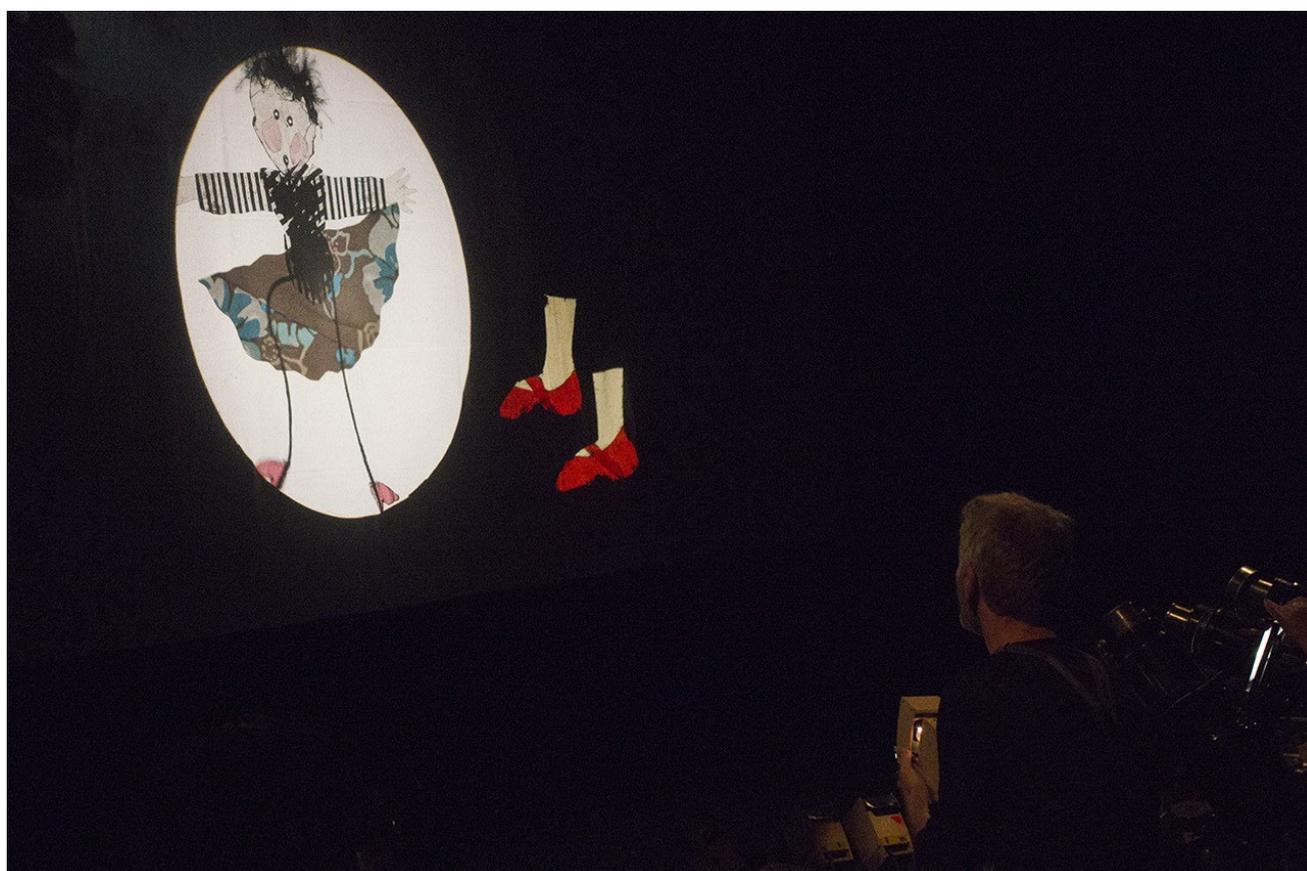


LICHTBENDE
AMSTERDAM (NL)
TUTU



Magically Ordinary Life Story

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who had a ballerina music box on her night stand. And this little girl wanted nothing more than to become a successful dancer. And not only the story of how she managed to make this dream come true in the first half of the last century but also the story of other events and encounters of her life are told during TUTU, the truly magical performance of the Dutch theatre company Lichtbende from Amsterdam.

We watched the sequence of various images on a huge screen but the creators from Amsterdam were not using it to hide how they do things. Quite the opposite, actually, they gave the audience the opportunity to watch how the picture and the accompanying sound and music are gradually created right on the stage. A sufficiently curious viewer would therefore take their eyes off the screen every now and then to explore the many devices, instruments and models used for the shadow play and projections. The performers revealed the details of the secrets and the history of the techniques used at the end of the performance and allowed the audience to explore everything from up close.

Since the point of interest was the life story of a ballet dancer, it was natural for the viewer to focus on the dancer's legs, or the foot to be precise, sometimes it was just a shoe and at other times the ballet dancer's figure was also accompanied by a dress. The entire film created live was telling the story using similarly fragmentary symbols and references, none the less the viewer was able to make sense of it throughout the entire performance. The creators simply utilised human imagination very well and it was not necessary to use any words. Various dance choreographies that the main character learnt during her life journey (ranging from tap dancing, tango to traditional and avant-garde ballet) were depicted by little feet in baby shoes, ballet shoes, high-heel shoes etc. swinging in rhythm.

The entire terror of her love being drafted for the war fitted into a switch from a men's dress shoe into suddenly very heavily marching military shoes. The performance worked with very different projections with the aforementioned images of shoes as well as landscape sceneries, photos, X-ray images and cutouts. Shadow puppets made of everyday items such as buttons, beads, feathers and wires depicted famous dancers and actresses of the first half of the 20th century such as Shirley Temple, Anna Pavlova and Josephine Baker.

Despite all the impressiveness and variety of these images, the performance would have lost its specific atmosphere without its musical and acoustic components. The tambourine, keyboard, guitar and wind instruments, the ear pleasing singing of one of the performers, old gramophone records and accompanying sounds. This all carried the genre of the story all the way from a silent grotesque or early cartoon to a mysterious horror story and then back to the gentle romance underlined by French chanson. However, the transitions were smooth and so even the relaxing funny gags (shoes competing in kicking and stepping on each other) were just as much part of the overall poetics as the chilling or even Orpheus-style mythical scene with the Grim Reaper. Just as smoothly, the performers were switching from one instrument to another exhibiting a good feel for the pace of the entire performance to eventually get up from their partly hidden position in the dark outside the main focus and add the shadows of their dancing bodies to those watched by the audience on the white screen until then.

Although the performance was not trying to pander to the children in the audience in the slightest, on the contrary, it placed relatively high demands on them and at times the mood of the performance might have been eerily scary, the whole audience across all age categories was devouring the theatrical experience sometimes with sincere amusement, other times holding their breath or with a moved smile. Not only the purposefully humorous sections were fun, there were also little ingenious practical solutions, surprising scenes with projected patterns as well as very well timed rhythm of the performance when the projections were in a truly fantastical harmony with the acoustic accompaniment.

The creators showed more than a story of a little girl, a ballet student, an artist adored by the audience, a woman in love and a bride all in one. They also confronted the line of one human life with historical events such as world wars, contemporary trends such as fascination by exotic cultures and allowed the audience to explore the development of dancing, music and, indirectly, film. The imaginary circle of life and the entire performance closed up symbolically when the baby shoes appeared again on the white screen and a new lifelong dream started again along with the obstacles faced in the efforts to make it come true.

The Dutch group managed to magically turn one human fate, not very different from the life journeys of our own predecessors, into a fairytale story with a presentation that is like - excuse my sentimental wording - a gentle touch to one's soul.

Veronika Švecová



Marie Raemakers: We Try to Keep the Story Open to One's Imagination

Interview: Diana Pavlačková

Marie Raemakers is the art director of Lichtbende, a theatre group from the Netherlands. Their production focuses on connecting projections, music and theatre. They participated in the Bystrica Puppet Theatre Festival for the first time with their production TUTU.

Your ensemble makes one feel like they are almost part of a community or family. How does your group work?

Rob (author's note: Rob Logister) and I are the art directors of the ensemble and we take care of everything regarding our theatre. In the Netherlands, you have to take care of everything on your own, that's the way it is. We do not have a stable theatre space that would belong only to us. We have to go to other small theatres and ask whether we could rehearse there. Recently, there have been major financial cuts in culture in the Netherlands and all artists found themselves in a really difficult situation. It is demanding to do something that you truly enjoy for a living. You have to have another job at the same time. All of us, for example, teach in addition to our artistic activities. However, we want to do what we like so we are trying to find ways.

Your theatre group works nearly exclusively with laterna magika. How did you first get to work with this device and what did you like the most about it?

Rob and I have graduated with degrees in visual art. I studied painting and Rob studied sculpture. We pursued these fields for many years in the past. Over time, however, we gradually got into this and realised that it was exactly what we wanted to do in life. It was something new and different. Something that no one else did until then. Laterna magika was brought into our lives by one of our friends. She asked us to help her create the scenes and the technology. She had her own ideas but did not know how to make them happen so we started to work together. At that time, however, she was already sick, she had cancer. We promised that we would continue with this project. So we made her wish come true and started our ensemble after her death.

We changed the name but we are still all together and continue to work together.

Are you still able to find new ways to work with laterna magika after many years of experience?

We still are. For example, we are currently organising light concerts. Live music plays a very important role in our theatrical performances as well. The interaction between us and the musicians inspires us in creative work. It brings new impulses. In the light concert project, we are looking for unusual music that is too difficult for ordinary listening.

In combination with some scenes and a story, it is an unusually interesting and full experience. We organise them in one large church in Amsterdam. We selected the largest organ and music by Gubaidulina and Górecki. Their music is almost impossible to listen to, it is really very difficult. During the creative process, we often listened to this music and then combined it with a story of a lonely woman with a hard fate. She survived a war, lost a child and her mind started to slip at an older age. She suffered from dementia. Despite that, we wanted to create a brighter ending for her life. We were inspired by life itself, as things come, that's how they leave.



In your creative work, you focus primarily on the visual aspects of the performance, but you still work with narrativity. What does the story mean to you when creating a theatre performance and what affects you when selecting your topic?

It must be a topic that is closely related to our lives. In terms of TUTU, we all attended ballet lessons when we were little. Then we just fantasised about ballet and, in general, dancing that we like. We went over the history of dance, as well as our own, and that is how we got, for example, to tap dancing. When I was little, tap dancing was very new for us and I really wanted to learn how to do it. Of course, I was not able to. These are examples of the impulses and ideas that we used to build up the story. At the same time, we are trying to keep the story open, unfinished. We give space to the audience to finish the individual situations as well as the actual story.

You work with many symbols in your production. Tell me, in your experience, are children capable of reading the individual images and what are their responses?

It is not a problem for them. Everything that moves is interesting to very young children. It may actually be much harder for adults as they need to look for other levels in the performance. It is natural, something that we all do. Children from seven to ten years of age can usually understand very well what it is all about. They can follow the plot, easily use their imagination and finish creating the story. This is only possible if we provide sufficient space for their imagination.

There is a near symbiosis between music, projection and movement in your production. What components do you use in your creative process and how do you connect them?

Our creative process takes very long, at least six months. We create all images ourselves, Rob is, for example, responsible for all technology. When we have an idea about the image, we try to make it move. Just as the shoes in today's performance. As you saw, the result seems to be very simple, but the movements around it are not. That is where the puppet theatre aspect is present, in the ability to make something come alive. We always start with an idea, then we create the figures and test what all we can do with them. We explore what emotion then can evoke.

And yes, music is what brings emotions, so we try to find a way to make it all work together. We explore all this in the process. It is always a surprise, something always surprises us. We watch many cartoons and observe how they work with music. One can learn a lot from it. Especially older cartoon production is truly phenomenal.

OPINION: TUTU

Lenka Džadíková: The TUTU production really impressed me not only with its technological sophistication as well as by involving certain poetry. It was admitted and it was visually attractive - not just the screening but the devices as well. It was inspiring to watch the actors themselves. They were not only operating the devices but they were truly acting and living out the experience. Specifically the musical and singing performance of one actress was phenomenal.

Vladimír Predmerský: I would like to start by saying that I have seen various forms and systems of screening at festivals. This group selected very simple means and did not allow exceeding this form in terms of its artistic aspects. They did the animation of simple images differently than I have ever seen at other festivals. I was mainly intrigued by the imaginativeness of projections and the technical capabilities of the devices. I was also intrigued by the musical and sound components of the production. Altogether, I was very impressed.

Ida Hledíková: Although the topic of this short reflection is the performance by Lichtbende, a Dutch group from Amsterdam, it was when I was watching this pleasant visual piece that I got the idea of diversity of scene forms and means of expression that we see at the Bystrica Puppet Theatre Festival this year. This year's festival "collage" is excellent and the Dutch piece in the mosaic glowed like a shiny magical piece with a number of visual metamorphoses in the atmosphere of reminiscence at the beginning of experimenting with the miraculous optical *laterna magika* and other optical devices and their tricks, the predecessors of film. It is as if the Dutch group were paying a tribute to their fellow countryman Christiaan Huygens, a Dutch physicist who praised *laterna magika* in the 17th century as a miracle device for image screening. In the fresh, dynamic, artistic and dramaturgically clean performance, we gave in to the magic of enlivened images that were static inside the small wooden boxes and were projected on a large screen, on which they came to life when moving. The fascinating moving pictures were created by indirect animation, meaning through the movements of a performer with multiple such boxes inside which the individual pictures were placed. In the boxes, we recognised the bodies of the old classic Russian transparency projector. In addition to the small wooden boxes – small *laterna magikas* - Lichtbende used (today already antique) projectors, through which a number of optical effects were created by animating the creatively styled figures. The great inventiveness of the authors benefits not only from their artistic taste but also their technical skills. The actual mini mechanism attached to the projector that, while rotating, propelled the styled figures, animating them, was fascinating eventually just as well as this entire audio visual performance on the topic of a fragile story in the style and using the means of times long gone. This visual and dramaturgical concept was supported by the accompanying music and the musical adaptation. Atmosphere, taste, style, lightness and comfort. It is great that TUTU is here.