



During the XVIII century the theatre of figures, which is still a local phenomenon though with international tendencies, was enriched with new masks and scripts: the new pieces were derived from melodramas, prose theatre plays, literature, and even history and contemporary chronicles. In particular, the “wooden-head” theatre was inspired by the actions of bandits such as Vincenzo Pacchiana, Majno della Spinetta, Stefano Pelloni alias Passator Cortese, Giuseppe Musolino, who gained public favour. The performances presented the romantic figure of the bandit who steals from the rich to give to the poor, and associated it with that of the popular rebel who revolts against a tyrant government. Obviously, each play would underline either the heroic or the criminal aspect which coexisted in the figure of the bandit. The horror and hatred were mostly directed against the traitors, who were responsible for the eventual capture of the bandits.

Puppeteers

Gualberto Niemen (Tronzano Vercellese 06/08 1905 – Biandronno 19/08/2003)

Gualberto was the son of Giuseppe Niemen and Virginia Caprani, two acrobats who worked in the circus and on the vaudeville circuit. All his family, acquired relatives included, worked as travelling artists: his uncle Umberto Caprni was a contortionist and a comic; the brother-in-law of his mother, Roberto Taitov, was a musician, a quick-change artist, a vaudeville actor and a stage-designer; his uncle Cesare Costa (the husband of Giuseppe’s sister) was a marionette puppeteer.

When he was a boy, Gualberto was a contortionist, but already had a passion for the animation theatre. He used to go to the Gianduja Theatre and attend performances by the Lupi brothers. His father was enrolled during the Great War so that the Niemen family had to wait for the end of the conflict to start performing again in the urban and outskirt areas of Turin. In 1919 Gualberto bought from a certain Bogni, an old tinker who had been a puppeteer, a case of rod puppets; then he built a little theatre and, when free from his acrobatic exhibitions, started to perform some plays. He met puppet and marionette operators such as Marengo, the Burzios, the Gambaruttis, Ferdinando Garda, and the Concordias, who were then working in North-West Italy. For some time, he worked together with the Garda family, that is to say they used to perform simultaneously in different squares of the same village in a “competition” for the larger public. The Niemen repertoire consists of both the animation classics and productions of his own such as *L’acqua miracolosa* (*The Miraculous Water*), *La storia dla vaca rusa con Gianduja guardiano al cimitero di Costantinopoli* (*The Story of the Russian Cow with Gianduja as guardian of the Constantinople Cemetery*), *Il re della foresta alla caccia dell’uomo* (*The King of the Forest Hunting for Men*). One of his best pieces was *La iena di S. Giornio* (*St. Gregory’s Hyena*), a story which had been previously performed by the puppeteer Canardi and which was derived from metropolitan legends dealing with butchers, innkeepers, or cooks preparing their dishes with the corpses of their victims. For a long time Niemen used to improvise this story before writing the script. He invented the puppet characters of Testafina, Battista Diareja and Capitan Bobò.

In 1964 he settled down in Biandronno and officially retired from the animation theatre; he started to work as a decorator and once in a while he would perform either as an actor or a puppet operator. Niemen is one of the few authentic wandering artists who were sometimes taken for gypsies so that they tried to distinguish themselves by calling themselves *dritti*.



Gualberto Niemen in his theatre

Marionette and Puppets Operators

The Monticelli Family

The Monticelli family is one of most ancient Italian families working in the animation theatre. The forerunner was Ariodante, who was originally from Piedmont and was born in 1820. He was both a good animator and a remarkable stage designer; he performed all over Italy and his



repertoire included such plays as *Otello il moro di Venezia* (*Othello the Moor of Venice*), *Ugo e Parisina*, *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), *Macbeth ovvero l'assassinio di Duncano Re di Scozia* (*Macbeth or the Murder of Duncan King of Scotland*), *Ernani il masnadiero ossia le elezioni di Carlo V imperatore dei due mondi* (*Ernani the bandit or the Election of Charles v Emperor of the Two Worlds*), *I due sergenti al cordone sanitario di porto Wandrè* (*The Two Sergeants and the Quarantine Rules at Wandrè Harbour*), *Matteo Visconti Duca di Milan* (*Matteo Visconti Duke of Milan*), *La battaglia di Legnano* (*The Battle of Legnano*).

Like the other marionette puppeteers of the second half of the sixteenth century, he gave stage directions in his scripts for the position of each character at the beginning of each act. He died at the age of ninety.

Ariodante had five children: Eloide, Angiolina, Dolores, Vittorio – who was also called Cesare – and Natalia – who worked as Vittorio's assistant for a long time.

Vittorio was born in Robbio (Pavia) around 1850 and worked in Piedmont and Lombardy before permanently moving to Emilia, where he obtained some success. During the last years of his career, he performed in Modena, Bologna, Ferrara, Rovigo, and Verona. Two years after his death in 1926, his wife Genoveffa Peli – who was herself a skilful marionette operator and script writer for the puppet theatre – married Agostino Galliano Serra, a painter and stage designer who was already cooperating with the Monticelli family. The couple founded a company called *Compagnia Burattinaide del prof. Serra* (Professor Serra's Puppet Company) which performed in the area of Bologna and Imola, mostly in courtyards, schools and pubs.

Vittorio Monticelli had six children who, for a short time after their father's death, worked in the same company which was called *Mondiali Fantocci Drammatici Flli Monticelli* (Monticelli brothers' World Dramatic Puppets) and had Otello as manager and Agostino Serra as administration representative: a playbill of that time testifies that the show performed at the Novi Social Theatre of Modena on 29th June 1929 - *Il giuramento di Pontida* (*Pontida's Oath*); with the ballet *L'incendio di Cartagine* (*The fire of Carthage*) – was accompanied by the theatre orchestra. Another brother, Vasco, was born in Carpi on 23rd October 1907 and became one of the most famous marionette operators of the XX century. He worked alone, but also cooperated with the companies of Vittorio Podrecca and Yambo (Enrico Novelli); what is more, for a certain period he worked with the group *I Pupi* (Sicilian dialect: *Puppets*) – a union of families of marionette operators which counted, apart from Vasco, the Ansaldo, the Guidis and the Dinas. As a member of the *I Pupi*, Vasco performed in Europe and Brazil. He also worked for many years with Anna Maria, one of his two daughters (the other was named Magda), and his wife Teresa. Once back in Italy, he started to work as a puppet operator, which he did until his death, which took place in Reggio Emilia on 21st February 1967.

His repertoire included: *Cinderella*, *Puss-in-Boots*, *The Barber of Siviglia*, *Marionette...che confusione!* (*Marionettes... What a Mess!*), *Puccettino*, *I Pagliacci* (*The Clowns*), *Il Paese dei Campanelli* (*The Town of Bells*), *La Gheisha* and *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*) which was performed in four shows.

Otello Monticelli was born in Fiorenzuola d'Arda (PC) on Christmas Day 1905. When his father died, he founded a company of his own and the following year married Nella Furlotti, who gave him three children: William (Salsomaggiore 07/09/1930), Loredana (Portile di Modena 27/08/1931) and Mirca (Parma 03/09/1936).

In 1934 Otello and Nella joined the Yambo company and, during the three years they spent with the group, acquired great experience and improved their interpreting qualities (later, in 1950, they bought part of Yambo's theatre staff). In 1940 Otello sometimes performed together with Enzo Baroni (see the corresponding section), who was a family friend. In 1955 he started to cooperate with Vittorio Podrecca and they did a world tour. When he came back to Italy in 1961, Otello devoted himself to his puppets and performed such shows as *L'albero della fortuna* (*The Tree of Fortune*), *Snow White*, *Puss-in-Boots*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Sandrone avvocato* (*Sandrone the Lawyer*), *Sandrone re* (*Sandrone the King*), *Fagiolino principe* (*Fagiolino the Prince*), *Un conte calzolaio* (*A Cobbler Count*), *La fata Morgana* (*Morgana the Fairy*), *L'acqua miracolosa* (*The Miraculous Water*), *Fagiolino Cavaliere* (*Fagiolino the Knight*). He died in Ravenna on 7th July 1991.

At the age of fifteen, Otello's son William, helped by his sister Loredana, started to perform puppet shows and was engaged by the company of Podrecca which was called *I Piccoli*; here they were joined by both Mirca and their father. A good puppet operator and stage designer, he was also a remarkable puppet maker. Last two descendants of the dynasty are Andrea (Ravenna 08/11/1958) and his brother Mauro (Ravenna 02/09/1961)



Vasco Monticelli with wife and daughter