

■ By Shefalee Vasudev

What is puppetry doing in the time of the idiot box? How can quaint tales of love and longing enthrall audiences who are hooked to steamy accounts of sex and scandal on TV soaps? The answers were evident as soon as the curtain went up on the first show at the recent international puppet festival in Delhi, revealing how much puppetry has evolved. The skill of the puppeteer in expressing emotions through materials and objects is now a marriage of the digital age with traditional puppetry where one complements the other.

Puppetry is no longer a marginalised folk art that amuses children or tells royal Rajasthani tales through petite figures bobbing around in tune to the tugging strings of their manipulators. It is now an assimilated ingenuity combining real actors, modern dancers, digital lighting and a variety of gloved, hand-manipulated, string and mammoth puppets to present stories of the here and now. Poems, educational messages, wildlife themes, even black comedies are choreographed with provocative music, resulting in spectacular acts. Caricature puppets are now used on TV to convey social messages or to get away with biting political satires. Even print advertisements play with face masks as did a McDonald's ad that appeared last week expressing preference for a McAloo tikki burger over an NRI son-in-law. India now has more than 50 modern puppet groups, which work on the theorem of fusing diverse arts into one performance. While Ahmedabad, Kolkata and Delhi have a large number of new groups, others making their presence felt are from Chennai, Hyderabad and Mumbai.

India's foremost puppeteer Dadi Pudumjee is behind the rewriting of the traditional script. But his no-hype-please demeanour masks the passion that has gone into transforming this art from its traditional rigours to one with global appeal. His recent presentation, *Transposition*, interpreted the original Indian tale *Vetalpanchcavināsati* and achieved through puppetry what Girish Karnad did through theatre with his *Hayavadana*. Exploring the theme of duality within each human being, the play used body puppets, modern dancers and a mammoth figure of



PULLING THE RIGHT STRINGS

Contemporary masks, mammoth puppets, digital techniques and new themes have resulted in the transformation of puppetry into a spectacular modern art



Goddess Kali tuned to the strains of Indian chants mixed with western music. "It is the age of thinking puppeteers who can link themes and techniques," says Pudumjee. An enthralled audience came out of the auditorium saying that they had never imagined that puppets could be so big or that they could tell such a complex story so vividly.

That is how puppetry affects those

nurtured on a staple TV diet, challenging the senses like few forms of entertainment do. It also turns on its head Roland Barthes' idea that "the modern mind is a consumer par excellence". Puppetry sells no consumer idea, yet it is good enough to pull "consumers" away from their couches to watch something as engrossing as their favourite soap. *Serenades*, a glove puppet show by an

Italian team that is slated to travel to Ahmedabad after their recent Delhi and Jaipur performances, is a feast. It features Columbina, an immensely cute little figure with two golden pigtailed. Such a relief from the domestic intrigues on TV. Coquettish and flirtatious, Columbina is everything Italian—spicy and engaging.

Artistic fatigue with theatre and the



PUPPET'S PROGRESS: (Anti-clockwise from above) Bhatt's *Dhola-Marū*; dancers perform in a collaborative play and body puppets in *Transposition*

new forms of puppetry have tempted many to swap one for the other. Sudip Gupta, director of Doll's Theatre from Kolkata says that unlike theatre, puppetry allows him to express a multitude of talents like painting, sculpture and dance as well as reach out to a wide spectrum of viewers. Doll's Theatre does about 60 shows a year, dwelling on themes that mirror the bond between nature and human beings. Their play *Taming the Wild* is currently on tour in Jharkhand.

For traditional Indian artistes, this evolution of puppetry is like a rebirth. Forty-nine-year-old Puran Bhatt, the first ever conventional puppeteer to be awarded by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, says that he did not want to pursue his inherited art of Rajasthani puppetry. "There was no interest, no money, no recognition in it," says Bhatt, who broke away from puppetry for a decade till experimental groups pulled him back. Bhatt lives in a slum in Delhi called Kathputli Colony, but has done over 50 shows of his classic Rajasthani love story, *Dhola-Marū*, in 16 countries. He speaks English like a jack in the box and has Anna Sober, a Fulbright scholar and US puppeteer training under him. Urged to improvise, he added modern masks, stuffed pythons, shadow lighting and slow motion manipulation techniques to his dainty, painted string figures.

Now, the annual puppet workshops he conducts at Udaipur draw enthusiastic students from all over the world, especially Germany and France. Undisguised pride lights up his eyes as he mentions how Sanjana Kapoor invited him to perform at Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai.

Working with foreign puppeteers through workshops has opened a vista of new possibilities for the Indian exponents. They have learnt to use utensils, umbrellas, straw, bamboo baskets and shoes in puppetry besides multimedia techniques. Using big, stuffed animal puppets for educational work—to teach self-esteem, conflict resolution, avoiding drugs and alcohol and the use of arithmetic outside the classroom are actually western ideas now being adapted in India.

But despite the fun and the exploration, puppetry is low on the hierarchy of Indian arts. "It is neither as hyped nor supported and sold like dance and theatre," says Pudumjee, emphasising that for it to really evolve, it needs financial, governmental, structural and artistic support. Bhatt joins in to add that the government ignores traditional artistes. While puppetry may never be eclipsed by other arts, it generally remains in their shadow. All the more reason why the curtain should not fall on it. ■

