

Summary:

We are going to take you with us as we go behind the scenes of the *Augsburger Puppenkiste*. You'll learn some interesting facts about the museum's exhibitions, the making of the puppets, and the theatre itself. The *Augsburger Puppenkiste* has been offering a wide range of shows for both young and old since 1948.

(Voxpops): "It's a dragon or a primeval monster and it's green, blue, scaly" – "It kind of looks like a dragon or something like that" – "Kind of green, like a dinosaur" - "Actually pretty cute" - "I think it was green" - "It's green, looks like a dragon and has a fat stomach" - "Green, I don't know, just like Urmel."

Narrator: So, do you already know what we are talking about? Sure, we're talking about what is probably the most popular little dinosaur in Germany: Urmel. And he lives in Augsburg. To be exact, he lives at Spitalgasse 15. That's where the Augsburger Puppenkiste is located and Urmel is one of its stars.
The Augsburger Puppenkiste is a puppet theatre and one of Augsburg's most important landmarks, along with the Fuggerei and the cathedral. The theatre was established in 1948 by Walter Oehmichen. Oehmichen was a trained actor and he had a true love for the puppet theatre. In 1943, he and his family opened a first puppet theatre called the Puppenschrein (Puppet Shrine). When Augsburg was bombed the following year, the Puppenschrein was destroyed. But the puppets were saved. Angela Gumbolt, a five-year employee at the Augsburger Puppenkiste, will tell us how the Puppenkiste became the famous puppet theatre that it is today.

A. Gumbolt: "Well, it all started with Mr. Walter Oehmichen's dream to start his own puppet theatre. And after the Puppenschrein burned down in 1944, he decided to open a bigger puppet theatre four years later, which he managed to do. And I think he accomplished something pretty amazing. Sixty-three years later, the Augsburger Puppenkiste is one of the best-known puppet theatres in Germany."

Narrator: Most people know about the Augsburger Puppenkiste, but how many University of Augsburg students have actually been there?

(Voxpops): "No, I haven't been yet" – "I haven't been there" - "I haven't either, but I haven't lived here very long yet" - "I'm planning on going."

Narrator: That's already reason enough for us to look behind the famous Kistendeckel (box tops) ourselves and take a closer look around the theatre, which is located in the former Heilig-Geist Hospital in the old town of Augsburg. BY THE WAY, YOU CAN EASILY GET TO THE PUPPENKISTE WITH THE TRAM. JUST GET OFF AT THE ROTES TOR STOP. From there, cross the street called Rote-Torwall-Straße and walk in the direction of the old town. You'll pass an Irish Pub, and then just keep following the street until you get to the Puppenkiste. Go through the rather inconspicuous,

green door, and you'll be in the foyer of the Puppenkiste. By the way, about 60,000 visitors pass through this door every year.

Next to the theatre, there is also a museum, where you can see the famous puppets from the Puppenkiste plays and movies. The puppets are carefully arranged in showcases, and set in front of backgrounds that change between fairy-tale, exotic, and fantasy worlds. And of course you'll also find our most favorite Urmel.

A. Gumbolt: "The most famous puppets from the TV classics are displayed in the permanent exhibition, where nothing is changed. And that is what people ask first, when they get to the Puppenkiste museum, "Where is Jim Knopf and Urmel, and where is the little king Kalle Wirsch"? Because those are the figures that come to everyone's mind. "I saw that once, so now I want to see it live". So these puppets are always on display, because they are literally the stars of the museum.

The temporary exhibition is redesigned every six months. We always have a new theme and then put the puppets on display that match this theme. We also try to borrow various puppets and props from other museums so that preschool and school-aged children have more things to look at and can then learn more about the theme at hand".

Narrator: With more than 6000 puppets, you may well speak of the largest residential community in Augsburg. But how are the cult figures on strings made anyway? Theatre manager Klaus Marschall knows more about that. He runs the family business, which is now in its third generation of ownership.

K. Marschall: "Making a puppet takes on average 50 hours of work. It takes that long to carve the hands and feet, to build the structure for the body, to tie the puppet to the control bar, and so on.

The heads, hands, and feet are carved out of limewood. The body itself is made out of different kinds of hardwood, and then materials like foam rubber, and cotton strings are added, anything that is needed".

Narrator: The chest of the female puppets is also carved. So you could really say "she has a well-carved chest".

K. Marschall: "Partly. Yeah, that's right. As soon as you see a neckline, the torso has to be carved as well".

Narrator: On stage, the puppets from the Puppenkiste are finally brought to life. In up to two shows a day, fairy-tale classics like Sleeping Beauty and The Robber Hotzenplotz and also special performances for adults are presented. For the latter, there are performances such as A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Magic Flute, as well as cabaret shows, in which current politicians and celebrities are made fun of.

Marschall himself is a trained puppeteer and knows what qualities a puppeteer has to have to work in the Puppenkiste.

K. Marschall: “A successful puppeteer brings a good dose of idealism, has the necessary skills, and fits in the team well. Most of all, it’s important to be creative, and it’s a plus if you have good ideas for the cabaret.”

Erzähler: At the moment, 16 people work in the ensemble, a few more men than women. In addition to doing the puppet shows, all of the employees have additional responsibilities—for example in the tailor’s shop, the carpenter’s workshop or working with sound equipment.

Although there are special courses of study in Berlin and Stuttgart for puppeteers, the puppeteers at the Puppenkiste are trained onsite. The basic training takes three years. But the puppeteers aren’t allowed to play a leading role until they’ve completed an additional three years. This is no surprise when you consider that the strings are 2.20 meters long and that the puppeteers have to control a minimum of ten strings.

Marschall can only confirm how much work the supposed easy job of a puppeteer really is.

K. Marschall: “It’s a fulltime job since we offer about 420 performances a year at our theatre in the old city. In addition, there are several tours. For five weeks of the year, we are on the road with a pharmaceutical company and visit a large number of children’s clinics. And right now we’re visiting preschools as part of a joint project with the German prevention programme Papilio. And we have been preparing two tours that will take us to Korea and the Gulf Region, if everything goes well.”

Narrator: To date, the dancing puppets have lost none of their fascination, neither for children nor for adults. The theatre performances are regularly sold out. Marschall knows why.

K. Marschall: “Because digital media can’t do one thing and that is to stimulate the imagination. Digital media is relatively perfect, especially when you watch current productions of children’s movies. Stories like Finding Nemo and all the others. The animation is amazing, and they are great stories. But there isn’t hardly any room left for fantasy. And that’s what’s so special about puppet theatres today. We leave room for fantasy”.

Narrator: In the future, the famous box tops will continue to open and the puppets will be on center stage. Perhaps, you’re now excited to visit this Augsburg landmark. If so, here is the most important information once again:

You can get to the Puppenkiste with the tram. Just get off at the Rotes Tor stop.

From there, cross the street called Rote-Torwall-Straße, walk in the direction of the old town and you can’t miss it. The address is Spitalgasse 15. The museum

offers a permanent and temporary exhibition and is open from Tuesday to Sunday,

from 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. For students, the entrance fee is €3.50 on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and €4.50 on all other days. And if you want to see the puppets live, just visit one of the many performances. From fairy-tale to cabaret, there is something for everyone.

A. Gumbolt: “The shows are sold out 99.9 percent of the time because the Puppenkiste is quite famous for its performances. And when, for example, the new program is released in April, people come in and buy their tickets for Christmas because they know that if they wait too long, all the tickets for the Christmas performances will already be sold”.

Narrator: So make sure to get your tickets early. For more information about the famous blockheads visit the Puppenkiste online at www.augsburger-puppenkiste.de. Have fun!

(to himself, gradually getting quieter) And me, well I’m going to go to a show, too. It’s crazy that I’ve lived here for a year, and I still haven’t been to the Puppenkiste! And I’ve always wanted to see the Urmel live...

(whistles the Lummerland song)

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