

BRUNO FORMENT & CHRISTEL STALPAERT (eds)



Theatrical Heritage

Challenges & Opportunities

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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BEYOND THE ARCHIVE

*Safeguarding Theatrical Heritage: a Strategy for the Empowerment of Artistic Communities**

Maarten De Pourcq & Staf Vos

Why look back? Performing arts are at home in the ephemeral, ever-changing present, it is often said. The essence of performance is its disappearance,¹ and the performer is “a veritable avatar of Orpheus: he has no right to turn back on his course, lest he be denied the object of his quest.”² Artists have to reinvent themselves constantly, finding relevant forms and concepts for the present. What use can there be for a heritage policy in such a context? Although similar objections can still be heard today, the interest in performing arts heritage from within the artistic community itself has increased significantly over the last decade. Many artists and companies now agree that reflection about what they want to pass on to other artists, audiences or future generations is not necessarily at odds with their ambitions as (avant-garde) performers in the present. Tangible or intangible traces from past performances, events, and experiences can inspire new creations, provide a new perspective on one’s own oeuvre, be of invaluable help for education, and even help reaching new audiences through the use of different media and contexts for presentation.³

Het Firmament (‘The Firmament’),⁴ center of expertise for the heritage of the performing arts in Flanders (Belgium) since 2012, supports heritage institutions as

* This chapter is a revised and updated version of De Pourcq & Kennis 2011.

¹ See Phelan 1996, 146-149.

² Louppe 1994, 32.

³ The internationally renowned initiatives by, amongst others, Romeo Castellucci’s Societas Raffaello Sanzio, William Forsythe (<motionbank.org>), Siobhan Davies Company (<www.siobhandaviesreplay.com>), and Rosas (e.g., De Keersmaeker & Cvejc 2012; De Keersmaeker, Cvejc & François 2013) represent only the tip of the iceberg in this respect.

⁴ <www.hetfirmament.be> (last accessed 27 October 2014).

well as professional and amateur artists in their interaction with archives or collections, and/or in their need for transmission of intangible heritage.⁵ Het Firmament does not simply advocate a shift from performance to archive or documentation, however useful for (art-)historical research this can be. It also sets out to encourage the inverse shift, which involves the contemporary production of as well as dynamic participation in performances by using and reflecting upon both tangible and intangible heritage. Most importantly, such an interaction with heritage should not be imposed top-down upon artistic communities, but preferably grows slowly in a process of reflexive consensus-building within the community, if necessary with the help of a specialized organization.

This chapter discusses a research project about the cultural heritage of puppet theater in Flanders that was carried out by Het Firmament from 2005 to 2009.⁶ It can serve as a case study to show the relevance of the heritage paradigm for the living performing arts and to explain the value of the approach mentioned above. In the first part of the chapter, we explain the motivation behind the strategic decision by Het Firmament to consider the contemporary praxis of puppeteers in Flanders not only as a fascinating form of art, but also as a particularly interesting way to safeguard cultural heritage. In the second paragraph, we share the approach and a few results of the research project *Bouwplan van Het Paradijs. Het onderzoek naar de behoefte, de haalbaarheid en de wenselijkheid van een (t)Huis voor het figurentheater in Vlaanderen* ('Building Plan of The Paradise. An Inquiry into the Need, Feasibility, and Desirability of a House/Home for Puppetry Theater in Flanders'). To our knowledge, research of this scale on puppetry or from an international perspective has not been carried out. There are some interesting monographs on the subject and research networks with similar objectives have since been founded elsewhere,⁷ but they are either more wide-ranging or more selective, or do not adopt the intangible cultural heritage approach as defined by UNESCO (see below). To conclude, we briefly present a number of projects as 'good practices' that have been developed by Het

5 Het Firmament also assists museums, archives, and other heritage organizations with specialized advice on issues relating to performing arts. In general, it aims to establish better communication and cooperation between the field of the performing arts and the heritage field in Flanders.

6 Het Firmament preferred to use the label 'theater of figures,' which is meant to be less restrictive than the term 'puppetry,' as it hosts all kinds of performing arts based on the animation of objects or the objectivation of animated beings. However, because the term is not common in English, we will speak of puppetry throughout this chapter. Until 2012, Het Firmament functioned as the center of expertise for the heritage of puppetry in Flanders, since when it has widened its scope towards the heritage of the performing arts, including puppetry but also other forms of theater and dance.

7 E.g., Alkema 1994; McCormick & Pratisik 1998; Bell 2000; Luger 2004; Blumenthal 2005. In 2011, the Object Theatre Network was funded in the United Kingdom by the Arts & Humanities Research Council to reflect on the principles, methodology, and pedagogy of 'object theater.'

Firmament and were based on the conclusions of the research project. A participatory performance on location, an exhibition with installations, and a demo version of a computer game all explore different possibilities at the crossroads of artistic practice and heritage. In these projects, Het Firmament has tried to keep a balance between references to the cultural praxis of the past and the ambition of contemporary artists and developers to be innovative or at least to create new works of art and entertainment. As we shall see, this implied, amongst other things, a shift in emphasis from the 'dead materials' of the tangible heritage of puppetry to the living praxis of puppetry as intangible heritage.

THE ENTRY OF THE HERITAGE PARADIGM INTO THE FIELD OF PUPPETRY

The core idea behind the research project was to assess the feasibility of a house that could centralize the cultural heritage of puppet theater, object theater, and the like. This idea of a house for puppetry dates from long before the start of the project, as it goes back to the dream of a family of puppeteers in Mechelen, a provincial town in the heart of Flanders. The family in question owned a professional city theater where it used to transmit its trade from father to son. In 1948, Jef Contryn founded the Mechels Stadspoppentheater ("Town Puppet Theater of Mechelen") which, from 1977 until 1995, was led by his son Louis. Willem Verheyden became director in 1995 and changed the name of the theater into DE MAAN ("THE MOON") by agreement with Louis Contryn's son Paul, who has been scenographer, puppet maker, and puppeteer with the company for about thirty years. At the end of the 1960s, the Contryn family founded De Centrale voor Poppenspel ("The Central for Puppetry") out of concern for the growing lack of artistic professionalism in their field. Puppetry was widely practiced as one could see it on television, in the classroom, in the folkloric theaters, on the professional stage, and in the many playrooms of children at home. Yet, there was no institution to safeguard its artistry and to take care of the remains of the performances. That is why De Centrale voor Poppenspel decided to organize workshops and to start a collection of puppets, objects, and figures from its own company, supplemented by endangered collections from others. In this attempt to keep its artistry alive, one can already detect an implicit understanding of intangible cultural heritage. For the tangible collection was not meant to be put in a

case, but to challenge new generations to animate the figure, the puppet, or the object. Along with the workshops and the collection, the center also published a journal in order to preserve the scripts of the performances and the stories surrounding them, but unfortunately was granted only a short life.

For three decades, De Centrale voor Poppenspel had its share of ups and downs, for different reasons. The acute shortage of resources was one of them, for the Center, for the few professional theater companies, and for the myriads of amateur theaters in the region. But at least as crucial was the animosity among the different members of the field who were unwilling to concede to De Centrale voor Poppenspel its central institutional role due to its close ties with a single theater company in Mechelen. In 2002, Willem Verheyden and Paul Contryn, the youngest member of the Contryn family, revamped the Center and renamed it Het Firmament. Although the artistic legacy of their workshops was great (plate 12), the institutional impact remained low: the training offered was not officially recognized and the collection of five thousand puppets, objects, and figures was not in an optimal condition. Moreover, there were no resources in the field of puppetry to make the many so-called *living human treasures*—UNESCO terminology for exemplary bearers of intangible cultural heritage—collaborate in order to preserve their work and to re-empower the state of their art.

Not a moment too soon, the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and Flemish *Cultureel-Erfgoeddecreet* ('Cultural Heritage Decree,' 2004) were eye-openers that made Het Firmament recognize how its activities and, above all, its dream of a house for puppetry could be defined as cultural heritage.⁸ Het Firmament answered the Flemish government's call for initiatives to develop expertise on how to preserve, register, conserve, and present cultural heritage with the research project entitled *Building Plan of The Paradise. An Inquiry into the Need, Feasibility, and Desirability of a House/Home for Puppetry Theater in Flanders*. The project set out to examine whether the preconditions for a cultural heritage house for puppetry were readily available. The funding assigned to it by the Flemish government—for three years between 2005 and 2009—was immediately understood as an important signal to get the field together in order to collaborate, for if the house

8 Earlier, the Flemish government's cultural heritage policy was based on the Popular Culture Decree (1998). Since the initial funding for the research project in 2005, the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* was approved by the Flemish parliament (2006), an Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Flanders was established (2008), and the preparation for a long-term policy by the Agency for Arts and Heritage of the Flemish Government resulted in the *Vision Paper "A Policy for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Flanders"* by the then Minister of Environment, Nature, and Culture Joke Schauvliege (2010), published in Van Den Broucke and Thys 2012.

was not supported by the entire family of puppeteers—that is to say, by the greater part of its heritage community—it was destined to fall before it was even built.

The case of puppetry was considered an exemplary testing ground for Flemish policy makers in the area of intangible cultural heritage, as puppetry draws on many centuries worth of knowledge, stories, and skills that are handed down from one generation to the next, both orally and in practice. In the field of the performing arts, puppetry is generally regarded as among the most folkloric art forms, although it has impacted greatly on many avant-garde artists in the past and present (from Edward Gordon Craig, the Italian Futurists and the German Bauhaus to Tadeusz Kantor, William Kentridge, and Jan Fabre).⁹ The esthetic and institutional history of puppetry is also defined by various cross-medial and cross-cultural exchanges—one may think here of the impact on the art of puppetry worldwide by the Indonesian Wayang and the Japanese Bunraku, both of which were inscribed on UNESCO's *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2008.¹⁰ For this reason, it was clear from the start that the research project could not be limited to a folkloric and Flemish story; it had to adopt a wide-ranging and international perspective, bringing together people, practices, and discourses that have traditionally been kept apart for various institutional, esthetic, and sociocultural reasons. In so doing, the research project on puppetry, being among the first safeguarding projects in Flanders, was also meant to provide the newly flourishing field of intangible heritage with good practices.

APPROACH AND CHALLENGES OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The initial research project faced various challenges, but as soon as it had started, the crucial support from the field grew quickly, thanks to the official recognition from the government and the introduction of external junior researchers with a great interest in the medium and without a previous history in a particular company.¹¹ Most of all, the approach of the project was very effective in bonding the many members to common goals, the first of which was to detect and register all

9 See Smessaert & Daenen 2009, 23-28; Devens 2004, 34-43 and 53-56.

10 For the current elements on the list, see <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/lists>> (last accessed 27 October 2014).

11 Smessaert and Daenen 2009.

extant puppetry collections in Flanders, in both private and public hands. In order to accomplish this aim, there were numerous on-site interviews which made many people aware of their precious artistry and collections. There was also an annual conference to discuss the results of each phase of the registration, and to provide a platform for artists to get to know each other better. Hence, registration was not an end in itself but also a deliberate means to realize other ends,¹² among which was establishing a self-conscious heritage community.

Another good practice of this kind was the thesaurus group, to which members of the field were invited in order to prepare for the proper registration of the various objects. This thesaurus group, consisting of puppeteers, theater critics, performers, amateurs, and researchers, agreed upon how to identify the various sorts of puppets, figures, and objects. Such a common vocabulary was required, since different names were being used for the same types of objects. For instance, the term ‘muppet’ is often used to refer to any puppet that resembles the distinctive style of Jim Henson’s *The Muppet Show* (created 1954-5). However, since it is an informal name and a legal trademark for the characters created by Henson, the thesaurus group decided to use the Dutch term *bekpop* (‘beak puppet’), defining it as follows: “A theater puppet which is manipulated from underneath or from the back. The puppeteer’s fingers directly handle the mouth of the puppet. Usually several fingers are put in the upper half of the mouth, and the thumb in the bottom half.”¹³ This definition helps to classify different types of puppets. A *sock puppet* for instance does not need its own category, as it can be defined as a beak puppet made of a sock.

The thesaurus group exemplifies the principle of dialogue which Het Firmament continuously tried to apply in its decisions on what as well as how to register, and also as to why and for what purposes objects and practices must be registered and conserved. Given the involvement of stakeholders from outside the field of puppetry (e.g., museums and archives, heritage centers, tourism, academia, and the other visual and performing arts) in this dialogue, many ‘culture brokers’¹⁴ became familiar with the medium of puppetry, its heritage, as well as its current, rather peripheral position in the arts. In so doing, the research project also realized an increasing awareness of the value of puppetry.

Working with intangible cultural heritage not only concerns the past, but also affects the present and the future. One major outcome of the project’s interviews and surveys was the widely shared call to maintain, in any context whatsoever, the

¹² Jacobs 2011.

¹³ Smessaert & Daenen 2009, 18.

¹⁴ Kurin 1997.

puppet's 'aura,' its distinctive potential to be animated and to become alive in our imagination (see also Raphaële Fleury's chapter). This aura could be created and maintained through stories, traditions, manipulation techniques, and coordinative skills, all of which create a unique performance and experience. This call for a performative presentation of cultural heritage ensues from the typical ways in which puppeteers transform all kinds of matter and ready-made objects into animated figures. Their advice, then, was not to re-enact original performances, but to translate the material to a new performative context in which not only the tangible objects but also their intangible artistry gained new meanings and functions.

We therefore expect the field of performing arts in general to enable the heritage field to produce innovative, exciting, and creative approaches to intangible cultural heritage.¹⁵ This approach, which invests in people rather than artifacts, coheres well with the concern made explicit by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that many of those involved in the process of developing the intangible heritage initiative wanted to "focus on actions that would directly support local cultural reproduction, rather than on creating metacultural artefacts" such as UNESCO's lists of *Masterpieces of Intangible Heritage* (until 2008) and the subsequent *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*.¹⁶ In other words, attention should not merely be given to establishing lists of *masterpieces*—whether tangible objects or intangible repertoire—but rather to enabling the *masters* to keep on interacting with their ever-changing audiences and the new contexts in which their artistry has to find its own means to survive. For this reason, a positive attitude to change is indispensable. Dealing with intangible heritage, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, is now dominated by the interventions of policymakers such as UNESCO and national governments. This may cause heritage to lose its inherently dynamic nature:

all heritage interventions—like the globalizing pressures they are trying to counteract—change the relationship of people to what they do. They change how people understand their culture and themselves. They change the fundamental conditions for cultural production and reproduction. Change is intrinsic to culture, and measures intended to preserve, conserve, safeguard, and sustain particular cultural practices are caught between freezing the practice and addressing the inherently processual nature of culture.¹⁷

15 This is in keeping with Taylor 2003.

16 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 56. For the current elements on the UNESCO *Representative list*, see <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/lists>> (last accessed 27 October 2014). For the implicit criteria for admission to the list (the 'no electricity' rule, no traditions from European elite, preferably non-European phenomena or 'traditional popular culture' from Europe), see Jacobs 2014.

17 Jacobs 2014, 58.

In this respect, it is crucial to implement the possibility of performative reinterpretations in the safeguarding process, thus keeping the dynamics of both the medium and its heritage community alive.

THE PERFORMATIVE SAFEGUARDING OF INTANGIBLE HERITAGE: SOME EXAMPLES

Between 2008 and 2012, Het Firmament has tried to put some of the conclusions of the research project into practice. A first example is *HAYAT* (2008-9), a social-artistic project curated by Joost Van den Branden (Theater Tieret) under the center's auspices. Puppetry was presented in a creative way to ill and elderly patients in different hospitals, which undoubtedly stimulated (childhood) memories of puppetry heritage. Yet at the same time the patients were confronted with a new social and cultural reality, as the puppets were now animated by people from very diverse ethnic backgrounds, telling stories about their own life and background—'hayat' means 'life story' in Arabic. The actors wandered from one room to another, in waiting rooms and corridors, while giving short performances. The overall aim was to generate intercultural dialogue by exchanging life stories through the medium of puppetry.

A second example is *PLAY*,¹⁸ an exhibition with live performances and installations curated by Eric Raeves, a contemporary dancer-performer. Raeves was invited by Het Firmament to work with some of the puppet collections registered during the research project. A telling example of reflection on heritage by means of performative reinterpretation is offered by an installation made by Raeves himself: a *perpetuum mobile* with puppets made by Paul Contryn (plate 13).

Another example is our demo version of the computer game *Wireless Puppetry* (2012; plate 14), by means of which children from the age of eight to twelve learn to play with a string puppet (marionette). Computer games are valuable didactic tools for raising awareness about cultural heritage and effectively contributing to its safeguarding. Although the players do not use real puppets for the game, they learn about the physical aspects of puppets, as they have to choose the material from which their virtual puppet is crafted: a wooden puppet, for instance, will be able to float on water, but also has its weak points. More importantly, players will also be-

¹⁸ Devens 2010.

come familiar with an essentially intangible aspect of puppetry heritage: the challenge of how to play with a string puppet. A computer game is an appropriate tool for this, as workshops in puppetry are hardly institutionalized in Flanders. Moreover, playing with a real string puppet is very difficult: it is better to start with a simplified version in virtual reality. An experienced ‘master’ puppeteer advised the designers of the game on how to assimilate the playing experience. In the demo version, players can manipulate a wooden control bar in the form of a cross, attached with real strings to a mechanism in a box. The mechanism transforms the movements of the strings into electronic signals that create a virtually animated puppet on the computer screen. Finally, also the history and cultural diversity of puppetry can be taught with the help of the game: in the visuals, different contexts appear, from the Javanese *wayang golek* rod puppets to the imaginary worlds of two influential twentieth-century puppeteers, Richard Teschner and Sergey Obraztsov. Of course, the game is only a means to complement other didactic approaches to puppetry or heritage.

CONCLUSION

The results of the *Building Plan of The Paradise* were significant in many ways. The project largely contributed to the entry of the heritage paradigm in a field that used to focus almost exclusively on making theater without any consideration of how previous productions and the specific artistry engendered by them could be safeguarded for new generations. More than 16,000 puppets, along with many other objects such as stage settings and props, have been registered so far. More importantly, puppeteers, and other artists became aware of the heritage value of their creations and started thinking of ways to preserve their puppets, objects, figures, and the techniques to manipulate them. This awareness outreached the mere tangible forms of heritage, for puppeteers reflected about the possibilities to present older creations in new performative contexts by using the broad vocabulary of intangible techniques they and other community members had in store. They felt ‘empowered’ as they discovered new arguments to convince audiences of the importance and relevance of their artistry. The added value here is that performing arts and cultural heritage can dynamically enrich each other.

The second aim of the project—to consult various stakeholders about what their vision of a contemporary museum or heritage house for puppetry would look like—resulted in the idea of a ‘hybrid institution.’ This institution or meeting place for

the heritage community preferably carries out different tasks: education, storage and presentation, promotion and communication. Ideally, this would result in the house being an office, library, and documentation center, as well as an open depot and workshop space. The quintessential values of this center must be inspiration, animation, and movement, all integrated in every aspect of the house: from the reception desk to the open depot or exhibition space.

The Flemish government did not support the foundation of this kind of hybrid institution for a relatively small community within the arts and heritage field, even though the bottom line of safeguarding is that it pertains to intangible heritage that is supported by an active community of practitioners and audiences, yet without being as widespread as before. Nevertheless, the methodology of this research project has been used to map out other heritage communities. For instance, in order to assess the feasibility of a center for storytelling in Flanders, the voluntary association *Van stoel tot stoel* ('From chair to chair') conducted a research project based upon our approach, bringing together all key actors in the field of storytelling to develop a safeguarding plan.¹⁹ One of the results was that the different organizations decided to cooperate in a network called *Vlaanderen vertelt* ('Flanders recounts'). Het Firmament will investigate to what extent the same integrated approach can also be used to raise the heritage awareness of the larger field of theater and dance in future years.

To conclude, the project's major achievement is the insight that mapping out the heritage of an entire sector in close dialogue with the sector itself as well as with its most important stakeholders readily leads to a comprehensive safeguarding strategy which is not only supported by the entire heritage community, but may also yield innovative and creative approaches to deal with the past. This safeguarding strategy, however, requires more than raising awareness among artists that they belong to a heritage community. The goal of UNESCO and similar heritage policies is to protect endangered traditions. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett neatly put it: "if it [the tradition] is truly vital, it does not need safeguarding; if it is almost dead, safeguarding will not help."²⁰ Empowering the vulnerable community of puppeteers therefore needs a follow-up policy that enables the community to carry out their safeguarding strategy and to sustain this process. As our project has shown, this policy includes institutional support to make sure that the archives are not the end of it.²¹

19 Vandewijer 2010.

20 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 56.

21 At the time of writing, a number of Flemish heritage organizations, supported by the Flemish UNESCO Commission, were about to publish a report (*Virtuoes Vlaanderen!*) with recommendations for a Flemish Living human treasures policy that address this concern. The report is to be published on <www.livinghumantreasures.be> (last accessed 31 October 2014).