

Andrew Mulley: Young people in care shouldn't be **abandoned at 18**

## Lyon's answer to Punch and Judy

By Amanda Baltazar  
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Extreme violence and misogyny are the last things you'd expect to find on a holiday in France, but that's what you get a dose of in the puppet shows of Lyon. This year marks the bicentenary of the birth of Lyon's most famous puppet, Guignol, the French equivalent of Punch, who for 200 years has been accompanied by his cantankerous wife, Madelon, and the endearing drunkard, Gnafron.

It's not hard to see Guignol in Lyon. Puppet shows are held everywhere, aimed at both adults and children. For children, it's the usual affair of truncheons smashing heads, wife-beatings and police chases. For adults, there are satires of political and current events, as well as plays.

Laurent Mourguet, a Lyon dentist, developed Guignol in 1808, to both attract new clientele and to distract his patients from their pain. Before long, Mourguet was a recognised puppeteer and his wooden friend was attracting large audiences.

By the 1820s, he'd given up dentistry for the stage. So successful was Guignol that puppet shows spread through France, reaching such popularity that in the mid-1800s the police stepped in to censor them. A stamp of approval had to be affixed to every show's written dialogue (many of which had been improvised oral shows as a lot of puppeteers were illiterate) as the messages in the shows - not paying rent and pounding people's heads with batons - might inspire the masses to pick up the same habits.

The Musee Gadagne in Vieux Lyon (Old Lyon) showcases this history, with the original three wooden puppets, as well as hundreds of others from the craze they started. It's closed for refurbishment at the moment, but will reopen in December with around 2,000 puppets and accessories, as well as regular performances.

Nearby, at Place du Doyenne, you can see a statue of Mourguet (note his resemblance to Guignol), which was erected 100 years ago to celebrate the centenary of puppetry in Lyon. "The people of Lyon are very proud of our puppet history," says Simone Blazy, the Musee Gadagne's curator and director, "even though it's not exactly serious."

The Théâtre La Maison de Guignol, also in Vieux Lyon, has two shows a day at 3pm and 4.30pm. These are geared towards children, but that didn't stop my husband and me from enjoying them. After all, there's no need to understand French to get the idea of wooden dolls running around on a stage doing each other bodily harm. When you buy your ticket, you give your name; during the performance the puppets speak directly to audience members, which the kids loved, but which left us cowering at the back.

There are evening performances that deal with current events, where you can also eat and drink. Compagnie des Zonzons divides its shows up into those suitable for ages three and below, five and up, and adults, the latter mostly improvisational satires.



ALAMY

*Traditional puppet shows are hugely popular with children and adults in Lyon*

Traditional performances are also held every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday in the Parc de la Tête d'Or, and are aimed mostly at children.

The park is worth visiting for more than just Guignol, especially in the spring and summer. Its sprawling grounds include a zoo, arrays of flower beds, woods, vast lawns, botanical gardens and even a dinky train.

And don't let Guignol distract you too much from the other options available in the old town. The culinary speciality of the city are quenelles, sausage-shaped mousse-dumplings (often made with cod or poultry) in a tomato sauce. And Lyon has its own type of restaurant, too, known as a bouchon, a type of intimate bistro.

While you're in Vieux Lyon, check out the traboules: alleyways between buildings that are hidden by doors, created to provide shelter for the silk weavers, a huge part of Lyon's workforce in the 1800s.

For puppet shows elsewhere, there's the Compagnie Daniel Streble in the hilly Croix-Rousse area, the former silk-weavers district, which is now fairly run down. Here, you can find an authentic silk weaver's workshop and the ruins of an ancient Roman amphitheatre. You also get a good feel for non-touristy Lyon. The puppet performances offer family entertainment during the day, and grown-up shows at night.

*Musee Gadagne (00 33 4 78 42 03 61; [www.museegadagne.com](http://www.museegadagne.com)) Théâtre La Maison du Guignol: (00 33 4 72 40 26 61; [www.lamaisondegaignol.fr](http://www.lamaisondegaignol.fr)) Théâtre du Parc de la Tete d'Or (00 33 4 78 28 60 41) Compagnie des Zonzons: (00 33 4 78 28 92 57; [www.guignol-lyon.com](http://www.guignol-lyon.com)) Compagnie Daniel Streble: 00 33 4 72 32 11 55; [www.guignol-un-gone-de-lyon.com/index.htm](http://www.guignol-un-gone-de-lyon.com/index.htm))*

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