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# The Living Heritage of Puppetry

## The Perception of the Status of Intangible Cultural Heritage and its (Contemporary) Emancipation

TEREZIE ŘÁNKOVÁ

### Abstract:

This study focuses on puppetry, which is recognized on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a joint nomination by Slovakia and the Czech Republic. It critically analyses the perspectives and attitudes of culture bearers regarding the significance and recognition of intangible cultural heritage. The recognition of Puppetry as part of the UNESCO List highlights prevailing attitudes and conceptual frameworks surrounding intangible cultural heritage in the Czech Republic. Puppeteers exhibit a range of emotional responses regarding the award, reflecting not only their personal beliefs but also their cultural and social dimensions. This phenomenon underscores the existing tensions between the traditional practices of puppetry and the institutional frameworks tasked with its preservation and innovation.

*Keywords:* UNESCO, UNESCO status, intangible cultural heritage, perception, identification, theatre, Czech Republic, Czech puppetry

### Heritage of Puppetry as a Research Problem

Puppet theatre is a form of performance involving puppets' manipulation to tell stories or convey messages. Puppetry encompasses all practices and processes involved in performance, including the skills required for puppet making, dramaturgy, on-stage techniques, and the artistic and musical elements. Puppetry was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in the Czech Republic in 2016 as a joint nomination of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.<sup>1</sup> UNESCO's criteria for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) highlight customs that are considered to be passed down through generations and play a crucial role in shaping community identity. The Representative List acknowledges Slovak and Czech Puppetry as an essential social phenomenon, illustrating a con-

1 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/puppetry-in-slovakia-and-czechia-01202>, 9. 4. 2023.

tinuous practice that spans various forms, from traditional wooden marionettes to contemporary performances. However, its designation has generated controversy regarding the definitions of tradition and the essence of Puppetry itself. Unlike other entries on the Representative List, Puppetry is not anchored to specific times, places, or linguistic expressions; it relies solely on the presence of an actor and a spectator. It is also the only one of the practice listings from the Czech Republic that quickly changes and responds directly to the social situation. Is this the reason why it is the object of much controversy? Is this fact reflected in the cultural policy of the Czech Republic? Is the Herderian idea of an inviolable national culture still present in the Czech Republic? What impact did receiving ICH status have on the shape of the phenomenon? How is the designation perceived by those at the core of ICH – namely, the bearers? This study delves into the perspectives of puppeteers regarding their ICH status. I am keen to explore the significance of this designation for those involved and its potential impact on their expression. The inclusion of Puppetry on the Representative List could underscore the tension between institutional perspectives on cultural heritage and those of its practitioners, revealing both their viewpoints and their understanding of cultural heritage.

The current diversity of puppet theatre and the issues surrounding the inscription on the Representative List sparked my attention as a researcher. Although the inscription on the Representative List recognizes the joint efforts of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, my research focuses solely on practices within the territory of the Czech Republic, because the two countries have differing histories regarding the implementation of the Convention at both national and regional levels, as well as distinct puppetry practices and their development. As I ventured into the field, I brought some prior knowledge of the research area, which I had partially explored during my master's thesis.<sup>2</sup> This foundation in the field has given me insight into the community's operational structures. Ethnographic research in a theatre context involves examining not only what happens on stage but includes an expanded understanding of theatre as it is co-created by people, by scholarly writings about theatre, by the ways in which the field describes and situates itself, or by how practitioners within the field understand the scope of what they do.<sup>3</sup> I encountered my interviewees during their performances at theatre festivals, enabling me to scrutinize their physical expressions and communication efforts in theatrical and public settings. Furthermore, it extensively leverages the rich content of *Loutkář* magazine<sup>4</sup> and delving into current issues in puppet theatre. However, to delve more into the debate about the inscription on the Representative List, it is necessary to look at the development of Puppetry in the Czech lands. Knowing the history will help us to understand not only what puppetry practice is

2 Řánková, Terezie: Fenomén českého loutkářství v kontextu zápisu do Reprezentativního seznamu nemateriálního kulturního dědictví lidstva UNESCO. Master Thesis. Brno 2020.

3 Tinius, Jonas: Fieldwork as Method in Theatre and Performance Studies. In: Tracy C. Davis, Paul Rae (eds.): *The Cambridge Guide to Mixed Methods Research for Theatre and Performance Studies*. Cambridge 2024, pp. 188–210.

4 Founded in 1912, *Loutkář* [Puppeteer] is one of the oldest and most famous puppetry magazines in the world.

based on but also what social role Puppetry played and how it was reflected in the identity of the bearers.

## (Re)presenting Context: the History and Present of Puppetry

The first known puppeteers in the Czech lands date back to the 16th century.<sup>5</sup> From the 18th century onwards, puppeteers became an integral part of the cultural and social environment.<sup>6</sup> More than any other puppets, it was marionettes, wooden puppets led from above, that influenced the shape of Central European puppet theatre.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the Thirty Years' War, numerous theatre groups came to Central and Eastern Europe and introduced marionettes as a new type of puppet.<sup>8</sup> In the middle of the 18th century, the Czech lands were dominated by specialist puppeteers of various nationalities. Marionette makers of Czech nationality began to be more active in the last third of the 18th century.<sup>9</sup> Blecha and Jirásek date the peak era of Czech travelling puppeteers from the mid to late 19th century.<sup>10</sup> The association of puppet theatre with the rural environment gave rise to the term folk puppet theatre or traditional puppet theatre, which also referred to its stylistic closure and finality.<sup>11</sup> Marionette productions continued in the early 20th century, maintaining established conventions despite new artistic genres emerging in the 1860s. While contemporary puppetry faced criticism, Czech society increasingly recognized puppeteers as national heroes, leading many to embrace family traditions and preserve their repertoires, as can be seen from historical documents summarized by historian Alice Dubská.<sup>12</sup> This effort, though not progressive, helped to maintain a relatively unchanged form of Puppetry into the second half of the 20th century.

In the first half of the 20th century, family puppet theatres became popular, leading to the mass production of puppets.<sup>13</sup> According to Jaroslav Blecha, amateur productions were the most significant form of puppet theatre in the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> One of the main characteristics of the era of amateur puppet theatre is the targeting of the children's audience. Teachers have also noticed the educational potential of puppet theatre and it has influenced several generations of children.<sup>15</sup> Theatre theorist and director Karel Makonj notes that puppet theatre shifted its focus to children in response to declining adult interest. As adults sought more complex

5 Magnin, Charles: *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*. Paris 1852.

6 Bartoš, Jaroslav: *Profesionální činohra v českých zemích 17. a 18. století*. Černý, František. *Dějiny českého divadla, [Díl] I: Od počátků do sklonku osmnáctého století*. Praha 1968, p. 229.

7 Magnin (note 5), p. 92.

8 Bartoš, Jaroslav: *Loutkářská kronika: kapitoly z dějin loutkářství v českých zemích*. Praha 1963, p. 128.

9 Bartoš (note 6), p. 229.

10 Blecha, Jaroslav; Jirásek, Pavel: *Česká loutka*. Praha 2009, p. 130.

11 Vaňková, Jana; Pavlíček, František: *O dřevěné komedii na Moravě*. Brno 1987, p. 21.

12 Dubská, Alice: *Dvě století českého loutkářství. Vývojové proměny českého loutkového divadla od poloviny 18. století do roku 1945*. Praha 2004, p. 129.

13 Císař, Jan: *Česká divadelní tradice: mýtus, nebo živá zkušenost*. Praha 2011, p. 8.

14 Blecha/Jirásek (note 10), p. 132.

15 Sokol, František: *Estetická výchova, dětské publikum a loutkové divadlo*. Praha 1982.

entertainment, puppet theatre revitalized itself by embracing younger audiences.<sup>16</sup> Puppeteers emerged from many amateurs in the first half of the 20th century and professionalized the field. Thanks to the efforts of experts to create a communication and information platform for the field, the magazine *Český loutkář* (The Czech Puppeteer) was founded in 1912 as the first puppetry magazine in the world.<sup>17</sup> The lack of a cohesive organization to foster international collaboration was evident in the puppetry community. This gap was addressed through the vision of Jindřich Veselý, the inaugural editor-in-chief of the magazine *Český loutkář*, that was envisioned as a platform to facilitate foreign connections and active participation within the Czech puppetry landscape.<sup>18</sup> Veselý's efforts culminated in the establishment of the International Puppetry Organization (UNIMA) in 1929, marking a significant milestone in the unification and promotion of puppetry on a global scale. Prague was chosen as the headquarters for the new international association due to its status as a cultural city and the inspiration Czechoslovak puppeteers provided to others.<sup>19</sup>

In the early 20th century, specific artistic personalities influenced the shape of puppet theatre, laying the groundwork for modern Puppetry.<sup>20</sup> In the 1930s, puppet theatre was influenced by the emerging avant-garde and enjoyed increased popularity.<sup>21</sup> During the occupation in the 1940s, Czech literary classics or anti-Nazi allegories appeared on puppet stages.<sup>22</sup> Although the larger puppet theatres were not included in the ban on theatre activity by the political regime, the smaller puppet theatres, of a federal type, were forced to cease their activities for financial reasons. The First World War slowed down the development of Puppetry, but at the same time it strengthened the perception of puppet culture as a distinctive national phenomenon. After the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, the puppet became one of the signs of national spiritual culture and a symbol of Czechoslovak identity.<sup>23</sup> In the early 1940s, Czech puppet theatre maintained the principles of the 1930s, focusing on historical and national traditions despite occupation. While many troupes disappeared, about 25% of theatres were lost, Czech Puppetry played a social role and contributed to the resistance against Nazi occupation, promoting democratic ideals. By the war's end, efforts were underway to establish permanent professional puppet theatres.<sup>24</sup> The Czech professional puppet theatre was

16 Makonj, Karel: *Od loutky k objektu*. Praha 2007, p. 15.

17 Mezinárodní loutkářská unie. *Historie UNIMA 1929–1999*. Dostupné z, <https://unima.idu.cz/ceske-stredisko-unima/loutkar>, 31. 1. 2025.

18 Blecha/Jirásek (note 10), p. 212.

19 Jacob, Max: *Mezinárodní loutkářská unie (UNIMA)*. In: Margareta Niculescu (red.): *Světové loutkářství. Současné loutkové divadlo slovem i obrazem*. Praha 1966, p. 45.

20 Dubská (note 12), p. 23.

21 *Ibid*, p. 33.

22 Srba, Bořivoj: *České loutkářství za Protektorátu Čechy a Morava 1939–1945*. In: *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. Q, Řada teatrologická a filmologická 48/Q2 (1999)*, pp. 103–155, here p. 122.

23 Jirásek, Pavel: *Za české a zároveň mezinárodní loutkářské muzeum*. In: Alice Dubská (ed.): *Obrazy z dějin českého loutkářství. Ke 40. výročí založení Muzea loutkářských kultur v Chrudimi*. Chrudim 2012, pp. 10–35, here p. 11.

24 Srba, Bořivoj: *České loutkářství za Protektorátu Čechy a Morava 1939–1945*. In: *id.*, Libor Vodička (red.): *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity*. Brno 1999, pp. 103–155, here p. 106–117.

officially recognized and placed on the same level as other theatre forms through the enactment of the 1945 and 1948 theatre laws.<sup>25</sup> The law impacted private enterprise, including travelling puppeteers. While they gained the status they sought for over a century, the last nomadic puppetry practices ended.<sup>26</sup> After the communists' liquidation of nomadic merchants, amateur associations lost legal recognition and often their founders. Consequently, puppet troupes had to find a socialist founder. After 1949, permanent statutory theatres focused on children's productions were established in many regions.<sup>27</sup>

The 1950s are associated with the advent of animation. Several artists left for the new profession, and puppet theatre and animation began to develop along separate paths. In the theatre-reform movement of the 1960s, the first more ambitious efforts at international puppetry cooperation appeared. However, these tendencies were interrupted by normalization in the early 1970s.<sup>28</sup> The productions and poetics of puppets were aimed at children of a wide age range and adults.<sup>29</sup> The creation of a wide network of professional stages was led by the growing popularity of Czech Puppetry at home and abroad.<sup>30</sup> In connection with this, however, there was a need to train young, professionally educated actors, directors, and stage designers. The Puppetry Department was established at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 1952, the first official puppetry school in the world.<sup>31</sup>

The drama theatre underwent harsh crackdowns in the 1970s through the political efforts during the era of "normalization", following the Prague uprising in 1968. Although puppeteers had a freer space to create than other areas of theatre, the overall development of puppetry stalled after the significant shifts of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>32</sup> In the 1970s, the first projects cooperating with foreign theatres appeared, and regular puppet festivals began to be held.<sup>33</sup> The involvement of private collectors has significantly contributed to the reassessment of folk puppeteers, especially in relation to their role in preserving family traditions. Over the last two centuries, there has been a concerted effort to document the art of puppetry,

25 Dubská, Alice: Na počátku cesty. In: *Československý loutkář* 39/1 (1989), pp. 7–11.

26 Malíková, Nina: Moderní české loutkářství a jeho ohlasy v muzeu loutkářských kultur. In: Alice Dubská (ed.). *Obrazy z dějin českého loutkářství. Ke 40. výročí založení Muzea loutkářských kultur v Chrudimi*. Chrudim 2012, pp. 126–147, here p. 127.

27 Pavlovský, Petr: Pohled do dějin českého profesionálního loutkového divadla 1948–89. In: Miloslav Klíma, Zuzana Vojtíšková (eds.): *Živé dědictví loutkářství*. Praha 2013, pp. 48–75, here p. 49–50.

28 Dvořák, Jan: K prvnímu mezinárodnímu projektu českého divadla. In: id., Nina Malíková: Karel Brožek. *Víra v sílu loutkového divadla*. Praha 2015, pp. 93–104, here p. 95.

29 Bezděk, Zdeněk: *Československá loutková divadla 1949–1969*. Praha 1973, p. 9.

30 Editorial: Loutkář. Loutkáři slaví 60 let své existence. In: *Loutkář* 62/4 (2012), p. 3; Lázněvská, Lenka: České loutkářství mří do UNESCO. In: *Loutkář* 65/1 (2015), pp. 12–13, here p. 12.

31 Viz Loutkářská katedra na AMU se otvírá. Rozhovor redakce Čs. Loutkáře s rektorem prof. A. M. Brousi-lem. In: *Československý loutkář* 2/5 (1952), pp. 115–116, here p. 115.

32 Černý, František: *Divadlo v bariérách normalizace (1968–1989). Vzpomínky*. Praha 2008, p. 103.

33 These are the following festivals: Biennial Skupova Plzeň (festival of puppet and alternative professional theatre) alternating with Mateřinka in Liberec (biennial dedicated to productions for pre-school children), the international festival *Spectaculo interesse* in Ostrava (biennial) showcase of Czech amateur puppetry groups *Loutkářská Chrudim*, a show organized by the Czech Centre UNIMA *Přelet nad loutkářským hnízdem*.

culminating in the establishment of the Museum of Puppetry Cultures in Chrudim. Opened in 1972, the museum serves as a vital institution dedicated to highlighting the historical development and diversity of various puppetry forms.<sup>34</sup> Puppet productions of the late 1980s included the widest technical possibilities. Puppet work shifted towards new media, and the principles of the 1970s and 1980s tended to be developed in puppet theatre fixed in a permanent theatre building.<sup>35</sup> The social conditions after the fall of the communist regime allowed the legal existence of new companies and thus the creation of theatre scenes without the need to secure an official founder. After 1989, several dozen independent theatre troupes were founded, as well as several private theatres that travel all over the country, mostly to kindergartens.<sup>36</sup> The university department has been renamed from the Department of Puppet Theatre to the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre, indicating a broadening of the field of study.<sup>37</sup> The department focuses on theoretical education and practical skills for students in directing, dramaturgy, stage design, acting, and options like costume design, music, or dance. It emphasizes teamwork and the collaborative process of theatre-making.

## The Journey Continues: From Practice to Heritage

The results of the transformations of contemporary work, nowadays not only in puppet theatre, are a development of the path that Puppetry has taken since the beginning of modernism at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Shaped diversity has become both a goal and a means of communication. The search was on for a communication code that would most accurately reflect the thinking and feeling of contemporary society.<sup>38</sup> In the current era, a question has been raised concerning the revision of the very notion of puppet theatre and the related labels puppet, puppetry, and other derivative terms. The subtitle of the magazine *Loutkář*, which has been called during its existence “the chronicle of Czech Puppetry”, has therefore also managed to include three words: “space, matter, animation”. These are meant to evoke the broader scope not only of the periodical, but also of contemporary puppet theatre.<sup>39</sup> Currently, puppetry gatherings, shows, and festivals continue to thrive in villages and small towns, providing valuable opportunities for networking, sharing experiences, and transmitting knowledge and skills.<sup>40</sup> There has been

34 Malíková (note 26), p. 130.

35 Blecha (note 10), p. 266.

36 Malíková, Nina; Exnarová, Alena: *Svět loutek včera a dnes*. Chrudim 1997, p. 13.

37 Katedra alternativního a loutkového divadla. O katedře. Dostupné z, [www.damu.cz/cs/katedry-programy/katedra-alternativniho-a-loutkoveho-divadla](http://www.damu.cz/cs/katedry-programy/katedra-alternativniho-a-loutkoveho-divadla), 6. 4. 2024; Národní informační a poradenské středisko pro kulturu. České loutkářství zapsáno na seznam UNESCO, [www.nipos.cz/ceske-loutkarstvi-zapsano-na-seznam-unesco/](http://www.nipos.cz/ceske-loutkarstvi-zapsano-na-seznam-unesco/), 4. 4. 2024.

38 Klíma, Miroslav: K vývoji animace v moderním a současném loutkovém divadle. In: id., Jan Dvořák (eds.): *O animaci: z různých stran současného loutkového divadla*. Praha 2019, pp. 9–48, here p. 9.

39 Lešková Dolenská, Kateřina: Trojí způsob animace In: Miloslav Klíma; Jan Dvořák (eds.): *O animaci: z různých stran současného loutkového divadla*. Praha 2019, pp. 51–57, here p. 54–55.

40 The complete list of festivals can be found here: [www.loutkar.eu/?uf](http://www.loutkar.eu/?uf), 10. 4. 2024.

a shift of many activities to urban areas, likely due to improved accessibility and operational convenience. Today, a wide range of puppet theatre forms can be found across the Czech Republic, from the discovery of new techniques to a return to the old puppet forms or countless combinations of both.

The inscription of Puppetry on the Representative List was preceded by several events. At the beginning of 2012, representatives of only two regions – the Hradec Králové and Pardubice regions – proposed East Bohemian puppetry for inclusion in the The List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture of the Czech Republic, which is a form of a national list.<sup>41</sup> However, there were some objections to this initiative, which were since Czech Puppetry cannot be located only in the territory of East Bohemia.<sup>42</sup> Despite minor contradictions, Czech theatre scholars prepared material that led to the inclusion on the national list.<sup>43</sup> Shortly after East Bohemian Puppetry registration, the Ministry of Culture sent an invitation to regional authorities and methodological centres for traditional folk culture to prepare nationwide nominations of Puppetry, and the Czech Republic could then proceed with the proposal for nomination to the UNESCO list.<sup>44</sup> In 2014, the theatre researcher and puppeteer Juraj Hamar came up with a proposal for a joint Slovak-Czech nomination to the Representative List.<sup>45</sup> The perception of potential inclusion on the Representative List was a positive expectation among nostalgia scholars and theatre scholars. The designation evoked a sense of prestige and possible material assistance; as Jaroslav Blecha, who was one of the main coordinators of the preparation of the nomination dossier, expressed in an interview for the interactive website *Místní kultura* (Local Culture) shortly before the Puppetry's inclusion on the Representative List. He put it, “it will benefit all those who work in the field because it is a prestigious mark. Any new project, be it a publication, exhibition, or theatre, which refers to this nomination, can receive support – not only moral but also financial. If the nomination is approved, it would unquestionably guarantee that Czech and Slovak Puppetry has a truly significant value in the international world context.”<sup>46</sup>

The previous description shows how important the phenomenon of Puppetry is to its bearers, whose importance they have confirmed by inscribing it in the Representative List. Puppetry also shows great vitality and, thanks to its constant transmission through festivals, meetings, or teaching at the university, it has a significant potential to exist in the future. The Representative List has several important functions and objectives, including the protection and maintenance of cultural identity, the promotion of research and education, the promotion of

41 Národní ústav lidové kultury. Východočeské loutkářství, [www.nulk.cz/2017/02/01/vychodoceske-loutkarstvi/](http://www.nulk.cz/2017/02/01/vychodoceske-loutkarstvi/), 9. 4. 2023.

42 Klíma, Miloslav; Vojtíšková, Zuzana (eds.): *Živé dědictví loutkářství*. Praha, Chrudim 2013.

43 Lázňovská, Lenka: České loutkářství míří do UNESCO. In: *Loutkář 65/1* (2015), pp. 12–13, here p. 12.

44 Lázňovská (note 38), p. 12.

45 Národní informační a poradenské středisko pro kulturu. České loutkářství zapsáno na seznam UNESCO, [www.nipos.cz/ceske-loutkarstvi-zapsano-na-seznam-unesco/](http://www.nipos.cz/ceske-loutkarstvi-zapsano-na-seznam-unesco/), 4. 4. 2023.

46 *Místní kultura*: Interview with Jaroslav Blecha, <https://mistnikultura.cz/historik-divadla-jaroslav-blecha-upsal-dusi-loutkam>, 8. 4. 2023.

sustainable development, or the revitalization of the expressions in question and the sustainable transmission to future generations. However, as indicated in the introduction, perceptions of the listing on the Representative List, its significance, and opinions on the benefits of the listing vary among puppeteers.

## Honour as Motivation for Development

The research revealed that puppeteers expressed a profound sense of pride regarding the inclusion of Puppetry on the Representative List. This recognition is seen not only as validation of their artistic craft but also as an acknowledgment of the substantial cultural significance that Puppetry holds within their communities and beyond. This sentiment is echoed by Aleš Pop from amateur theatre Kašpárkova říše in Olomouc, who shared his thoughts in an interview for the magazine *Loutkář*: “And we really have something to be proud of, the tradition we all come from. Let us realize that we are its carriers, we participate in it, we are part of it, we develop it further and transmit it! However, this also obliges us greatly. To further, greater efforts. It makes sense!”<sup>47</sup> With a sense of pride comes a sense of recognition, too. Karel Šefrna from the *Céčko*, amateur theatre in Svitavy, also compares Czech puppet theatre in a European context: “We are small, but we also have the ambition to be seen. Moreover, now and then, we have something to be proud of. Our puppet theatre is one of those things. I have been touring Europe with amateur theatre for years, and I can compare.”<sup>48</sup> A sense of pride and perception of inclusion on the Representative List as an award for long-term work was felt by a wide group of puppeteers, both amateur and professional. The tendency to perceive ICH status as a reward for effort and value is thus evident across different areas of Puppetry. A correlation can be observed between the perceived pride in incorporating Puppetry into the Representative List and the level of engagement in the nomination process. Several dozen puppeteers contributed to the preparation of the nomination, suggesting that this collective effort may have influenced the favourable perception of the award. “Well, it was hard work, I was there, and I’m pleased it worked out. Puppetry deserves it,”<sup>49</sup> remarks puppeteer Jiří Polehňa, who has been performing solo with puppets since 2007 and describes himself as a folk puppeteer. This illustrates the benefits of the holders’ active involvement in the nomination process. However, this quality is a direct result of their commitment and appreciation for their craft, rather than the award itself. While the recognition from ICH has strengthened the puppeteers’ sense of pride, it seems to be more complementary than essential to the continuity of their work.

47 Interview with Aleš Pop, Kašpárkova říše in Olomouc. Co přinese UNESCO? II. In: *Loutkář* 67/2 (2017), pp. 82–86, here p. 83. Translation by the author.

48 Interview with Karel Šefrna, Céčko in Svitavy. Co přinese UNESCO? II. In: *Loutkář* 67/2 (2017), pp. 82–86, here p. 84. Translation by the author.

49 Jiří Polehňa, folk puppeteer, 23. 6. 2023. Translation by the author.

Inscription on the Representative List also represented an opportunity for puppeteers to make a financial profit. Puppeteers would have liked to have the opportunity to receive more financial support for their work by being included on the Representative List, as illustrated by Jakub Hojka of the amateur puppet theatre Jiskra: “Those of us who are funded by grants can add one extra mandatory sentence to each grant application they write in the future.”<sup>50</sup> Tomáš Hájek, a long-time amateur puppeteer, recognizes similar benefits in all areas of puppetry: “But I see it mainly as a pragmatic benefit, that money is needed everywhere if you say UNESCO, they will find more money for it. That someone who did not know before will realize it. Museums, shows.”<sup>51</sup> The inclusion on the Representative List does not inherently result in financial benefits; it is at the discretion of individuals or groups to utilize the ICH status, for instance, in grant applications to support their claims. In the realm of cultural heritage, the inclusion of specific elements on the Representative List can have significant implications for financial support at various levels. A pertinent example of this is the museum exhibition devoted to the phenomenon of Puppetry at the Moravian Museum in Brno.<sup>52</sup> This exhibition has not only highlighted the cultural relevance of puppetry but has also benefitted from state-level financial backing because of its recognized status. Jaroslav Blecha, who was the main author of the exhibition, confirms that without the status of ICH, the exhibition would not have been built, thanks to the part of the financial budget that the Ministry of Culture reserves for phenomena included on the Representative List.<sup>53</sup>

At the local level, funding operates independently of the Representative List entry. For instance, the largest annual festival, Puppetry Chrudim, secures support from multiple sources. This event is organized by NIPOS-ARTAMA, an organization designated by the Ministry of Culture, alongside the town of Chrudim through the Chrudimská beseda organization, and the Association for the Publication of the Puppeteer magazine.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, there are various regional financial contributions.<sup>55</sup> The local funding for Puppetry is independent of its inscription on the Representative list. It has proven effective prior to this designation; however, the sustainability of such funding in the absence of ICH status remains uncertain. At both national and local levels, it is ultimately up to individuals to determine if they will utilize their ICH status to secure additional financial support. Research indicates that many puppeteers capitalize on this opportunity, as receiving a prestigious award often includes the assurance of funding.

50 Interview with Jakub Hojka, Loutkové divadlo Jiskra. Co přinese UNESCO? II. In: *Loutkář* 67/2 (2017), pp. 82–86, here p. 85. Translation by the author.

51 Tomáš Hájek, amateur troupe Bažantova loutkářská družina, 6. 7. 2023. Translation by the author.

52 [www.mzm.cz/loutkarske-umeni](http://www.mzm.cz/loutkarske-umeni), 23. 2. 2024.

53 Jaroslav Blecha, Director of the Theatre Department of the Moravian Museum, 21. 2. 2024. Translation by the author.

54 Annual report of the organization chrudimská beseda, [www.chrudimskabeseda.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Vyrocnni-zprava-2022.pdf](http://www.chrudimskabeseda.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Vyrocnni-zprava-2022.pdf), 23. 2. 2024.

55 Budget measures of the town of Chrudim from 2023 can be viewed at [www.chrudim.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Rozpocetove-opatreni-c.-82022.pdf](http://www.chrudim.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Rozpocetove-opatreni-c.-82022.pdf), 23. 2. 2024.

## “Puppetry doesn’t need artificial fame”. Resistances and Encounters

The perception of ICH status evokes a range of emotional reactions, with feelings of fear and apprehension being others. These emotions can stem from concerns about the preservation of cultural practices, the potential loss of heritage, or the implications of modernization. Inclusion on the Representative List may exert pressure on certain puppeteers, who express concerns that such recognition could lead to the commercialization of Puppetry and subsequently dilute its authentic cultural message. Karel Makonj, a teacher at the Academy of Performing Arts and a director at Loutkář, expressed his dissatisfaction with the submitted definition after the entry on the Representative List; he considers it inaccurate, unsuccessful, and even understands the entry of Puppetry on the Representative List “as if it were an obituary of Czech and Slovak puppetry in its historical culmination”.<sup>56</sup> The holders are concerned that Puppetry should not become a conserved phenomenon. Kateřina Dolenská, the current editor-in-chief of Loutkář magazine, has watched the development and captured not only the fears of puppeteers and the public but a misunderstanding of the listing on the Representative List: “Some people joked that it was dead, that it was the last nail in the coffin. It was passed off as a form in danger, which was confusing. However, the fear that it would die and disappear was in the perception that we were worried if it was the final station and all these young people would be put off.”<sup>57</sup> However, the promoters also perceive puppet theatre as a living, constantly evolving phenomenon, and freezing it would go against its alleged essence. From the point of view of people involved in the field, puppet theatre should change and reflect current social issues: “Puppet theatre was, is, and will be here. However, it will evolve, and new forms will come; they will have to,”<sup>58</sup> Antonín Maloň, a professional puppet carver, mentions. The diversity of contemporary puppet theatre expressions is appreciated by the holders, and from the entry on the Representative List, they may feel that the award will temper this diversity of practice. The director of the esteemed DRAK Theatre, Tomáš Jarkovský, adopts an approach to the evolution of the puppet theatre form by embracing a philosophy of relinquishing control to accidental circumstances: “The question is what will come out of this multiplicity, but I would be fine if nothing unified would come out of it.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, for some puppeteers, inclusion on the Representative List may serve the opposite of its perceived purpose – fears of freezing live practice can motivate innovation and unstable reflection on the present.

The research indicates that not all puppeteers feel a connection to or see value in the status of ICH. This sentiment is shared by the younger generation of puppeteers and independent puppeteers, who approach the art form differently. The

56 Interview with Karel Makonj, teacher at the Academy of Performing Arts, director. Co přinese UNESCO? In: Loutkář 67/1 (2017), pp. 63–73, here p. 65. Translation by the author.

57 Kateřina Dolenská, editor-in-chief of Loutkář magazine, 13. 10. 2023. Translation by the author.

58 Antonín Maloň, puppet designer, 17. 2. 2020. Translation by the author.

59 Tomáš Jarkovský, director of the DRAK theatre at Conference Is puppet theatre a public thing?, 9. 3. 2023. Translation by the author.

inscription of Puppetry on the Representative List does not resonate with their work or mindset. Many identify themselves as artists or creators rather than traditional puppeteers, often blending various theatrical styles and seeking innovative forms of expression.<sup>60</sup> For them, puppet theatre is merely one avenue for artistic exploration, chosen for its unique expressive capabilities. Their work frequently addresses contemporary social issues and promotes international collaboration. While their creations may consciously or unconsciously draw from the rich tradition of puppet theatre, they emphasize the significance of its immediate presence and fleeting nature.

Berta Doubková, a student in the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre, describes this essence of theatre, where it is made up of the present moment between the actor and the spectator: “For me it is an important medium, that in the meeting of the spectator and the performer, that their meeting creates a new reality, all other things are tied to that, theatre is a social affair, the projection of the historical-social situation will always be there, the essence is the contact here and now, that is what holds it together.”<sup>61</sup>

The inscription of Puppetry on the Representative List has generated a considerable amount of discourse within academic circles, particularly regarding its implications and the motivations behind such recognition. Critics argue that the act of listing puppetry may be more indicative of political manoeuvring by certain stakeholders rather than a genuine effort to preserve and promote the art form. Jaroslav Blecha, who initially had sound expectations for the registration on the Representative List, is somewhat sceptical after the registration and considers it almost an unnecessary act: “With other elements on the Representative list, people are assured that they will see an unchanging manifestation that stems from a particular historical record and essentially nothing changes there. Whereas if you come to a puppetry festival, nobody knows about UNESCO. The festival was before, and inscription and puppetry doesn’t need artificial fame. In our country it was just politics, people don’t need it to live and create.” Pavel Jirásek, director, screenwriter, and theatre researcher, who sounds a strong voice in puppetry circles, was outraged not only by the entry itself, but also by the definition in the nomination protocol, which he said was created for political purposes only: “They had to simplify it, reduce it, the journalists then take some of the lessons they all repeat and that’s it. The definition was made to pass, yeah, I mean, the definition doesn’t express Czech Puppetry, but it simply expresses politics that is meant to serve as a way to gain some kind of profit, whether it’s simply social recognition or money.”<sup>62</sup> This perspective raises important questions about the authenticity of cultural recognition and the potential overshadowing of grassroots initiatives in favour of institutional validation. The debate underscores the complexities involved

60 Introductions as an artist, actor, performer, and more are so evident in the festival program *Přelet nad loutkářským hnízdem*, [www.prelet.cz/index.php?lmut=cz&part=archiv](http://www.prelet.cz/index.php?lmut=cz&part=archiv), 12. 4. 2023.

61 Berta Doubková, a student in the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre, 19. 2. 2024. Translation by the author.

62 Pavel Jirásek, director and screenwriter, 12. 9. 2022. Translation by the author.

in cultural heritage policies and the diverse interpretations of what constitutes meaningful preservation and representation in the arts.

## Place of Conclusion: Critical Present, Critical Heritage

An overview of the development of Puppetry illustrates a remarkable historical continuity, marked by dedicated efforts to transmit techniques, preserve material culture, and document the evolution of this art form in the Czech lands. The critical work of theatre scholars and historians underscores the significance of safeguarding and showcasing puppetry as a vital cultural asset. This emphasis on the transmission and integration of traditional Puppetry aligns with the conceptual framework of ICH, highlighting the idea of cultural practices as dynamic elements that are intentionally selected by communities for future continuity.<sup>63</sup> Social geographers, such as John Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth, emphasize the temporal relationships inherent in heritage, suggesting that the present context invites choices from the past while simultaneously shaping what is bequeathed to future generations.<sup>64</sup> This duality is evidenced in the establishment of institutions such as the Museum of Puppetry Cultures in Chrudim and the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre at universities, which serve as repositories of knowledge and encourage educational outreach. The proliferation of festivals, seminars, and conferences further showcases the ongoing interest in the transmission of puppetry techniques and narratives. However, discussions among participants illuminate the unpredictable trajectory of Puppetry's future. While deeply rooted in tradition and maintaining a lasting appeal, this art form faces challenges from shifting cultural dynamics and technological advancements that could influence its evolution. This raises pertinent questions regarding the role of unpredictability in artistic growth and prompts dialogues surrounding innovation, audience engagement, and the sustainability of traditional practices. Furthermore, these reflections lead to inquiries about the interplay between cultural practices and the impacts of heritage interventions. Notably, how does inclusion on the Representative List affect the manifestation of cultural practices? Scholars like Dorothy Noyes have noted that UNESCO nominations often lead to a spectrum of instrumentalization, which arises when certain cultural manifestations are deemed of universal significance.<sup>65</sup> The inclusion of specific phenomena on international heritage lists serves to affirm their value, which reinforces Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's assertion that such lists establish global standards that may exist separately from the living cultural

63 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Article 16 and 17, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>, 31.3. 2025.

64 Tunbridge, John E.; Ashworth, Gregory J.: *Dissonant Heritage. The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*. Chichester 1996, p. 6.

65 Noyes, Dorothy: *Traditional Culture: How Does it Work?* In: CP101. *Concepts and Institutions in Cultural Property 1 (2010)* (A Working Paper of the Göttingen Interdisciplinary Research Group on Cultural Property), [https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/serien/qu/cp101/01\\_2010.pdf](https://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/serien/qu/cp101/01_2010.pdf), 13. 5. 2023.

expressions they represent.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, these listings often lead to a recontextualization of cultural manifestations within national frameworks and grant them new significances informed by their international status.

Respondents have noted a tendency to evaluate puppetry in relation to other entries on the Representative List within the Czech Republic. While each inscription possesses unique qualities, together they contribute to a collective understanding of how these phenomena ought to be perceived on such lists. A prevailing sentiment suggests that inscribed practices should remain in a historical state with minimal allowance for innovation, raising questions about the alignment of this perspective with UNESCO's ethos. Critics argue that these lists frequently extract cultural practices from their contexts, thereby freezing their forms or relegating them to mere relics for admiration. This approach contradicts the dynamics of culture, being fluid and evolving. As Jonathan Friedman articulates, culture is "a relatively unstable product of signifying practice,"<sup>67</sup> underscoring that the elements associated with culture – texts, codes, paradigms – are abstractions of lived practices. Despite facing challenges related to Representative Listing, puppetry has successfully navigated the biases often associated with such classifications. It has emerged as a vibrant, adaptive practice that retains a significant presence in both historical and contemporary contexts, largely due to the unwavering efforts of its advocates. This observation beckons a critical examination of whether the Representative List should exclusively highlight instances of ICH intertwined with popular culture, especially considering the romanticized narratives often attached to such representations. The perception of ICH status often elicits a wide range of emotional responses. These emotions may arise from concerns about the preservation of cultural practices, the potential loss of heritage, or the impacts of modernization. Such sentiments underscore the significance of ICH as a vital cultural asset and a cornerstone of identity and community cohesion. Understanding these emotional reactions is essential for stakeholders engaged in heritage preservation, as it can lead to more empathetic and effective strategies for safeguarding ICH.

### Zusammenfassung:

Diese Studie konzentriert sich auf das Puppenspiel, das auf der *Repräsentativen Liste des immateriellen Kulturerbes der Menschheit* als gemeinsame Nominierung der Slowakei und der Tschechischen Republik anerkannt ist. Sie analysiert kritisch die Perspektiven und Einstellungen von Kulturträgern in Bezug auf die Bedeutung und Anerkennung des immateriellen Kulturerbes. Die Anerkennung des Puppenspiels als Teil der UNESCO-Liste verdeutlicht die vorherrschenden Einstellungen und konzeptionellen Rahmenbedingungen im Zusammenhang mit dem immateriellen Kulturerbe in der Tschechischen Republik. Puppenspieler zeigen eine Reihe emotionaler Reaktionen auf die Auszeichnung, die nicht nur ihre persönlichen Überzeugungen, sondern auch

66 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara: Intangible Cultural Heritage as Metacultural Production. In: *Museum International* 56/1–2 (2004), pp. 52–65, here p. 55–56.

67 Friedman, Jonathan: *Cultural Identity and Global Process*. London 1994, p. 74.

kulturelle und soziale Dimensionen widerspiegeln. Dieses Phänomen unterstreicht die bestehenden Spannungen zwischen den traditionellen Praktiken des Puppenspiels und den institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen.

*Keywords: UNESCO, UNESCO-Status, immaterielles Kulturerbe, Wahrnehmung, Identifikation, Theater, Tschechische Republik, tschechisches Puppentheater*