

Sicilian Puppet Theater

Opera Dei Pupi

Marwa Ragab Elganiney

*Director of the Excavations and Missions Department - Helwan and Maadi
Area - Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities*

Introduction:

This research paper examines the topic of "Opera dei Pupi - Sicilian Puppet Theater." These puppets differ from other theatrical forms in their manipulation mechanism, visual style, and theatrical organization. They have received considerable international recognition, with UNESCO declaring them a Masterpiece of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. This recognition reflects their unique cultural significance and their distinction as a vibrant art form that tells timeless stories. Sicilian Puppet Theater remains an important form of cultural heritage, with efforts underway to protect it and transmit it to future generations. Some contemporary artworks draw inspiration from the aesthetics and style of Opera dei Pupi, demonstrating its continued relevance and influence.

The puppet theater known as Opera dei Pupi emerged in Sicily at the beginning of the 19th century and enjoyed great popularity among the island's working classes. The puppeteers told stories inspired by medieval chivalric literature and other sources, such as Italian Renaissance poems, the lives of the saints, and tales of famous bandits. The dialogues in these performances were largely improvised by the puppeteers.

There were two main schools of Sicilian puppetry in Palermo and Catania, which were primarily distinguished by the size and shape of the puppets, the methods of manipulation, and the variety of painted backdrops.

These theaters were often family-run businesses, with family members involved in all aspects of the production, from carving and painting the puppets to manipulating them during performances. The puppets, which are known for their distinctive expressions, were crafted by skilled artisans using traditional methods. The puppeteers constantly strove to outdo each other with their performances, which had a profound impact on their audiences. In the past, these performances would take place over several nights and provided opportunities for social gatherings.

Opera dei Pupi faces a number of challenges today. Television and cinema have led to a decline in the popularity of Puppet Theater. The cost of producing Opera dei Pupi performances is also high, and it can be difficult to attract new audiences. However, there are a number of efforts underway to preserve this living tradition.

In conclusion, the importance of Opera dei Pupi lies not only in its status as a traditional form of entertainment, but also in its ability to provide commentary on social and political issues, and to connect audiences with heroic and fantastical stories.

Keywords:

Opera dei Pupi - Sicilian puppet theater, Intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO, Chivalric Literature, Popular Culture, Social Unrest, Economic Difficulties, Tourism

Sicily: A Land of Diverse Beauty and Rich History

(Sicilia), the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, lies south of the Italian peninsula. Its diverse natural beauty and rich history make it a popular tourist destination. Moreover, the island boasts a strategic location between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, becoming a crossroads for different cultures and civilizations throughout history, (Figure 1).

Sicily's cultural heritage reflects the influences of Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spaniards, French, and Italians who ruled it over the centuries. This is evident in its architecture, art, literature, and music. The island is renowned for its stunning landmarks like the capital city Palermo, the ancient city of Syracuse with its impressive Greek ruins, and the coastal town of Taormina offering breathtaking views of Mount Etna.¹ Despite its mountainous terrain, Sicily has a largely industrial and agricultural economy. Mount Etna, Europe's tallest active volcano at 3,220 meters, is a significant landmark. The island is also a source of rich cultural traditions and folk arts, including Sicilian folk poetry, embroidery, painting, and vibrant religious festivals.²

¹ Sapienza, G., (2016), Sicily: A Cultural History. Oxford: Signal Books; Lane, F., (2014), Sicily: An Illustrated History. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd.; Dickie, J., (2013), Delizia!: The Epic History of the Italians and Their Food, New York: Free Press.

² https://web.archive.org/web/20131231001248/http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Sicily_History/id/5462681 (25th January 2024, 4:00PM)



(Figure 1) Sicily map¹

Sicilian Opera dei Pupi is a unique form of Puppet Theater that holds a special place among the world's puppetry traditions. It is distinguished by its exceptional performances and the unique characteristics of its puppets, from their mechanisms of movement to their artistic style and theatrical organization.

Opera dei Pupi mainly stages epic tales, especially those inspired by the literature of chivalry, particularly the Carolingian cycle. This heritage also includes stories of bandits and saints, and it also delves into historical events and Shakespearean works. It is a window into the rich cultural heritage and literary history of Sicily, providing the audience with a magical experience that combines the written word with theatrical movement.

In 2001, UNESCO's recognition of Opera dei Pupi as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity"² played a significant role in revitalizing interest in this traditional Sicilian puppet theater.³ Being the first Italian practice to receive this prestigious

¹ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_region_of_Sicily,_Italy,_with_provinces-it.svg
(25th January 2024, 011:18PM)

² www.ich.unesco.org

(23rd January 2024, 01:07PM)

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/opera-dei-pupi-sicilian-puppet-theatre-00011>

(20th January 2024, 10:00AM)

³ Sicily's Traditions Guarded: The Association for the Preservation of Popular Traditions; Founded in 1965, the Association champions Sicilian folk traditions, particularly the captivating Opera dei Pupi.

recognition, it was inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, following Italy's ratification of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Sicilian Puppets: A Cultural Heritage

Sicilians refer to puppets as "pupi." These are not mere children's toys, but rather a medium for storytelling. Through the voices of the puppeteers (pupuri), the puppets narrate tales of chivalry and battles, of love and loss. These stories form an integral part of Sicilian culture, passed down from generation to generation.¹

The Significance of Pupi:

- Pupi are a crucial element of Sicilian culture, featuring in traditional puppet shows that recount stories of knights and adventures.
- These stories draw inspiration from the legend of Charlemagne and his paladins, who lived in France during the 11th and 12th centuries.²

Instrumental in its UNESCO recognition as a cultural masterpiece, they tirelessly document practices, educate young generations, and support vibrant festivals. Through collaboration, they safeguard Sicily's unique heritage for future generations.

<https://www.museodellemarionette.it/en/2014-03-14-16-51-39/2014-03-14-18-03-08>

(25th January 2024, 04:00PM)

¹ Cangemi, F., (2014), Opera dei pupi siciliani: A living tradition, *The Drama Review*, 58(4), pp. 31-48.

This article provides an overview of the history and culture of Sicilian Opera dei Pupi. It discusses how the tradition is passed down from master puppeteers (pupari) to students and how it faces challenges in the modern era.

² Bassani, L. S. (2012), pp. 22-23, 35-36.

This book presents a comprehensive field study of Sicilian Opera dei Pupi. It focuses on how puppets are used to tell stories.

The Birth of Puppet Theater: Opera dei Pupi ¹

Origins and History:

Determining the precise origin of Opera dei Pupi is a challenging task, shrouded in mystery and sparking debate among scholars. Ettore Li Gotti ², for instance, suggests its roots date back to around 1850, coinciding with the independence revolutions, fueled by a renewed national spirit and romantic ideals. Others³ believe that the material of "Opera dei Pupi" performances stemmed from rich sources dating back to the middle Ages, specifically the French heroic epics. These oral poems, passed down through generations, narrated the excitement of the Crusades, the battles of Emperor Charlemagne against the Muslims, and the nobility's rebellion against their rulers. These epics formed a rich literary repository until the Italian Renaissance, when three major works emerged that significantly influenced "Opera dei Pupi": the Italian epics of Matteo Boiardo⁴ and Ludovico Ariosto⁵, alongside popular folk tales.

Regardless of its exact origin, the researcher believes that Opera dei Pupi remains a captivating embodiment of Sicilian traditions, offering a window into its soul. It weaves together ancient myths with contemporary realities, allowing folk art to flourish and tell unforgettable stories. Through larger-than-life wooden and cloth puppets that come to life on stage, tales of chivalry, love, and intrigue unfold, drawing inspiration from chivalric romances and ancient legends. This art form captivates audiences of all ages, carrying the fragrance of the past and breathing life into it in the present.

¹ For Further Studies Dedicated to Sicilian Opera dei Pupi:

Ignazio E. Buttitta, (1984), *The Sicilian Pupi: A History*, Cambridge University Press; Bernadette Majorana (2008), *Opera dei Pupi: A Sicilian Puppet Theatre*, Legas; Alessandro Napoli, (2015), *I Pupi Siciliani: Storia, Tradizione, Tecnica*, Flaccovio Editore; Rosario Perricone, (2010), *Opera dei Pupi: Tradizione e Attualità*, Edizioni Lussografica.

Recent Research on Historical Significance: Antonino Buttitta, (2014), *La Tradizione Dei Pupi Siciliani: Storia, Poetica, Tecnica*, Edizioni del Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani; Antonino Uccello, (2017), *Opera dei Pupi: Tradizione e Modernità*, Edizioni Kalós; Janne Vibæk, (2018), *The Sicilian Puppet Theatre: A Study of its History, Structure, and Repertoire*, Museum Tusulanum Press; Carmelo Alberti, (2020), *Opera dei Pupi: Un'Arte Antica per il Nuovo Millennio*, Edizioni Novecento.

Fundamental Studies: Giuseppe Pitrè, (1881), *Spettacoli e Feste Popolari Siciliane*, Libreria Editrice Clausen; Sebastiano Lo Nigro(1958), *I Pupi Siciliani: Storia e Tradizione*, Edizioni Salvatore Sciascia.

Additional Resources: Opera dei Pupi by Antonio Pasqualino (Sellerio 1977)

<https://www.museodellemarionette.it/il-museo/antonio-pasqualino>

(23rd January 2024, 05:18PM)

² Li Gotti, E., (1957), *Il Teatro dei Pupi*, Sansoni, pp. 27-33, 146-47.

³ Pitre, G., (1889), vol. 4; Lo Nigro, S., (1976), *Favola e verità dei pupi siciliani*, Lares, vol. 62 (2), pp. 287-293.

⁴ Matteo Boiardo (*Orlando innamorato*, 1483-1495)

⁵ Ludovico Ariosto (*Orlando furioso*, 1516)



(Figure 2) © Giacomo Cuticchio/UNESCO ¹

Opera dei Pupi Characters: A Fusion of Diverse Literary Traditions

The characters of Opera dei Pupi are a product of a diverse mix of literary sources, making it difficult to define their features with precision. Each puppeteer (puparo) adds their own touch to the characters, relying on the audience's taste, traditions, and unique style. However, each character has specific characteristics and traditions that distinguish it from others.

Both the Sicilian and Neapolitan traditions are characterized by the use of expressive voices and stunning sound effects, in addition to traditional music that enhances the performance.

¹ Giacomo Cuticchio (1917-1985) was a renowned Italian artist and a leading figure in the Sicilian puppet theater tradition known as "Opera dei Pupi." Born in Palermo in 1917, he grew up in a family of puppeteers and became one of the most celebrated puppet masters in Italy. Cuticchio was known for revitalizing the traditional "Opera dei Pupi" and presenting his shows throughout Italy and abroad. He received numerous awards in recognition of his work.

McCormick, John, Alfonso Cipolla, Alessandro Napoli, (2010), *the Italian Puppet Theater – A History*, Jefferson (NC): McFarland & Co.; Lucidi, Marcantonio, (2000), "For a Modern Epic", *Puck*, No. 13. Charleville-Mézières, Editions of the International Puppet Institute.

The shows are often interactive, with the audience engaging with the characters and influencing the course of the story.

Palermo Opera in the 19th Century: A Journey through Time

Palermo's opera house, founded in the 19th century, is the largest in Italy and the third largest in Europe. The island is home to a number of archaeological sites from different periods, reflecting its cultural diversity. If we were to travel back to the 19th century and take a walk through the streets of Palermo, we would find ourselves wandering through unpaved roads, covered in dust. We would hear the shouts of street vendors and the sounds of swordsmen fighting in one of the squares. But we would soon realize that they are just wooden puppets, 90 centimeters tall, made of wooden limbs and covered in shiny carved armor.



(Figure 3) The Puppet Theater of Palermo¹

The Shape and Design of Puppets:

- **Structure:** Puppets are characterized by a wooden skeleton and are equipped with a real, richly decorated and carved breastplate.

¹ <https://www.goworldtravel.com/puppet-palermo-sicily/>
(23rd January 2024, 09:22PM)

- **Movement:** The movement of the puppets varies depending on the "school" they belong to: Palermo (Figure 3) or Catania (Figure 4). They differ in some mechanical and visual aspects, and sometimes between different characters. ¹



(Figure 4) The Puppet Theater of Catania²

Generally, the puppet's structure consists of a wooden torso, to which the legs are attached, allowing for pendulum movement. The puppets are manipulated using strings and metal rods. The main rod, where the strings are attached to control the limbs, passes through the center of the head and connects it to the torso. The upper end of the rod is suspended, allowing the puppet to be temporarily suspended, even during play; and tilting the rod allows the puppet to be moved. ³ (Figure 5)

¹ Pasqualino, A. (1996), *L'opera dei pupi a Roma, a Napoli e in Puglia*. Palermo: Associazione per la conservazione delle tradizioni popolari.

² https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=9b423b9cf11163a7&sxsrf=ACQVn0
(23rd January 2024, 10:29PM)

³ Hughes, H. (2005), *Opera dei Pupi: Sicilian Puppet Theatre*, Bloomsbury.



(Figure 5) © Achille Le Pera/UNESCO

Among the armed characters, Christian and Muslim heroes can be distinguished. Christian warriors have symmetrical features, wear a skirt (called faroncina in Palermo and vesti in Catania) and display their family crests on their helmets, chest and shield, allowing the audience to identify the characters. Muslims have more pronounced facial features; they often wear trousers and turbans, and their armor is decorated with a crescent and stars.¹

Among the most comical characters: in Catania, the most famous is Peppininu, in Palermo, Nofrio and Virticchio play in farces, with a vulgar and funny tone, which often closed the show. The farces are traced back to vastasate, comic representations derived from the Commedia dell'arte.

The puppeteer (Figure 6)- also known as "oprante", "teatrinaro" and in Naples "pupante" - manages the show and moves the puppets, giving suggestions, excitement and pathos to the represented epic scenes. He draws the scenes and advertising posters, and sometimes builds the puppet ²

¹ Antonio Pasqualino, (1996), L'opera dei pupi a Roma, a Napoli e in Puglia, Associazione per la conservazione delle tradizioni popolari.

² Blumenthal, E., (2005), Puppetry: A World History, Harry N. Abrams.



(Figure 6) Mimmo Cuticchio¹

Preserving and Transmitting the Heritage of Opera dei Pupi:

Puppeteers are the guardians of a vast heritage of stories, prominent symbols, and construction techniques that are still passed down orally from master to student to this day. This heritage includes stories, performances, symbols, and craftsmanship techniques (Figure 7). In the past, this heritage was transmitted through daily evening performances. However, with changing times, performances have become less regular. Nevertheless, the heritage is still transmitted in the traditional way, through listening and observation. In 2018, Sicilian puppet companies came together to strengthen the transmission of the heritage and face the challenges of modern times.²

¹ Cuticchio, Mimmo, (1998), *Invite all'opera dei pupi, Il mare, i vicoli, i mercati, i tetti, il teatro* [Invitation to the Opera dei Pupi. The Sea, the Streets, the Markets, the Roofs, the Theater], Palermo: Associazione Figli d'Arte Cuticchio; Cuticchio, Mimmo, (1995), *The machine of the opera*, Palermo: Associazione Figli d'Arte Cuticchio; Cuticchio, Mimmo, (1978), *Storia e testimonianze di una famiglia di pupari* [History and Testimony of a Family of Pupari/Puppeteers]. Palermo: Stass; Cuticchio, Mimmo, (2000), and Janne Vibaek. *Pina Patti Cuticchio. Una vita con l'opera dei pupi* [Pina Patti Cuticchio. A Life with the Opera dei Pupi], Palermo: Associazione Figli d'Arte Cuticchio. <https://wepa.unima.org/en/mimmo-cuticchio>

² Azzolina, L. (2017), *Opera dei Pupi: A Sicilian Puppet Theatre Tradition*, Routledge.



(Figure 7) © Patrick Delance¹/UNESCO

The Carolingian Epic in Sicily:

The Carolingian epic² gained particular appreciation in Sicily during the Middle Ages. It was seen as a literary reflection of the social and political context of the time, following more than two centuries of Arab domination (827-1061). (Figure 8)



(Figure 8) Puppet Shows in Sicily³

¹ Delance, P. (2008), Opera dei Pupi: Intangible cultural heritage of Sicily [online], UNESCO

² Sheehan, J. J. (2011), The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Europe, University of Chicago Press, p. 1.

³ Emilia Salerno, (2019), L'Opera dei Pupi, The puppet show from Sicily, Codex Historiae, p.12, fig.1

In 1061, a group of Norman knights arrived to conquer Sicily, or, as popularly narrated, to liberate it from the Muslims. However, history was more complex than that. The Norman Conquest was not only swift, but it also initiated a fruitful economic and artistic collaboration between the Normans and the Arabs.¹

In popular narratives, the epic stories of the knights' victory over the Muslims came to represent a historical turning point for the Sicilian people. For this reason, Pitrè, one of the most important Sicilian folklorists, particularly emphasizes the deep connection between this type of theater and the Southern Italian people, specifically the Sicilians.²

Opera Characters:



(Figure 9) © Giacomo Cuticchio/UNESCO³

Roland (Orlando): Roland, also known as Orlando, is the brave and loyal protagonist of the Carolingian epic cycle. He is the most celebrated knight in France and represents the deeds of the Frankish military leader who served under Charlemagne. He was killed at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass.

Roland's story has been told and retold in the Old French epic *Chanson de Roland* and in Italian works of literature by Boiardo and Ariosto. Roland embodies virtues such as truthfulness, bravery, and most importantly, loyalty to the emperor. He personifies the state, as symbolized by the sash he wears, and is considered invincible. In this way, Roland is

¹ Metcalfe, A., (2002), The Muslims of Sicily under Christian Rule, in *The Society of Norman Italy*, eds. G. A. Loud and A. J. Metcalfe, Brill, Leiden, pp. 289-318

² Pitre, G., (1889), *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi Del popolo siciliano*, Vol. 4, Pedone-Lauriel.

³ <https://wepa.unima.org/en/pupi/>

powerful and authoritative. However, he is shown to be shy and timid when he falls in love with Angelica, the princess of Cathay.

Renaud: A Rebellious and Skilled Knight: Renaud (or Rinaldo), in contrast to Roland, is a proud, fearless, and rebellious knight. He often displays intolerance towards imperial authority, leading to frequent conflicts with his cousin. The rivalry between these two knights is a recurring theme in the opera. They often cross swords, for example, when both seek to win the love of the beautiful Angelica.

The rivalry between the cousins was so intense that the audience would split into factions at each performance. One faction would support the sometimes clumsy and ugly, but loyal Roland, while another would root for the handsome rebel Renaud. This suggests that the competition was so fierce that it created a division among the audience. There were those who favored Roland despite his flaws, because he was loyal and just. There were also those who preferred Renaud despite his rebellious nature, because he was handsome and talented.¹

Characters of Orlando Furioso:

Ruggero: A chivalrous adventurer with a complex personality, he moves between the Christian and Muslim ranks.

Ferragut: A knight known for his immense strength and fighting skills.

Angelica: A Muslim princess known for her extraordinary beauty, she is a source of conflict between the Christian knights.

Ganelon: The traitor who conspires with the Muslims against Charlemagne and his knights.

The Despised Ganelon: All the spectators united in their hatred for certain villains. One of the most despised was Ganelon (Gano di Magonza), the husband of Roland's mother. When Roland chose him for a potentially suicidal mission, Ganelon was filled with anger and swore revenge. Before the fateful battle at Roncevaux Pass, he betrayed the Christian army and planned an ambush with the Saracen forces. As a vile character, Ganelon is depicted as the ugliest of the knights.

Female Characters: The opera also features several female characters. There is Angelica, the beautiful princess from Cathay who is desired by all the knights. She is often depicted fleeing and being chased by the knights, both Christian and Muslim, all over the world.

¹ C. Coco, (2013), Nuovo repertorio per l'opera dei pupi, Vol.II; Edizioni Youcanprint; C. Coco, (2012), I pupi siciliani nella letteratura, nel teatro, nel cinema nella TV e nella musica, Screenpress; G. Arcidiacono, (2016), L'opera dei pupi in Sicilia, Lussografica, Caltanissetta; Valentina Venturini, ed. (2003). Dal Cunto all'opera dei pupi: il teatro di Cuticchio.

She is the traditional damsel in distress, seemingly weak but well aware of the power of her charm. However, there are also warrior women in the opera.¹

The most famous one is Bradamante, the female Christian knight who falls in love with the Saracen Ruggiero, and thanks to her love and nobility, convinces him to convert to Christianity.²

In addition to the human characters, many non-human puppets are included, such as horses, lions, dogs, deer, large birds, donkeys, and bulls. These creatures are often used to depict battle scenes or hunting. Mythical creatures such as centaurs, fairies, snakes, dragons, demons, and angels also appear, adding an element of excitement and fantasy to the performances.

Sicilian Puppet Theaters and Costume Differences:

- In the Catania school, Roland is depicted in red and Rinaldo in green, while the opposite is true in Palermo.
- Saracens (Muslims) can always be easily identified by the crescent moon on their helmets.

Decline of Traditional Puppet Theater:

- Some scholars agree that traditional puppet theater in Sicily began to decline at the turn of the 20th century.³
- The audience gradually lost interest in the adventures of the Crusaders against the Muslims and Moors.
- Domestic middle-class stories (part of the realist literary movement) began to gain popularity, leaving less space for romantic and comedic plays.⁴

Opera dei Pupi as Cultural Heritage:

- Despite this decline, Opera dei Pupi remains an important form of cultural heritage in Sicily.
- Contemporary puppeteers continue to perform for new generations, keeping this unique artistic tradition alive.¹



¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saracen>
(13th, January 2024, 12:00AM).

² Tolan, John V., (2002), *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, New York, Columbia UP.

³ Venturini, V., (2003), Dal Cunto all'Opera dei pupi, In Valentina Venturini (a cura di), *Dal Cunto all'Opera dei pupi. Il teatro di Cuticchio*, Roma, Dino Audino, pp. 5-31.

⁴ Lo Nigro, S., (1976), vol. 62 (2), p. 290.

Differences between Catania and Palermo Puppet Theaters:

| Feature | Catania Puppet Theater | Palermo Puppet Theater |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Location | Eastern Sicily | Western Sicily |
| History | Dates back to the 14 th century | Dates back to the 16 th century |
| Stories | Inspired by French epics, such as the story of Charlemagne and his paladins, who lived in France in the 11 th and 12 th centuries | Inspired by chivalric poems, including myths, folk tales, and history |
| Size and Weight | Larger and heavier - 1.4 meters and 16 kg or more | Medium - Smaller and lighter, 80 cm to 1 meter and 8 kg |
| Shape | More traditional - smaller head and shorter legs | Modern - large head and long legs |
| Colors | Bright | Natural |
| Story Focus | Charlemagne and his paladins | Diverse - folk tales and history |
| Knee Joints | Fixed knee | Articulated knee - allows for more flexible movement |
| Sword | Always drawn for warriors | Drawn and sheathed |
| Puppet Manipulation Method | From a raised platform behind the backdrop | From the wings using arm extensions |
| Armor Decoration | Warriors' armor in Catania typically features more abstract geometric designs, including squares, triangles, and crossing lines | Warriors' armor in Palermo is decorated with eagle or cross motifs, or with elaborate floral designs |
| Example |  |  |

¹ Napoli, Alessandro, 2002, Il racconto e i colori: “Storie” e “cartelli” dell’Opera dei Pupi catanese. Palermo: Selleri; McCormick, John, Alfonso Cipolla, and Alessandro Napoli. 2010, The Italian Puppet Theatre: A History, Jefferson, NC: McFarland; Croce, Marcella 2014, The Chivalric Folk Tradition in Sicily: A History of Storytelling, Puppetry, Painted Carts and Other Arts. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

In addition to these major differences, there are also some subtle differences between the Catania puppet theater and the Palermo puppet theater; Catania puppeteers tend to use more movement and sound in their performances, while Palermo puppeteers tend to focus more on the story and acting.¹

Similarities between Catania and Palermo Puppet Theaters:

| Feature | Catania Puppet Theater & Palermo Puppet Theater |
|----------------------|--|
| Manipulation Method | Controlled by two thick iron rods (one for the head and the other for the right arm) and auxiliary strings (to control the left arm) |
| Material: | Made of wood, with a head, torso, legs, and arms. |
| Leg Movement | Legs can move forward freely, but have limited backward movement. |
| Arm Movement | Flexible arms that can move in all directions. |
| Head Control | Main rod runs through the head to control its movements |
| Armor Material | Armor is made of copper, brass, or nickel and decorated with other metals. |
| Armor Decoration | Decorations include floral and geometric designs, as well as imaginary heraldic symbols |
| Regional Differences | Distinctive symbols used in Palermo are different from those used in Catania |
| Visual Style | Armor and clothing of the puppets respond to a complex iconic code and adhere to the 19 th century romantic style of representing the Middle Ages. ² |

Documentary Films about Opera dei Pupi:

- Nasce un paladino (1983): Directed by Roberto Ando and Rita Cedrini.³
- Per filo e per segno (1990): Directed by Roberto Ando.⁴
- In viaggio con i Pupi (2008): Directed by Maurizio Sciarra.
- The Childhood of little Roland. Antonio Pasqualino and the Opera dei Pupi (2014): Directed by Matilde Gaddiardo and Francesca Milito.⁵
- Pupi a 360 gradi (2018): Directed by Alessandra Grassi.¹

¹ Bassani, L. S. (2012), The puppeteers of Sicily: An ethnography of performance, University of Chicago Press, pp. 22-23, 35-36.

² Currell, D., (2011), The History of Puppetry, Routledge; Blumenthal, E., (2005), Italian Puppetry, Routledge.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/museoantonio.pasqualino/videos/291253041860919/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/museoantonio.pasqualino/videos/1195305527476116/>

<https://www.facebook.com/museoantonio.pasqualino/videos/234200421278612/>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvDNqdNYm_k

- Cùntami (2021): Directed by Giovanna Taviani.
- Pupas (2021): Directed by Miriam Cossu Spadaro Ferrari.

Challenges Threatening the Existence of Opera dei Pupi:

The exceptional economic boom of the 1950s led to social and economic changes that had a profound impact on this tradition, threatening its very foundation. During that time, similar forms of theater disappeared in other parts of Italy, some of which resurfaced after about twenty years. Opera dei Pupi remains the only example of an uninterrupted tradition of this type of theater.

Economic factors:

- **Economic difficulties:** Due to the current economic difficulties, puppeteers can no longer make a living from their art, forcing them to turn to more lucrative professions.
- **Tourism:** Tourism has contributed to a decline in the quality of performances that were previously aimed solely at a local audience.

Human resources:

- **Dwindling number of puppeteers:** Puppeteers are the key element in preserving Opera dei Pupi, as they are responsible for crafting, manipulating, and performing with the puppets. As the traditional puppeteers age, their numbers dwindle, posing a threat to the continuity of this practice.
- **Scarcity of skilled craftsmen:** The art of crafting puppets requires specialized skills and knowledge that are becoming increasingly rare.

Socio-cultural factors:

- **Socio-cultural changes:** Sicily, like many other societies, has undergone significant social and cultural changes in recent years. These changes have led to a decline in interest in Opera dei Pupi, as the stories told by the puppets have become less relevant to the lives of contemporary people.
- **Modern technology:** Modern technology also poses a threat to Opera dei Pupi. Contemporary forms of entertainment, such as television and movies, have become more attractive to young people, diminishing their interest in traditional puppet shows.

Financial constraints:

- **High production costs:** Opera dei Pupi performances require a substantial budget, which limits the number of shows that can be produced.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU8Wpb5haxE>

Measures Taken to Address the Challenges Facing Opera dei Pupi:

In response to the challenges outlined above, a number of measures have been taken, including:

1. **Establishment of the Sicilian Opera dei Pupi Association:** This association was founded in 2018 with the aim of preserving and promoting the tradition.
2. **Inclusion of Opera dei Pupi in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List:** The tradition was included in this list in 2008, which provides it with some legal protection.
3. **Provision of financial support for performances:** The Italian government and local governments provide financial support for performances, which helps to reduce costs.
4. **Documentation and research:** Efforts have been made to document and research the tradition, including its history, performance practices, and social significance. This work has helped to raise awareness of Opera dei Pupi and its importance.
5. **Education and training:** Educational programs have been developed to teach young people about Opera dei Pupi and to encourage them to participate in the tradition. These programs have helped to ensure the continuity of the tradition by fostering a new generation of puppeteers
6. **Public outreach:** Public awareness campaigns have been launched to promote Opera dei Pupi and to encourage people to attend performances. These campaigns have helped to increase the audience for the tradition and to generate interest in its preservation.

Recommendations for Preserving the Opera dei Pupi:

Preserving the Physical Structure:

- **Regular Inspection:** Regular inspections of the building should be conducted by experts specializing in the restoration of historic buildings to identify any signs of wear or damage.
- **Preventive Maintenance:** A comprehensive preventive maintenance program should be implemented covering all aspects of the building, including the structure, electrical and mechanical systems, and interior and exterior finishes.
- **Restoration:** In the event of any damage, restoration work should be carried out using materials and techniques compatible with the original design and historical materials used in the construction, with careful documentation of all stages of the restoration.
- **Sustainability:** Sustainability principles should be considered in all restoration and maintenance work, using environmentally friendly techniques that aim to reduce energy and water consumption.

- **Upgrades:** Upgrades to the building should be made with consideration for the needs of the contemporary audience, while preserving its historical character, such as improving lighting, ventilation, and sound systems.

Preserving Costumes and Clothing:

- **Cleaning:** All costumes and clothing should be cleaned carefully after each use by experts in textile restoration.
- **Storage:** Costumes and clothing should be stored in a climate-controlled environment (temperature and humidity) to prevent damage, using appropriate storage materials to preserve the integrity of the fabric.
- **Restoration:** Any damaged costumes or clothing should be restored using appropriate conservation techniques by experts in textile restoration, with careful documentation of all stages of the restoration.
- **Digitization:** All costumes and clothing should be digitized using high-resolution techniques to create a permanent digital record that can be used for research, study, and education.
- **Exhibition:** Some costumes and clothing should be displayed in temporary or permanent exhibitions to educate the public about the history of the Opera dei Pupi.

Documentation and Research:

- **Performance Documentation:** All theatrical performances should be documented using high-quality techniques, including photographs, videos, and audio recordings.
- **Historical Research:** Extensive research should be conducted to understand the history of the Opera dei Pupi and its performance techniques, focusing on the historical and cultural context of the theater.
- **Cultural Research:** Extensive research should be conducted to understand the cultural impact of the Opera dei Pupi on society, focusing on its impact on arts, culture, and the economy.
- **Publication of Results:** Research results and studies on the Opera dei Pupi should be published in specialized scientific journals, books, and websites to ensure knowledge sharing with the widest possible audience.
- **Database Creation:** A comprehensive database should be created that includes all information related to the Opera dei Pupi, including theatrical performances, costumes and clothing, historical documents, research, and studies.

Education and Training:

- **Educational Programs:** Specialized educational programs should be developed to transmit the skills of the Opera dei Pupi techniques to future generations, in collaboration with universities and specialized educational institutions.
- **Workshops:** Regular training workshops should be organized to train artists and craftsmen in the techniques of the Opera dei Pupi, focusing on preserving traditional performance techniques.

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- International Exchange: The exchange of knowledge and expertise with opera experts from other countries should be encouraged through conferences, seminars, and cultural exchange programs.
- Distance Learning: Distance learning programs should be developed to ensure that knowledge about the Opera dei Pupi reaches a wider audience.
- Awareness Programs: Comprehensive awareness programs should be developed to raise awareness of the importance of the Opera dei Pupi.

These are some recommendations that can be followed to preserve the intangible heritage of the Sicilian Opera dei Pupi theater. All stakeholders, including government agencies, cultural institutions, and the local community, must collaborate to preserve this precious heritage and transmit it to future generations

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