

THEATRE

Figures of speech

A heritage group in Mechelen breathes new life into an old art



Photo: Kelly Odeyria

Lisa Bradshaw

In the centre of Mechelen, figures hang from walls and lie in drawers. They are young and old, happy and sad, human and animal. Maybe one is riding a unicycle on a wire above your head, maybe one is towering grim-faced over you, maybe another is only 25 centimetres tall and grabbing onto your leg.

Het Firmament is the "home for puppet theatre" in Flanders, and between its walls is a whole new world – several worlds, in fact. In a space inside the Hof van Busleyden museum, these figures made of wood, cloth, paint and paper-mâché come alive in such an enchanting variety of forms, the word "puppet" seems too simple to describe them.

But the Dutch word does them more justice. *Figuur* suggests all kinds of figures that maybe have a little bit of a life of their own. "When you think of puppetry, you think of old guys playing with wooden dolls on strings," laments Marnix Rummens of Het Firmament's Education and Communication department. "One of the main goals of Firmament is to create a shift in the image of puppetry. What most people don't realise is that puppetry is really alive."

Meaning it's diverse: marionettes and those recognisable little puppet theatres are certainly part of what Firmament calls "figure theatre". But it's also performers donning costumes or interacting with puppet figures or working with objects to tell a story. One of Firmament's members, for instance, put together a show for a reception using salt and pepper shakers in his hand. He walked around and did a little performance for small groups of people, who were surprised and delighted by everyday objects becoming something more.

"Some people call that 'object theatre' because it's not really creating a puppet – instead you use a ready-made object. But it's very much related to puppet theatre," explains Simon Smessaert, an expert in puppetry heritage and research.

Flanders has a long tradition of figure

theatre, with records of travelling shows dating back to the middle ages. Belgium took on its own traditions from the moment it was formed. "Theatre Toone in Brussels is as old as the country," notes Smessaert. The heritage here shows a major

adherence to rod puppetry – large figures (50 to 70 centimetres) manipulated from above with metal rods. It's a tradition that originated in Sicily. "We're not sure how it made the trip," admits Smessaert, "but we also have taken up Commedia dell'arte, which is another tradition in Italy. It's based in improvisation, so there's no written text. You'll never see the same show twice."

Because Firmament is a heritage organisation and not actually a theatre, there are few public performances. "Firmament is more about the history of puppeteering in Flanders and Belgium – to maintain the tradition and make sure that new people, new talent can be trained properly by experienced puppeteers," explains Rummens. "Then they can, in turn, hand their knowledge down to the next generation."

Because they've been around since 1970, the organisation has seen that happen first hand. In terms of your ability to see performances, both amateurs and professionals attend intensive workshops offered year round and often arrange performances themselves.

Workshops are specific – from Figures and Objects to Street Puppet Theatre – and are often in the form of classes that last several months. They are on offer all over



Flanders, and there are differing levels – from those with a passing interest to those who are professional puppeteers. Firmament also has workshops for children and arranges special projects with certain social groups. This year, they worked with a group of young people serving time in a juvenile detention centre. They made puppets, wrote music and built scenery using graffiti and other art forms to make an entire hip hop video. Next, Firmament will work with adult prisoners.

There is an opportunity this month, though, for the public to see a Firmament project in performance. They are taking part in In-Fusion, a project that is currently travelling between hospitals in Flemish cities. It consists of an exhibition and site-specific projects by local groups around the subject of sickness and health, life and death.

In keeping with a theme of intercultural communications, Firmament will visit patients in their hospital rooms in both Mechelen and Antwerp to present little shows. "People with different nationalities are telling their life stories with puppetry or with images or objects," explains Rummens. "It's meant to create an atmosphere so you can get to know someone from another culture."

If you are fortunate enough to not be a



hospital patient, on 23 November, Firmament will present an intimate public performance in the reception of the AZ Sint-Maarten in Mechelen.

Right now, Firmament is thinking of the future because the Hof van Busleyden plans to renovate, and the organisation will need to find a new home. They would like something permanent of their own and are drawing up concrete plans for a puppetry heritage site and education centre in Flanders, complete with workshop and rehearsal rooms, exhibition space, a documentation centre and accommodations for international visiting artists.

Firmament will perform at 15.00 on 23 November in AZ Sint-Maarten, Zwartezustersvest 47, Mechelen

online
www.hetfirmament.be