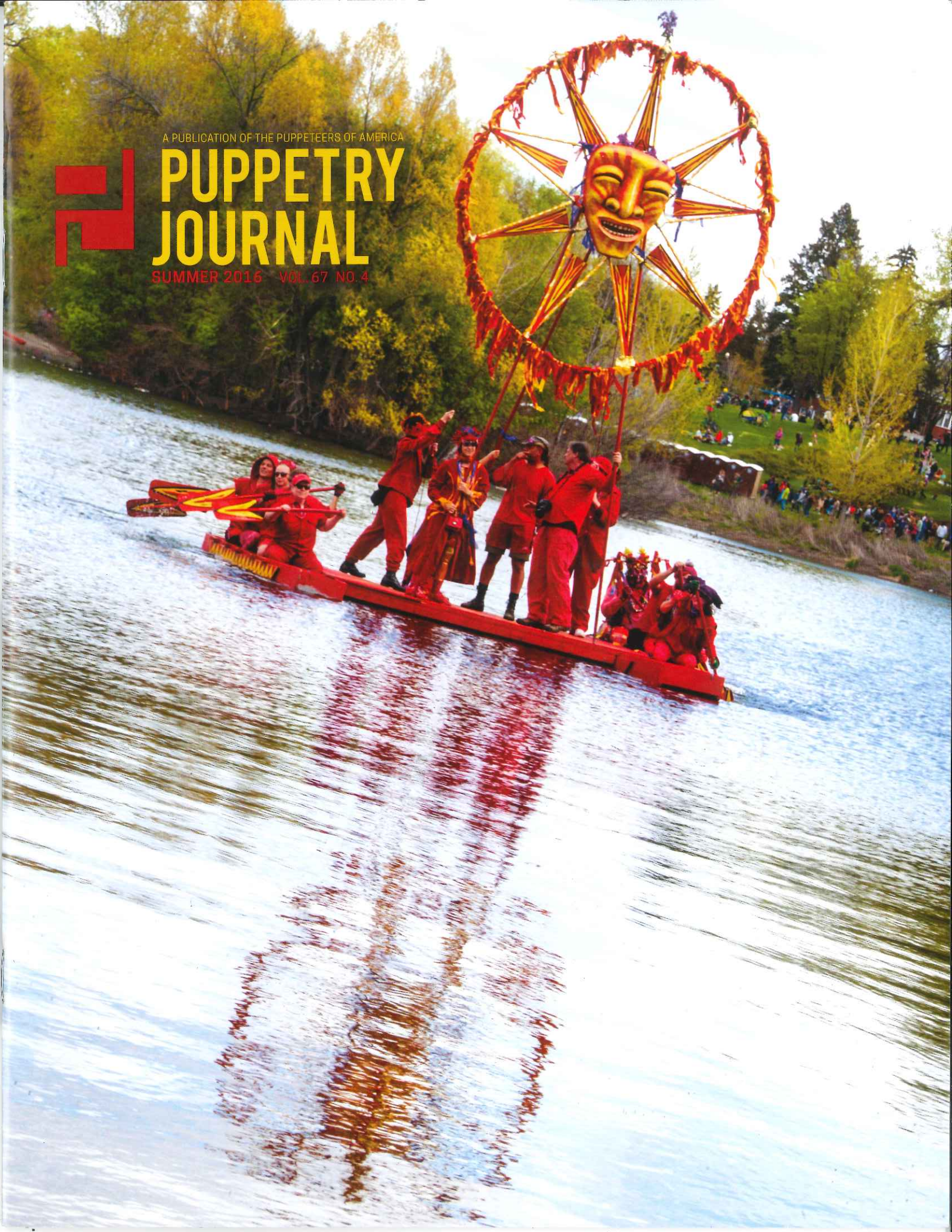


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A Week of the Unexpected

An Account of the 2016 UNIMA World Puppetry Festival in Donostia/San Sebastián, Spain

BY KRISTIN HAVERTY

There seems to be a common thread that connects accomplished North American professional puppeteers of a certain age. While I'm sure there are many exceptions, almost all I have met attended, and were subsequently forever changed by, the 1980 UNIMA World Puppetry Festival in Washington, D.C. For those of us who were not fortunate to be born early enough to enjoy this landmark festival spearheaded by the incomparable Nancy Lohman Staub and supported every step of the way by Jim Henson, this is a festival of legend. We of the younger generation pump our fists toward the sky, crying, "Why?! Why were we born too late?!" As Staub so eloquently recounted recently, the 1980 festival was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity where all the circumstances were right for the U.S.A. to host this costly and logistically challenging event. But while that was indeed a singular moment that may never be repeated, UNIMA, through its national centers, does host a festival every four yearsⁱⁱ to coincide with the convening of the organization's international congress. I had the great honor of attending the 22nd UNIMA Congress and World Puppetry Festival hosted by UNIMA Federación España, the international centre of puppetry, TOPIC,ⁱⁱⁱ in Tolosa, and the city of Donostia/San Sebastián. While the five-day congress was held in Tolosa's TOPIC, the eight-day festival took place in theaters in Donostia/San Sebastián, Spain. Currently the European Capital of Culture, this picturesque city in Spain's Basque Country had its once-in-a-lifetime moment. Each festival bears the stamp of the host country and I return from the experience rejuvenated and hopeful that we of the post-1980-Festival generation do indeed have opportunities to be inspired and forever changed.

From Saturday, May 28 through Saturday, June 4, 2016, festival performances in Donostia/San Sebastián activated the public spaces along the waterfront boulevard, below towering Baroque cathedrals, within Belle Époque theaters and even the local firehouse. The 2016 festival program consisted of Street Performances, Indoor Performances,

a Symposium, Exhibits, and late night presentations hosted by puppeteers from the distinct regions of Spain. As an UNIMA USA councilor, I also had the great opportunity to spend my days in congress meetings at the immaculately designed TOPIC, about forty minutes by bus from San Sebastián. TOPIC and its leadership were instrumental in bringing the festival to the region and have spent over four years preparing for this auspicious occasion. After the official welcome at the festival headquarters on Saturday night we made our way to the waterfront for the opening show, *Pedaleando Hacia el Cielo (Pedaling Skyward)* by the Belgian company Theater Tol. A towering construction crane had been perched there since earlier in the day, hinting of the spectacle to come. As the crowd gathered, a lone bicyclist playing the violin entered and ascended to the heavens. A procession of singers and dancers atop metal bicycle-powered carts followed, weaving their way through the crowd before attaching to a giant cylindrical structure which then lifted up in a breathtaking aerial display. If the citizens of San Sebastián were not aware of a puppet festival in their midst, this show opener, with its fireworks and confetti raining down, certainly announced the arrival of a week of the unexpected.

Street performances continued to have a strong presence throughout the festival. Artists associated with the Pepe Otal Puppet Studio in Barcelona offered a variety of puppet shows that displayed a diversity as great as their backgrounds from Spain, Argentina, Italy, and Switzerland. *Fishing for Shadows* by Austria's Wild Theater encouraged spectators to become puppeteers in their clever interactive exhibit which included a variety of rod puppets, marionettes and shadow puppets constructed of natural materials and manipulated by pulleys and other mechs. The Portuguese *Dom Roberto* by S.A. Marionetas illustrated that this traditional folk hero, on the hand of a puppeteer with fantastic comedic timing, could still hold his audiences in a state of delight and proved that "he's behind you" can be translated into any language. Spain's Titiriteros de Binéfar and their great showman Paco Paricio presented the lovely show *En La Boca del Lobo (In the Wolf's Mouth)*, consisting of popular fables and songs in a variety of puppetry styles with a set that gradually grew into a colorful garden. The United States' own Laura Heit performed her delicate *Matchbox Shows*, and the brilliant Bonnie Duncan took to the streets with *The Boy and the Old Man*.^{iv} From Japan, Shobei Tamaya IX and Karakuri Ningyo Company gave spectators a special treat by revealing the mechanisms behind the traditional *Karakuri* tea server and artist. While the Internet now allows those fascinated by these mechanized puppets to peruse countless videos, to view the mechanics up close was nothing short of thrilling. Also part of their performance was a highly elaborate Japanese technique, Chiryu Karakuri, which involved transforming puppets manipulated from below by rods and strings. *Les Irréels (The Unreal)* from France's Compagnie Créature engaged audiences in a series of six elaborate booths, each occupied by stunning masked characters and their puppets who moved through their individual universes in a way that was both otherworldly yet eerily familiar. Romuald Collinet of Compagnie La Pendue, who performed one of the finest *Polichinelle* shows I have witnessed, once told me that he and his partner took everything they performed to the street first. Audiences, if not en-



ABOVE: PERFORMANCE AT THE SPECIAL LATE NIGHT EVENING SPONSORED BY UNIMA ARAGON AND UNIMA CASTILLE. PHOTO BY JIM MORROW
RIGHT: STREET PERFORMANCE *LES IRRÉELS (THE UNREAL)* BY COMPAGNIE CRÉATURE OF FRANCE. PHOTO BY KRISTIN HAVERTY



LEFT: PEDALEANDO HACIA EL CIELO (PEDALING SKYWARD) BY THE BELGIAN COMPANY THEATER TOL. RIGHT: FRENCH PUPPETS ON EXHIBIT AT TOPIC, THE INTERNATIONAL PUPPET CENTER OF TOLOSA. PHOTOS BY KRISTIN HAVERTY



gaged, can simply walk away. The mesmerized audiences on the streets of San Sebastián were a testament to the strength of these performers and the stories they came many miles to tell.

The indoor shows exhibited techniques and subject matter as diverse as the international companies which presented them. *Red Earth Revisited*, a collaboration between the acclaimed Speeltheater Holland and Assitej-South Africa, took us to the mid-19th century colonial era of the Eastern Cape and the historic slaughter of cattle which took place during that time. A combination of actors, objects and finely crafted rod puppets told this heart-wrenching tale of a community's destruction. Another fine French showing, Théâtre La Licorice's *Spartacus* reinvented this revolutionary epic through the use of fantastically constructed scrap-metal rod puppets, fire and inventive operatic stagecraft. *El Gigante de Altzo* (*The Giant of Altzo*), a lyrical Basque children's opera by Iñaki Mata and co-produced by TOPIC, San Sebastián and the Barakaldo Theater, highlighted the region's talents with an inventive cubist-inspired puppet design and full children's chorus. Spain's El Espejo Negro took on the challenging subject of a child's coma in *Oscar, el niño dormido* (*Oscar, the Sleeping Boy*). The production exhibited a hyperrealistic design aesthetic to capture a boy and his caretakers with intimacy and grace. Brazil's La Fontana Formas Animadas brought us "the most important anti-hero of 16th century maritime history"^v in *Peregrinação* (*Pilgrimage*). Utilizing a tiny rotating toy theater with intricately detailed 2D rod puppets with disproportion-

ately large heads, green screen and Qlab manipulated entirely by one performer, the somewhat scandalous tale from Fernão Mendes Pinto was realized on the big screen. From Japan, Kakashiza's *Ani-mare* was a simply delightful hand shadow play with four performers who together were Mr. Shadow!, casting classic animal imagery mixed with a few surprises on multiple projection surfaces. Hand Made Theatre's *La Historia de Alicia Al Otro Lado Del Espejo* (*Alice's Story on the Other Side of the Mirror*) also experimented with green screen technology and a variety of collage techniques mixed with composite footage of a real-life Alice to create as they describe "a show-ephemeral object in real time." Sadly, congress duties prevented me from seeing Friday's evening shows which were Puppet Lab's *I Sisyphus* from Bulgaria and Sweden's *Les Funambules* (*The Tightrope Walkers*) by Marionetteatern. The final day of the festival brought the Netherlands' Lichtbende Theatre with *Tutu* and the Italian company Unterwasser's *Out*. As the name Lichtbende suggests, *Tutu* bent light via a series of Magic Lantern devices to tell a simple story of a dancer's evolution during the 20th century's interwar period. The final indoor show of the festival, *Out*, was an entirely wordless adventure tale of one boy's journey to find, and then ultimately set free, his heart. Metaphors found physical form throughout the lyrical production – taking full advantage of puppetry's strengths to dynamically encapsulate meaning through design and movement. Crafting a UNIMA World Puppetry Festival lineup is a fine art. While not every performance appealed to every sensibil-

ity, the curators designed a showcase of the art form on the world stage at the present moment.

The symposium took place on the opening Saturday and Sunday. Presentations on the *Máquina Real*^{vi} brought scholars from Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Slovakia, Britain, and France to discuss early puppet theatre repertoire in Europe and America. For all those puppet geeks like me, delving into the early 17th century records of puppet history and discovering the ongoing traditions of La Tía Norica de Cádiz^{vi} were truly a delight.

In addition to the stunning permanent exhibit at the TOPIC Center, exhibits on 20th Century Spanish Masters, the contemporary Spanish artist Joan Baixas, and a special photo exhibition of Québécois Puppeteer Family portraits added to the festival's dynamic offerings.

Each night after the indoor shows, festival participants would travel to the headquarters of the European Capitol of Culture to enjoy presentations hosted by the different regions of Spain, each unique in its culinary, artistic and linguistic history. From lyrical marionettes and abstract tabletop puppets, to robust and busy moving mouth hand puppets, the puppeteers highlighted that there is no one singular Spanish style – unless you speak of their passion as hosts and ambassadors during this momentous occasion in one of the most beautiful areas of the world. UNIMA has posted a great highlight video of the festival, you can find it here:

<http://www.unima.org/fr/outils/galerie-video/#.V4ayM5MrJE4>

The Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA) is the oldest international theater organization in the world. It represents an incredibly strong and diverse network of passionate artists, researchers and educators working in over 100 countries. Every four years, representatives from the member countries convene for the Congress and World Puppetry Festival. Mark your calendars. 2020 will take place in the Gianyar regency of Bali, Indonesia. A huge undertaking for any national center, as witnessed by the efforts in Spain and, in 1980, by UNIMA-USA, the Bali festival promises to be one for the history books. For anyone who has felt the creative spark that comes from attending a Puppeteers of America National Festival, there is nothing quite like a meeting of puppeteers. Who knows where the next festival that will transform a generation of puppeteers will take place – but I for one want to be there. Come join me!

Kristin Haverty currently serves as Associate Producer for the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, GA. As a performer and animator she has contributed to three UNIMA-USA Citation award-winning productions. Before joining the Center she toured with Tears of Joy Theatre and studied puppetry at Sarah Lawrence College and in the Czech Republic and Indonesia. She is a proud member of the Puppeteers of America and UNIMA-USA. www.puppet.org, www.jarvisilhouettes.weebly.com

Watch for Kristin's article on the UNIMA Congress in *Puppetry International* #40, Fall/Winter 2016.

ⁱ *Once in a Lifetime — The 1980 World Puppetry Festival*, by Nancy Staub, July 2014 Puppeteers of America website: www.puppeteers.org/puppetry-journal/once-in-a-lifetime-the-1980-world-puppetry-festival-by-nancy-staub-full-article

ⁱⁱ Between two congresses UNIMA's Council meetings are hosted by a national center which also organizes and hosts a puppetry festival held at that time.

ⁱⁱⁱ The International Puppet Center of Tolosa, Currently the 2016 European Museum of the Year www.topicolosa.com

^{iv} Unfortunately, my congress duties coincided with Laura's and Bonnie's performances. I had the pleasure of seeing *Matchbox Shows* at another fabulous festival, the 2007 PofA National, and I greatly look forward to seeing Bonnie's show soon.

^v From the festival program notes

^{vi} The Royal Machine, used to describe puppet phenomena throughout the Spanish territories, primarily between the 17th and 19th centuries.

^{vii} Aunt Norica de Cádiz, Spain



OUT BY THE ITALIAN COMPANY UNTERWASSER. PHOTO BY JACOPO NICCOLI

Kristin Haverty continues a long tradition of reporting on UNIMA festivals. In the first *Puppetry Yearbook* (1930) Paul McPharlin wrote about the festival in Liege Belgium where Meyer Levin and Richard Odlin represented the USA and in 1933 McPharlin reported that Dorothy Zaconick (1912-1992) performed in Ljubljana, the last Congress before UNIMA went dormant for 24 years. When UNIMA was revived in 1957, PofA president Romain Proctor attended the organizational meeting and wrote about it for *Puppetry Journal*. Proctor and Marjorie Batchelder McPharlin both attended the first modern puppet festival in Bucharest Romania in 1958, organized by Margareta Niculescu. The festival was so impressive that Marjorie's account ran as a four-part series in *Puppetry Journal*. In 1972, PofA president Frank Ballard and UNIMA-USA president Jim Henson were councilors at the festival in Charleville, Fr., and reported in *Puppetry Journal*. It was my privilege to write about the 2008 Congress in Perth, Australia. — Steve Abrams



PUPPET HEADS FROM THE EXHIBIT MASTERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY AT THE OKENDO CULTURAL CENTRE. PHOTO BY KRISTIN HAVERTY