

ORIGINS OF *OPERA DEI PUPPI* (Pupi means “puppets” in Italian)

HISTORY

It is difficult to determine exactly where the Opera dei Pupi originated. Some experts think that its origin could be traced back to the Greek marionettists, since rod marionettes were known to exist by then in Syracuse, Sicily. It is less difficult to establish the start of the Sicilian Puppet Theatre. The **Opera dei Pupi/Sicilian Puppet Theatre**, dates back to the end of the 18th Century. The Opera finds its roots in the desire for chivalric and literary themes to become part of popular (street) theatre. The stories are indeed based on epic medieval literature through the re-elaboration of the material contained in epic medieval tales as well as in Italian Renaissance poetry such as *Orlando Furioso/The Frenzy of Orlando* by Ludovico Ariosto. The characters are typified by their facial expressions, the color of their copper or brass armor fashion, and the emblem they wear on their suit of armor and shield.



SIGNIFICANCE AND MODERN PERCEPTION

Thanks to the fidelity of the master-puppeteer (“*oprante*”) to the most authentic requirements dictated by tradition, and to the methods of staging passed on through oral tradition, the *pupi* or rather the “armed marionettes” still entertain audiences almost two centuries after their first appearance on the stage. The plots of the Sicilian Puppet Theatre enjoyed great success with the working classes, who felt they could be redeemed by projecting and identifying themselves with heroes who could resolve the conflicts typical of class societies by means of virtues such as courage, loyalty and friendship. *La danza con le spade* (sword dance) and *Cunto* (storytelling) as told by *contastorie* (storytellers), are well-known models for the Opera dei Pupi. The rhythmic movement of the sword dance calls to mind the battle, where chivalric characters act the eternal struggle between good and evil, friends and enemies.

OPERA DEI PUPPI TODAY

The *pupari* (puppeteers) active today are nearly all descendants of old families. Only two families have never ceased their activity: one is the Cuticchio family. **In 2001, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) proclaimed the Opera dei Pupi a Masterpiece of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity.**

MASTER PUPPETEER MIMMO CUTICCHIO

Italian “puparo” (puppeteer), hailing from Palermo, Sicily, **Mimmo Cuticchio** is the most important figure in the preservation and renewal of the tradition of the Opera dei Pupi in Italy. Described as one of the last true heirs of the Sicilian theatrical tradition of the **Opera dei Pupi**, Cuticchio is known in all the world for his extraordinary intuition for quality sound and extreme attention to detail.

Mimmo comes from a family of distinguished puppeteers. His father, Giacomo Cuticchio, opened his first theatre in Palermo and became a puppeteer in 1943. Mimmo learned the traditional style of puppeteering as a young boy working at his father's side, but by the time he had grown up, he chafed at the idea of doing the same show every evening; as his father refused him space for innovation, so he apprenticed to a puppet maker and learned to make his own theater. Over the years he maintained the tradition of the puppet theater, renewing it with continuous creative additions and enhancing it through artistic experimentation.

In 1973, Mimmo opened the **Teatro dei Pupi Santa Rosalia** in Palermo and he is now passing on the tradition to his son, Giacomo. In 1977 Mimmo Cuticchio founded the **Associazione Figli d'Arte Cuticchio**, with the intention of safeguarding and handing down the artistic tradition of the Opera dei Pupi, and in 1997 he opened his workshop and the first School for *Pupari e Cuntisti* (puppeteers and story tellers) in order to ensure the future for the Opera dei Pupi and Cunto.

Mimmo Cuticchio is not only a storyteller and puppeteer, but also an actor and a theatre director. He appeared in the film *The Godfather Part III*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and he is one of the main characters in the documentary film *Rehearsal for a Sicilian Tragedy*, written by John Turturro and Roman Paska, in which Turturro led his audience in an intimate journey to his maternal homeland of Sicily.



THE THEATER COMPANY MISSION

To preserve the techniques of the puppeteers and storytellers, to renew a century old puppetry theatrical tradition by giving new forms to a theater of truth and poetry, and to ensure its legacy. The company organizes an annual international festival entitled *La Macchina dei Sogni*, recognized by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities in Italy and has founded an international school for *pupari* (puppeteers) and *cuntisti* (Sicilian storytellers) with the aim of guaranteeing a future to puppet theater in Italy and in the world.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest sources for performances of the Opera dei Pupi are French medieval epic poems, such as the *Chansons de Geste* and Arthurian Romances. These poems, originally handed down orally, tell the story of the crusades and the Christian wars led by the Emperor Charlemagne against the Saracens or the story of the rebellion of the French medieval barons against their sovereign.

These epic poems provided an abundant stock of literary material until the Renaissance when new key works appeared: the unfinished *Orlando innamorato* (Orlando in Love, 1494) by Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando furioso* (The Frenzy of Orlando, 1516) by Ludovico Ariosto, and *La Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered) by Torquato Tasso. These works, very quickly, became best sellers of Italian and European literature and their episodes were read and performed through the centuries.

This heritage emerged in Sicily at the beginning of the nineteenth century generating a unique and remarkable theatrical tradition of Opera dei Pupi. The function and effectiveness of the symbols, characters, and objects contained in these new performances were not restricted to a circle of experts who saw and listened to the singers and the audiences of the Opera dei Pupi. The new works also resonated with the poorer social classes of Sicily who, although not really knowing the plot, had a fairly clear idea about their fantastic elements and metaphorical use.



HOW IT IS DIFFERENT FROM THE AMERICAN PUPPET THEATER



The “Opera dei Pupi” is the traditional Sicilian puppet theater. The puppets differ from other marionettes in the plays presented, their mechanism, the figurative style, the scenic organization as well as in the manner of performing.

The puppets are large kid-size figures who “act” on stage moved by the master puppeteers, also on the scene.

Unlike the Muppets or other form of American puppetry tradition, this theater narrates stories from European literary poems, belonging to European history and tradition, and representing the characters of these poems on stage. The subjects are indeed mainly long cycles, events presented in installments based on the literature of chivalry and particularly on the Carolingian cycle. The repertory, however, also includes the lives of bandits and of saints, historical events and Shakespearean dramas. Recurrent themes include battles, duels, love stories, and good against evil. Bravery, honor, and pride are the overarching themes to the stories.

Most of these subjects provide material for several performances. Often the main performance was followed by short farces in Sicilian dialect. Characters from the farces sometimes appear with those of the chivalrous cycles playing the role of squires of the paladins, expressing in dialect the point of view of the people, or make joking comments on the action.

HOW THE PUPPETS ARE MADE

Sicilian puppets range from 2.6 to 3.3 feet in height and weigh about 17 pounds. Bodies and heads are made of beechwood and cypress. The body of the puppet is comprised of nine pieces (bust, thighs, legs, feet, hands or fist and hand). They have jointed knees; a string attached to the rod of the right arm goes through the fist to the hilt of the sword and enables the “pupo” (singular of pupi) to draw its sword and put it back in the sheath. The puppeteer uses models that have been passed down from one generation to the other and they improve with the personal touch of each puppeteer. The knight’s armor is also based on models. The puppeteer draws and cuts the different pieces from a brass plate. The various armors have specific requirements presenting different ornaments for each character. Female warrior characters are characterized by hair coming out of the helmet and by their armor structure. Source: <https://wepa.unima.org/en/pupi/>

HOW TO WATCH THIS PERFORMANCE AS COMPARED TO WATCHING ANY OTHER THEATER



To understand the reason for the success of the company, one must understand that Cuticchio's Sicilian puppet theater looks at the present and speaks to new generations by telling ancient stories and promoting universal values through a magic atmosphere that transports the viewer to a world of battles, fantastic animals, kings and kingdoms. This is a world that no longer exists, but that still attracts our imagination and emotions. This theater recounts the ancient stories of Charlemagne's Paladins of France and it expresses a whole range of emotions running from resignation to revolt: the puppets personify hopes, struggles, victories, and defeats in their own lives. The history of the Paladins is thus a good means of meditating on the world and of understanding life over a long period of time under varied historical and social conditions. They become a timeless picture of daily life, friends and enemies, loyalty and treachery, ingratitude and injustice of those in power. By showing hatred for the wicked and admiration for the hero, allegiance to human laws is expressed. The audience is usually divided into two groups: the supporters of Orlando and those of Rinaldo. Each group approves of a certain type of behavior. Audiences find their own relationship with authority in this and it allows them the possibility of expressing a revolutionary ideal or a more moderate one of social reconciliation.



For More Information

Figli d'arte Cuticchio:

<http://www.figlidartecuticchio.com/>

National geographic documentary on Mimmo Cuticchio and his company (1984):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxVii0J1P4A>

UNESCO:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QI7DxcWILE>

John Turturro and Mimmo Cuticchio:

<https://vimeo.com/24118533>