

SLUK 2017 Zadar
professional assembly

Puppet is everything, everything's puppet!
Teaching by puppet



Therapeutic puppetry in family care context

Since 2014 I have been working as a freelance Therapeutic puppeteer in a yellow painted cellar studio in Halle/Saale, Germany.

Every day I am fascinated by the puppets ability of opening doors and setting things in motion just by playing. It is truly a little bit like magic... and it is my interest to explore what makes this often painted phenomenon working.

First let me describe my practical work.

I use puppets as a psychotherapist adopting the method by the Swiss Käthy Wüthrich and Klaus Harter and the German Gudrun Gauda. It is depth psychology based on the archetypes and the theory of lifelong development by C.G. Jung.

The method works with archetypical puppets and symbolic props on a improvised scenery. Hereby the child or client is the leader and creates his world. I help the clients to get their stories on the stage, but without audience. We are just playing together for this moment. Alternative the client can mould a puppet on his own.

Afterwards I make photographs of the most important scenes, notice my emotions and transferences and try an interpretation of the symbols.

The structure of a playing session is very simple but important: There is one hour, are two people and three rules. These rules are: 1. Puppets can do and say everything, even what we are not able or allowed to. 2. We don't destroy materials and don't hurt each other because there would be no playing anymore. 3. Both of us can say "STOP" if there is something wrong or unclear. So we would lay the puppets down, talk and then start the play again.

The standard start is to choose three props, three puppets and to build a scenery where this figures could meet. I am flexible with this conditions because the main goal is to get the client involved in playing and to really stage a story.

This structure and the straight kept promise that the child is the leader through the story establishes a safe room – basis for free thinking, playing, growing, healing. I am not the teacher. I am the companion to share the experience, I am the escort on the child's way. Surely I am older and wiser but I only offer my sight and ideas as ones beneath other possibilities. Often I am surprised by the wisdom and accuracy of the child's solution.

Usually we have one hour a week over a whole year and this is ideal!

I do Therapeutic puppetry with children in difficult situations like mentally ill or addicted parents, divorces, mourning, being a foster child, migration, trauma etc.

The remarkable thing is that the town of Halle/S. has taken the Therapeutic puppetry in its catalogue of youth and family benefits. That means I accompany the child while the family is working out its problems with the social worker for one or two years. This special offer is seldom, may be even singular in Germany.

The experience shows that the method works well: the children are emotionally discharged. They stand reflected on themselves. They run through lost stages of psychological ripening. They win structure: inner and outer. They lose their traumatic helplessness and become confident. Hope and possibilities are growing while reality is still complicated. Mostly the problems can't be solved but you can arrange and see that you are just more than the problem.

Other benefits are to hear the child's voice in crises. This can be important for further decisions even for the family court, for further stay or just to get the parents moving. Parents looking at scenery photos of their child are touched and get another view on their child. I do not blame or demand like in the role of the youth welfare office. I am "only" talking about the grandiose playing of the child. This opens the hearts. Parents realize the meaning of the scene even better than me. So they are touched and ask what they can do... this is the first step to a working relationship. Now I can say even hard things because we have the same goal: to make things better for the child.

So the aim of Therapeutic puppetry lies between mentally healthy development, psychotherapy and social work.

How can this work? It is the speciality of the puppet, the speciality of playing at all and the speciality of story telling. It is the speciality of the therapeutic binding, of archetypical themes and the speciality of human being in brain and social matters and much more.

In this few minutes I only want to give a spotlight at the item puppet:

Why can everything be a puppet? Human thinking allows not only to percept the actual situation but can imagine, remember, anticipate or combine events. We see this as inner images. Our brain automatically connects them with emotions, which have been memorized through events before. These awaked emotions have no difference to emotions felt in real situations.

This is what playing is about: true emotions, true enthusiasm, true acting with less consequences within safe borders by doing just "as if".

This is what art is about: create symbols and metaphors with known and unusual materials, forms, situations, relationships and link them with present emotions.

You can take everything and suggest it as another. Our human brain will follow with joy if you argue with visible rules, if you combine the thing with any reference. The mind is up to fill gaps. If we can find any relation it brings new sights and we are excited by new things because we are naturally curious. We are interested not only in the contents but in the making of too. Animated puppets offer both in one and they explicitly exhibit that "To be or not to be" alive.

Take any object and give an inner impulse of moving to it – and we will accept it as alive.

Give him an orientation and directed movement – and we will accept him as a creature.

Let him visibly notice, evaluate and react – and we will accept him as intelligent.

Set him into a relationship and acting – and we will accept him as human being.

No matter if it is a stone, a flower, the shadow of my hand or a designed puppet: This animation establishes a figure to our mind. It is not the material thing, it is the animation of the thing that works.

So we have set our puppets. I use glove puppets made of Styropor and modelling compound.

How can puppets be everything?

As shown the animated puppet is predisposed as a symbol and metaphor. It promises: Look here! I will show you something!

At the puppet theatre the sculptor creates a unique puppet for a wanted figure, a special character should be caught. Special dramaturgical skills are constructed within materials. After displacing the play off the repertoire the puppet is jobless. May be it finds its residence in a museum.

In Therapeutic puppetry one puppet gives lots of different concrete figures: The grandma-puppet can be kind or strict in action, loud or gentle. The client deciding for one puppet chooses the material, the wooden matrix for a concrete figure to animate. Even he can use different puppets for the same figure during various settings: May be the mother today looks like a princess and tomorrow like a wick. If the play is over the figure stays in the room and in our memory while the puppet hangs at the wall again, ready to give another figure tomorrow.

The archetypical designed puppets are open for characters but they are not random. They provoke emotions and that's why the client chooses the right puppet for this right moment to give his emotions a face. Puppets want to be played with, they are shouting to be animated. So the client will set his inner movements in a concrete action. Symbolic props support it. So the client brings his wishes and fears in a visible and touchable form on the scenery. Maybe he sees this clear and evident the first time in his live. What is made can be made in another way too. What is touchable can be put away. So the client gets the feeling of having possibility and hope in his own hands.

This is the constructive Meta-level of playing: to do "as if" in the theme and to be real in acting and feeling. The animated puppet is the central focus on human personality as shown above. You can set parts of ones personality in various puppets and let them interact. No actor can act as consistent like puppets. They are the thing between. They don't want anything, they are wooden pieces. But they can mean everything of human interest. I don't explain this to the client I just let it act.

Puppets bring physicalness into diffusion. They afford corporal movement instead of endless thinking and talking. This in combination with relaxed and joyful atmosphere of just playing – nothing to do wrong, nothing to worry about – is a healing basis.

The animator of a puppet is completely superior. He is in control – the basic afford for Traumatherapy. Puppet is material, is a tool at last.

But there lies a risk too: It easily can become a manipulating tool.

The key to our brain is ardour. Enthusiasm opens new synapses, motivates us to learn.

As we saw emotions always are true. There is no "as if". We use this fact for provoking new psychological structures. The question is if you use this sentimental door-opener puppet for self-conscious experiences or if you sell your things. Lies the decision what to learn by the client or pupil or is he overwhelmed by the aroused ardour?

I think therapy and art are more spreading their contents, education is more focussing. That needs responsibility of the animator respectively guide.

The puppet of its own is nothing and innocent.