

***Speech by Professor Michael Meschke, Charleville,
September 22, 2019 at the celebration of UNIMA 90 years.***

Ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly thank President Dadi Pudumjee, Secretary General Idoya Otegui and professor Christina Grazioli for inviting me at the occasion of UNIMA's 90th jubilee to share some thoughts with you from a long past with this union.

Foundation act of UNIMA

The little group of artists from six nations who gathered in Prague in 1929 shared a passion. Let's take a quick ride through time, starting with them. I was not there, so please bear with me if, in a fog of fact and myth, I rely on my fantasy, imagining these pioneers, spending nights in the cosy taverns of Prague, filling their glasses with crazy, utopic dreams about a world dominance of puppets (oh horrible perspective!), yet sober enough to write and sign the foundation act of UNIMA.

Glory and honour to the founders, with names like Vesely, Lowenhaupt, Hardy, Brohme, Link, Jeane, Bogarytev, Puhonny etc. A memory book edited by Nina Malikova was just published. They lived and worked in the dynamic and dramatic age of the 1920s. Bauhaus days. And then?

East and West

During the 1930s, under the leadership of Jan Malik, UNIMA was slowly growing - while the world was darkening. What a challenge to promote internationalism as the greatest crime in history was being prepared. During World War II, UNIMA was deep frozen but as the world rose from the ashes, the organization resurrected, the foundation-spirit had survived and artists were there to take the relay.

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, puppet theatre reflected the need in most societies to rebuild - at the same time as a new political polarization split us into East and West. In so called socialist countries puppetry was state recognized as a folk art and widely subsidized, theatres in every town! In the so called capitalist West, puppeteers had to struggle for recognition and financing. Puppet theatres tried to reconstruct a repertory from before.

Then came the 1960s, new ideas, new artists who broke new grounds, radicalized the form language at certain theatres, like Franciszka Themerson in Stockholm, designing the production of *Ubu Roi* in 1964. With the movement called “May 68” everything was changing: in the East with hardening repression, in the West with unseen liberalisation.

“Stockholm Declaration”

During the 1970s the new lifestyle and freedom of 68 brought social and political participation, also in puppetry, like Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre, opposing the Vietnam war or, Joan Miró’s political satire. Myself I called it the “furious impotence of puppetry”.

As early as 1973, the Executive Committee, at session in Sweden, faced a “Stockholm Declaration” containing new definitions of puppetry and related arts, propagating artistic multi-disciplinary openness, inclusiveness and tolerance. The Declaration was unanimously adopted - and soon forgotten.

From Warsaw, Henryk Jurkowski, who was then UNIMA’s Secretary General, started a periodical called “*Unima Informations*”, open to all, sent out to members by post - internet did not exist. News were published from outer space, meaning from cultures beyond Europe.

Global extension

Some distant representatives joined UNIMA and were elected executive members, such as Meher Contractor from India and Taiji Kawajiri from Japan. Jacques Félix of Charleville who was now the third SG, was easy to win for global extension, encouraging new countries to join, especially Togo, Africa. The more the world was shrinking, the bigger the need for a broader integration. We created The Third World Commission, (an ugly, postcolonial name), but then soon understood that there was not one world to cover out there but several worlds. Consequently we dissolved ourselves and started one separate commission for each continent. But the most important and lasting change in those days was the birth of new national centres: in India, Greece, Iceland, Mexico, Thailand and elsewhere.

Cultural exchange intensified, much thanks to cooperation with the Charleville festivals, presenting art from many cultures. Especially

treasures from Japan made more hearts than mine beat faster: Bunraku-master Minosuke Yoshida, string puppet players Takeda, Kuruma ningyo player Koryo Nishikawa as well as the unseen tradition of Karakuri ningyo brought by Yasuko Senda.

We are now in the 1980s. At the 13th UNIMA congress in Washington, Nancy Staub offered a truly world wide festival, unseen before in scale, scope and boldness of visions, especially including repressed countries in Latin America. They got a face and a voice through Ana Maria Tempestini.

Professional training

Margareta Niculescu headed the introduction of professional training, her most important contribution to the world as well to UNIMA, because this high school, although being financed by the French state, is open to students from all over the world. To teach new generations, beginning in 1981 with talents like the Arketals until Basil Swift was a privilege.

In a historical perspective, and of course subjectively speaking, I would say *“Those were the days my friend I thought they’d never end!”* All these achievements were motorized by pure passion. We had no choice anyway – there was never money enough for the needs.

Basic values

Now what made UNIMA live so long? Maybe we find some answer looking at some basic values.

UNIMA’s greatest potential is **communication**: to establish contacts, to exchange information, spread knowledge, promote understanding of the unknown and exotic, honour experience, fight readymade ideas, correct prejudice.

One such prejudice hard to kill, is that tradition and renewal are opposed - while they are each others condition. Already in Braunschweig in 1957, we debated the long lived idea that tradition and renewal are opposed, while they are each others condition! The radical modernist Harry Kramer’s distorted, amputated post war characters rolled over the stage to Aretha Franklin’s sad voice. Kramer surprised us declaring that his inspiration came from traditional, mobile artisan children’s toys. The man built a bridge between tradition and renewal.

Another value inseparable from UNIMA is **idealism**. It means to dream a better world, regardless how utopic. Idealism inspired the founders and, I hope, still makes the organization go round thanks to all the unpaid work done. That is something! We need to keep it that way!

What about **solidarity**?

The Italian reformer Matteo Renzi said “ *solidarity is the constitutional element of our identity*”. Taste that!

UNIMA, as an organisation independent and free from any regime or cultural dictate, is free to face challenges, to take stands, and should intervene when needed and possible, be it to help a persecuted member, a living tradition threatened to disappear or a museum forced to shut down – a reality in Sweden, in brief : to implement solidarity.

Here is the biggest dilemma. With Idoya Otegui’s words: “*UNIMA has existed so many years because of much diplomacy. We have to deal with many countries, different regimes, religions, political ideas. Most of all we must fight for what our statutes say ...respect for the human being.* “

Indeed, statutes are there to uphold **democracy**. I know something about that: 1969 - UNIMA congress in Prague, one year after the annihilation of the “Prague spring”. Tension in the air. First time for me, bringing a Swedish delegation. The congress agenda includes changes of statutes to improve democratic procedures, presented by two Czech intellectuals, Dr Eric Kolar and Dr Sdenek Beszdek.

A big Russian delegation, headed by UNIMA president Sergej Obratzov, aggressively rejected the propositions. The members from Eastern countries observed a terrible silence. Timidly, I raised my voice to express Swedish support to the improvements.

Consternation: who was this extra-terrestrial who dared to oppose the big elephants? The matter was closed without any democratic discussion. I believe that started my career as black sheep of UNIMA.

One member, one voice

Years later, at the congress in Ljubljana 1992, another big statute crisis shook UNIMA. This time I was chairman of the Statute commission. On the table: new statutes, demanded by several national centres , especially Italy, who wanted to solve a big democratic problem: Generally, in socialist countries the

membership in UNIMA was collective and automatic for employees of state puppet theatres. No fees to pay and yet one voice. While Western members had to pay their membership fees individually. As a result, the beautiful principle of one member one voice, in this case made East unfairly outnumber West.

But before voting the congress had to elect a new President of UNIMA. I happened to be a favourite for the office. Opponents to statute changes thought stopping me from being elected would also stop the new statutes. I lost election but the statutes were adopted and UNIMA changed radically, from direct to indirect voting, meaning that representatives elected in proportion to number of members in each centre gathered in the Council took over decision making. It was a victory for democracy, they took the message, even if they killed the messenger and I left UNIMA, not without heading, together with Ariel Bufano, a seminar about ethics within the organisation.

The future

The new millennium brought along new challenges. Materialism and rough egoism took over, bringing along contempt of knowledge, of experience, of the immaterial heritage. Voices were shut down, visions refused. This constitutes heavy threats to all culture, including our art and our institutions. Life is not easy. Can UNIMA be a counterweight to such threats?

Indeed, what is UNIMA? UNIMA exists only because there is puppet theatre! Puppet theatre exists only because there are artists, artists are there to offer the magic of theatre to generation after generation. Performers and performances by the thousands and through times are part of this collective heritage, or patrimonio, as it is celebrated all over this very day, to remember some like Jan Wilkowskis Zwyrtała, Joan Baixas and Joan Mirós Mori el Merma, works of creators like Richard Teschner, Geza Blattner, Yves Joly, Ariel Bufano, Philippe Genty, also including eminent benefactors like Kapila Vatsyayan, India, Kive Staiff, Argentina and so forth. Such “name dropping” is really necessary for our history. No history – no future! Remembering shapes continuity. Where there is continuity, there is future. And that future is international. Today, UNIMA has successfully reached an enviable globalisation, symbolized by the first non-European President in Dadi: artist, humanist and “mundialista” in one person. Myself, I owe him to have re-activated me for UNIMA.

From an artist of the past to the artists of the future, I express my wishes: may no difficulty ever stop you from striving to reach your audiences with laughter and tears through important contents. Use all the accumulated knowledge of craftsmanship, refined techniques for articulation of puppet's bodies and clever or simple manipulation constructions and search for quality through , especially cherishing movements on stage! The more refined your instruments, the greater your chances to reach the hearts of others. "*Work is love made visible*" said the poet Kahlil Gibran.

UNIMA:s future as an organisation depends entirely on the personalities who shape her action. The old Lady is a mirror of the world: she can bring out the best and the worst in you. You can use her, abuse her or serve her, but if she has lived as much as ninety years there must be something about her.

I believe UNIMA has a natural destiny, yet to assume, to be the highest qualified authority in puppetry related issues, in matters of ethics and aesthetics, social justice, professional training, trade union business and so forth by still remaining a non bureaucratic instrument for promotion of exchange and quality.

By the way, the future is already here - what you do and decide today shapes your tomorrow. Let me conclude with the words of a friend, the Indian philosopher Subash Malik: *Be – not become, Act – not react.*

Happy birthday, UNIMA!

Michael Meschke