

Polish Koleda: Theatre of all Sorts

Trev Hill

Trev Hill, working with Teatr Wegajty in Poland, encounters storks, goats and vodka whilst on Koleda carolling expeditions.

Imagine you are sitting before the telly on Boxing Day, having eaten another pile of turkey sandwiches when there is a knock at the door and a two metre high stork, a rampaging goat and a bunch of black-faced strangers enter singing Slavic songs. Either you should check the level of the sherry bottle or you are experiencing Koleda (pronounced kolenda).

Thankfully for me it was the latter (although a commodity of the former, at least in the shape of vodka, was also present). This year for the second year running I was taking part in traditional Polish carolling in the north and south of Poland. But what, I hear you cry, does this have to do with puppetry? Well, I am coming to that... Koleda: a theatre of allsorts!

I have, for over a year, been working alongside Teatr Wiejski Wegajty (Village Theatre of Wegajty) from near Olsztyn, north Poland. As well as dramatic performances one branch of the theatre, Project Terenowy, regularly make expeditions to remote villages to perform seasonal carolling.

The background to this work can be seen to stem from the work of one of the groups founders, Wacław Sobaszek, with the Polish theatre director and theoretician, Jerzy Grotowski. Following work with Grotowski's Special Project in the 1970s and later on the Theatre of Sources, Sobaszek and his wife, Erdmute, moved to Olsztyn to coordinate a multi-disciplinary arts group (which was not wholly approved of by the Polish authorities of the time). With the loss of their premises in the early 1980s the couple moved to a deserted farmhouse in the tiny village of Wegajty. From here they began to practice theatre with a small number of like-minded individuals.

The Christmas and New Year season sees trips to the Suwalki region in the north and the Carpathian Mountains in the south (in villages inhabited by the Lemko minority) to perform an archaic (indeed, dead in some areas) form of carolling. This involves walking from house to house in all weathers (I mean ALL) and performing Christmas songs, a section of a play about King Herod and some theatrical songs and routines concerning a goat and/or a stork.

Here is the connection with puppetry. What is interesting about the characters of the goat and the stork is that they blur the lines between masks and puppets. While they may be considered as masks they are also hand held (and operated) moveable figures

which do not themselves cover the face. In this way they may be considered as puppets as well.

The goat is a rampaging beast which is performed by somebody covered with an old fur coat (sleeves turned in) which is pulled over their head. From this garment extends a roughly shaped animalistic head with horns and a moveable mouth/snout. The mouth can be controlled by a string which pulls it open and shut.

The stork, likewise, has a snapping beak (controlled in the same way) however it is a larger construction, being fitted to a longer stick. The handle being about one metre long the bird can stand taller than three metres depending on the height of the performer and the position it is held (important to remember in low-roofed rural cottages!). The head of this elegant fowl includes a carved beak, approximately two feet long, painted red. The handle (and the performer) are covered by a white sheet so only the performer's legs are showing.



From a 1977 Polish calendar

Each of these creatures has its own songs and routines (more of which later) and are a vital part of the Koleda performances which take place in often cramped conditions of the little houses which Wegajty visit during their expeditions.

Historically there have also been such characters as a bear and a horseman with his servants. The latter is known, at least in the northern part of Poland, as the szemyl. The szemyl is a kind of hobby horse fame which is worn around the waist of the rider, who runs along as if riding the beast. While Wegajty do possess an original 1950s szemyl (found in a barn in the nearby village) it is not generally used on Koleda but more often in theatrical performances and special performances for Carnival season (Zapusty).

Examples of all these figures and the masks which accompany them (Gypsy, Jew, Herod, Devil, Death etc) can be viewed in many of the ethnology museums around the country and, indeed there are still some kolednik groups active (generally in the south of the country, around Krakow) where the tradition has not died out.

In the Warmia-Mazuria region, where Wegajty are, the tradition has long since died, partly because it was widely practiced by the German population, many of whom were moved from the area after the war or emigrated to Germany in the 1960-70s. Elsewhere, such as Suwalki region, the tradition also died several decades ago. In the villages of the Lemko minority in the Carpathian Mountains (also subjected to forced movement after the war) some remnants may survive but they are hard to find, often it is left to children to carry on the tradition in a much diminished form. It is in such places that Wegajty bring their Koleda, a mixture of songs, tunes and dances from various parts of Poland and the surrounding nations.

The mixture of Jewish, Polish, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, German and Lithuanian elements have been gathered and learned from books and old musicians and koledniks over the years. In some way they not only reflect the ethnic and cultural make-up of Polish

society but also hint at the multi-cultural mix of the theatre group itself (at present the group includes German, Ukrainian and Polish members... oh, and me!).

So, what happens on these koleda expeditions? Often the expedition takes place in a small village, usually with a local guide, although in some villages the group are so well known (having performed there for over ten years) they can travel around themselves. The group move around the village visiting as many houses as possible. In those villages where they perform regularly they insist on visiting all houses.

If the inhabitants open the door (not always guaranteed) then the koledniks enter the house and perform part or all of their routines and songs. The host may then (usually) serve the group food (cakes!), tea, coffee and wodka. They may also give presents of apples, eggs etc. Performances may also take place outside the front of a house.

While the practice may differ in different areas, the Wegajty koleda performance has several regular features. There is a short piece about Herod and the Slaughter of the Innocents which has a (masked) Herod singing of how hard life is for kings (especially those who order mass infanticide!). He is then confronted by Death, who cuts his head off with a scythe (we went through a lot of Herods in each village!). The devil then enters and argues with his scythe-wielding compatriot over who gets the body and who gets the soul.

The goat rampages around the house (often terrifying small children) to a song sung by the group. Depending which version of the goat you meet (Polish or Ukrainian) there is sometimes a Gypsy driving it along and singing to it when it falls down sick (the Ukrainian one is shot by hunters and revived by a doctor).

The Stork appears and dances around the room until somebody (usually a fellow kolednik) feeds it something (a piece of bread, cake, pair of socks etc). This routine enables the performer to use the beak as both a musical instrument (clacking it to the music) and as a beak (funnily enough) when it takes the food. This latter can be a risky affair as it is considered a bad sign if the stork drops the offering, so both the stork and the feeder can be rather careful doing this routine. There is usually a group shudder if and when the food falls from the beak!

Over the last sixteen months I have been working alongside Teatr Wegajty on both the expeditions and theatrical pieces, as well as dabbling in some cross-cultural Punch and Judy (another story). I have also managed to contact some local puppeteers and explore certain other old traditions. Readers may have already noticed similarities of koleda with the Polish tradition of szopka puppets, who also used to travel from house to house. The two practices are not only related but often used to happen within the same group. Indeed, one 98-year old former szopka performer and kolednik told me some interesting tales of his performances before the war. However, this is a family magazine...

What readers might be interested to learn is that the ethnology museum in Krakow (Cracow) contains over 800 szopka puppets in its stores. I was lucky enough to be able to visit and see some of these amazing little characters. However, guess which idiot forgot his camera!

*Trev Hill: actor, puppeteer and fledgling Punch Prof.
Former teacher at Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre,
Glasgow. Currently doing PhD at Edinburgh and
working with Teatr Wiejski Wegajty, Poland.*
