

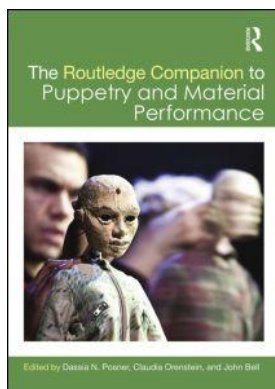
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13

Life-Death and Disobedient Obedience

Russian Modernist Redefinitions of the Puppet

Dassia N. Posner

One of the striking things about Russian theatre in the first two decades of the twentieth century is that puppets were both everywhere and nowhere. The Russian homage to wooden actors was seemingly ubiquitous; still-famous examples include the trio of dancers who play puppets in Benois/Stravinsky/Fokine's *Petrushka* (1911) and the puppet theatre-within-a-theatre in Blok's *Little Fairground Booth*, directed by Meyerhold in 1906. Although Stanislavsky is often mentally pinned to his naturalistic stagings of Chekhov, his seminal production of *The Blue Bird*, one of Maeterlinck's symbolist plays "for marionettes," is still running at the Moscow Art Theatre over a century after its 1908 opening.

Appearances of actual puppets on Russian modernist stages were, however, few. Tsar Nikolai II's regime had been steadily quashing the Shrovetide fairs, one of the familiar haunts of *Petrushka*, Punch's Russian cousin. And although many among Russia's artistic intelligentsia – Andrei Bely, Nikolai Evreinov, Sergei Sudeikin, Liubov Iakovleva, to name a few – made attempts to create puppet shows in the new century's early years, most were abortive. Thus, this period of unprecedented theatrical explosion and innovation was marked by a curious paradox: the puppet was one of the major rejuvenating forces in Russian theatre, yet few puppets were to be found.

This changed in 1916 when two women, writer and critic Iulia Slonimskaia and visual artist Nina Simonovich-Efimova,¹ became the first artist-intellectuals to stage professional puppet productions in Russia. Slonimskaia co-created and performed with marionettes in *The Forces of Love and Magic*, originally a French fairground play, at the Saint Petersburg cabaret The Players' Rest. Simonovich-Efimova created a glove-puppet *Petrushka* for the Moscow Association of Artists and shadow shows for *The Bat*, a cabaret later known abroad as the *Chauve-Souris*. Both women also made major contributions to a growing body of theatrical theory about puppets. Their writings, which were deeply informed by their practical puppetry work, challenged widespread interpretations of the puppet that were circulating in Russia's then-raging wars over what the theatre of the future should be.

In looking back at this period, many of the modernist ideas about the puppet that are most famous now – Edward Gordon Craig’s that the puppet is obedient, Jentsch’s and Freud’s that it is uncanny – were primarily developed from outside the puppet theatre looking in. This theory was often more concerned with what Gross calls “the idea of the puppet” than with the puppet itself (Gross 2011: 4). Bensky observes that “the human may be treated in two ways in puppet theatre ... [There is a] constant tendency to humanize the object, endowing it with human characteristics, and alternately to ‘depersonalize’ it, depriving the puppet of individual features and giving it the function of stereotype or pure theatrical sign” (cited in Jurkowski and Francis 1998: 26).² In a modernist context, such “depersonalizations” often focused on the puppet’s death or lack of agency.

Simonovich-Efimova and Slonimskaia found such views of the puppet unproductively limiting. They differed significantly from many of their contemporaries in that they aimed to define the specific nature of the actual stage puppet, to clarify its laws and aesthetics, and to establish its artistic legitimacy. Both sought to develop vocabularies for puppetry as a viable theatrical form, to define its laws as unique from the theatre of live actors, and to view theatre, art, and life itself from a puppet perspective.

Two paradoxes regarding the nature of the puppet recur in Slonimskaia’s and Simonovich-Efimova’s writings, though each articulates them differently with somewhat divergent solutions. Both grapple with what Penny Francis has called the puppet’s “life-death,”³ the idea that an object can be inanimate and yet simultaneously appear to contain life. This belief in the inanimate puppet’s innate life led Slonimskaia to write about movement as life and Simonovich-Efimova about the puppeteer as a life-giving force.

The second paradox I will call “disobedient obedience.” From the outset, Simonovich-Efimova viewed puppet choreography as a collaborative discovery rather than as an imposition of the puppeteer’s will upon her puppet. Slonimskaia, who had no previous experience with marionettes before *The Forces of Love and Magic*, learned quickly that the puppet was a less willingly compliant collaborator than the metaphors about marionettes as obedient beings wielded by omnipotent forces had led her to conclude. Her discovery raised questions about how one might learn not to control but to listen to puppets, material objects with minds of their own.

Slonimskaia and Simonovich-Efimova embraced the artistic autonomy that the puppet theatre provided, a rare sphere in which they could become directors, designers, and performers in their own theatres during an era when the directors in live-actor theatres were almost invariably men. The puppet theatre also gave them a unique opportunity to engage productively and transgressively with forms that had often been held separate: popular and elite culture, theatre for children and theatre for adults, fairground performance and fine art.

Here, however, we encounter another curious paradox. Their intense experimentation led to insights that significantly illuminate the puppet’s nature and artistic vocabulary, yet their complete creative freedom lay within a bounded sphere. While the actors’ theatre had no difficulty in appropriating puppet metaphors, it was ultimately more concerned with the live rather than the wooden body. The work of both Slonimskaia and Simonovich-Efimova is viewed as foundational among Russian puppeteers and puppetry scholars, but it is still little known beyond this.

This chapter examines their seminal theoretical writings, focusing in particular on their analyses of the puppet's life-death and disobedient obedience. I will first contextualize their work within the Russian marionette craze and in contrast to two contemporaneous symbolist writers, Fedor Sologub and Valery Briusov, before then turning to a more detailed examination of Slonimskaia's and Simonovich-Efimova's writings. My aim is to reclaim a broader, more pragmatic theoretical heritage for the puppet in the modernist period and to illuminate how these two women's insights resonate closely with puppetry theory and practice today.

The Russian modernist marionette

Slonimskaia's and Simonovich-Efimova's work was part of a much larger fascination with the puppet – with the string marionette, in particular – that spanned Europe and the US at the *fin de siècle*, a craze Jurkowski has identified as “an unexpected stroke of fortune” for puppetry in the sense that the form finally “was included in the aesthetics debate, thus establishing its uniquely characteristic features, its essence and its specificity” (Jurkowski and Francis 1998: 1–2).

Several factors contributed to the Russian branch of this marionette madness. One was the concurrent rise in small forms during Russia's Silver Age, roughly the two decades preceding the 1917 Revolution, during which directors and impresarios, inspired by proliferating cabarets in Western Europe, opened “miniature theatres” in defiance of the grandiosity of Imperial and commercial performance venues. Interest in folk and popular traditions also increased markedly in the wake of the decline and eventual erasure of the Russian fairground, as evidenced by many turn-of-the-century books dedicated to folk and fairground traditions.⁴

The pessimism with which Russian artists often linked the marionette is best understood in the context of the failed 1905 Revolution. As Bartlett and Edmondson note:

The creativity of the Russian modernists was largely inspired by prescience of the demise of their world and way of life; much of their art can be read as a death-wish in terms of its thematics. Yet what came out of that death-wish – music, literature, and art of genius – was ultimately creative, rather than destructive.

(Bartlett and Edmondson 1998: 215)

These artists used the puppet on strings as a metaphor for man at the mercy of fate, as a sign of death, and as an example of a rigidly mechanized being, reflecting the existential issues with which they were then grappling.

Equally significantly, the rise of the theatrical director and the rise of interest in the puppet occurred simultaneously. It is nearly impossible to fathom today how revolutionary it was then for directors to be the primary artistic shapers of theatrical productions. The marionette was a useful symbol for directors attempting to achieve artistic unity in collaboration with actors whose training and methods clashed with this unity. Unsurprisingly, these directors' views of the puppet emerged from their

own unique philosophies of the theatre. For instance, while Craig famously viewed the Über-marionette as the ideal actor stripped of messy, unpredictable individuality, Vsevolod Meyerhold lauded wooden actors for their uniquely conventionalized representation of character (Meyerhold 1913 [1969]: 129).

In several early directorial attempts to apply these ideas, actors wore masks, had their bodies replaced with cardboard, used mechanized movements, or even, in Meyerhold's 1908 *Petrushka*, wore false puppet legs in an attempt to explore new physical vocabularies free from the historical and representational constraints of realism (Wachtel 1998: 24). It became common for playwrights and directors to term their plays "marionette shows," meaning that they imitated puppets without using them.

Theatre and the puppet: Sologub and Briusov

These experiments were among a variety of attempts to define theatre in terms of its own inherent *teatral'nost'* (theatricality) and *uslovnost'* (conventionality). In 1902, Russian symbolist poet and playwright Valery Briusov had polemicized against what he called the "unnecessary truth" of the Moscow Art Theatre's early productions (Briusov 1902 [1986]: 30), arguing that it was impossible to mirror life exactly on the stage and futile to attempt to do so. No audience will ever believe that an actual tree is growing onstage or that Hamlet's life is in real danger, he asserted. Theatre should instead embrace its own conventionality in order to engage the "creative urge" of its audiences (Briusov 1902 [1986]: 29).

The question that followed in his essay's controversial wake was *how*. A 1908 collection, *Theatre: A Book about the New Theatre*, proposed several possible solutions. Two of its contributors, Briusov and novelist, poet, and playwright Fedor Sologub, wrote about the new theatre in relation to the marionette. Although both interpreted the puppet in terms that seem remarkably similar to the writings of Edward Gordon Craig, their work was initially better known in Russia than Craig's "The Actor and the Über-marionette" (1908), which was not translated into Russian until 1912.

In "Realism and Convention on the Stage," Briusov probes puppets as a possible solution to the problem of the theatrical actor, whose real body was "out of harmony with a conventionalized production" (Briusov 1908 [1981]: xlvi). Briusov posits that "[t]he only way left for the 'conventionalized' theater to triumph is to replace actors with puppets on strings, with gramophones inside them," adding:

But the more logical the conventionalized production and the more it tallies with a mechanical theater, the less necessary it will be. By depriving the actor of the possibility of acting and of artistic creation, theatrical conventionality will finally eliminate the stage and art as well.

(Briusov 1908 [1981]: 177)

For Briusov, a mechanical theatre is no longer theatre "as an individual art form" (Briusov 1908 [1981]: 180). Nor does he believe that forcing actors to behave like puppets is a viable solution:

Once the performers have been retained, one cannot force them to act like machines; a living creature is incapable of it, to any great degree. Once machines have been utilized, one cannot elevate their workings to the level of creativity: We do not have the power to inspire the dead with life ...

(Briusov 1908 [1981]: 180)

Because Briusov views the puppet as a machine, he believes it cannot provide theatre's life-blood: creativity.

A second essay, Sologub's "Theatre of a Single Will," views the puppet as an agentless symbol of death. Sologub advocates for the centrality of the playwright, stipulating that distractions such as the actor's unpredictable personality and the director's interpretive lens be eliminated, as they distort the playwright's vision. Sologub's proposed solution to the "tyranny" of the actor, which threatens to usurp the playwright's centrality, is the monodrama, in which one person reads the entire play, including the title, author's name, cast list, and stage directions (Sologub 1908 [1981]: 138). The actors follow the directions as they are read and speak their lines, prompted by the reader should they forget them. Sologub defends what he called turning actors into marionettes, stating:

Such is the unalterable law of universal playacting that man is like a wonderfully constructed marionette ...

When the hour ordained for every man comes, each of us, in full, will turn into an inert and unbreathing puppet, no longer capable of playing any kind of role ...

There it lies on sackcloth for the final ablution, a puppet outworn and of no further use to anyone – its arms folded by others – and its legs outstretched by others – and its eyes closed by others – a poor marionette for only one tragic bit of playacting. Yonder, behind the scenes, an indifferent being pulled you by an invisible string.

(Sologub 1908 [1981]: 140)

Thus, while Briusov saw the puppet as mechanical and lacking in spontaneity, Sologub viewed it as an empty body manipulated from without. Both were more interested in the puppet as a metaphor for mankind rather than in the puppet as a theatrical object. Similar views of the puppet still abound today.

Iulia Slonimskaia: The soul of the marionette

Slonimskaia and Simonovich-Efimova believed that puppetry theory generated from an external perspective – from actors' theatre, psychology, or literature – could generate insights applicable to those fields, but that to write about the puppet without engagement with it was to risk distorting along its practical potential. Thus, both women developed their theory simultaneously, along with or in response to their performances.

The Puppet Theatre of Slonimskaia and her husband, Pavel Sazonov, opened its first production, *The Forces of Love and Magic*, in February 1916.⁵ Their short-lived



Figure 13.1 Demon puppet from *The Forces of Love and Magic* (1916): puppet design by Nikolai Kalmakov. Image reprinted from Iuliia Slonimskaia, “Marionetka,” *Apollon* (March 1916), PSlav 122.5, Houghton Library, Harvard University

theatre was known for lavish sets and marionettes, for designs by World of Art artists Nikolai Kalmakov and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, and for attracting much of illustrious theatrical Petersburg to its shows.⁶ The month after the opening, Slonimskaia published a 42-page essay on the marionette that comprised much of the March issue of the journal *Apollo*.

Slonimskaia’s essay was written at the height of the marionette craze and was well known in her day. Because Slonimskaia’s work aligned so closely with Meyerhold’s views on conventionalized theatre, Meyerhold made her essay required reading in the early 1920s for his State Higher Directors’ Workshops students (Zabrodin 2005: 120), among whom were Sergei Eisenstein, Maria Babanova, and Igor Ilinsky. Unfortunately, Slonimskaia’s emigration to France shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution curtailed the spread of her influence in early Soviet theatre.

Slonimskaia’s essay tied in various strains of thought on the role of the marionette in modern theatre, while offering the historical basis and validation that Konstantin Miklashevsky’s research (1914–1917) had generated on the *commedia dell’arte*. She traces the puppet’s history from ancient Greece and India to the puppets of her own day, analyzing in detail several specific European forms, including Nativity puppets, the German Faust tradition, *commedia dell’arte*, and Punch and Judy.

Her essay develops several key arguments. First and foremost, she maintains that the marionette has a life of its own and that “the marionette’s soul is movement” (Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 58).⁷ She also defies what she views as a mistaken understanding of the puppet as mechanical: “The theatrical instinct that prompted ... the primal songs and dances instilled a desire to animate the marionette with

movement – not mechanical movement, but movement that responded freely to the immediate inspiration of its operator” (Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 31).

Slonimskaia redirects two familiar formulas that explore the relationship between man and the marionette – the puppet as an imitation of man and man as a puppet of fate:

Man has created the marionette in his image and likeness. It seems to imitate man, as man seems to imitate nature in his art, but in repeating man, in imitating him, the marionette takes the same path that man takes in the imitation of nature; it contributes something ... and instead of being a copy, it becomes an artistic creation that is full of its own mysterious life. Imitation is transformed into creation.

It is not the marionette that likens itself to man, but, conversely, man who has compared himself to the marionette, which has become a symbol of man in the world.

(Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 27)

Slonimskaia aims to demonstrate the puppet’s unique contributions to art and philosophy, arguing that it is “a semi-fantastical being,” not something dead or free of expression (Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 30). The idea that a puppet has a soul runs throughout the essay, particularly in the second chapter, where she writes, “Knowing how it is constructed, [mankind] nevertheless sensed in [the marionette] a hidden magical life that is awakened only by the movement of its strings” (Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 30).

Slonimskaia also counters Craig’s “The Actor and the Über-marionette,” insisting, for instance, that the puppet cannot be a descendent of ancient Greek temple automata, as Craig had suggested, since the movement of these statues was mechanized. Rather, she sees the organic movement of the marionette as having been initiated by women in Dionysian rituals:

Marionettes did not originate in the temple, but in the folk cult procession. They were not the artificial contrivances of the high priestly caste, but were created from the spontaneous religious thought of the people. ...

This is how the first articulated puppet was born, the strings of which were the conductors of the feelings and thoughts of its creator and poet.

(Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 31)

For Slonimskaia the puppet is the inner expression of the artist made tangible.

Slonimskaia’s most significant contribution to puppetry theory is her distinction between the marionette and the automaton. If, as she argues, the marionette’s spontaneous movement cannot have originated in the automaton’s mechanical movement, it therefore also cannot have the very qualities that made it attractive to directors. Her discussion of the problems inherent in this perception of the marionette is worth quoting at length:

Within the argument of the primacy of the actor or the puppet is concealed a false understanding of the marionette. The marionette is obstinately

identified with the automaton. The tirelessness, submissiveness, and lack of creative individuality that are attributed to it are, in reality, characteristics of the automaton only. In the theatre of the automaton, previously prescribed movements are ... repeated with utter precision at every performance; the automaton's performance is cold and unchangeable, tireless and impersonal.

"Marionettes are obedient, tireless, and always at the ready," says Paul Margueritte. In reality, they don't have a single one of these qualities. The marionette gets tired like an actor because it is moved by human hands. Its voice is human and thus cannot be tireless; it cannot be more tireless or obedient than that of the actor. Its performance cannot always be identical, because it depends on the inspiration of those who move its strings and speak its words.

The marionette is much less submissive than a living person. Its personal qualities are ineradicably strong

The marionette embodies the forces of life – movement – and cannot, as Gordon Craig asserts, be the bearer of death charms. On the contrary, in the marionette is the victory of the forces of life over lifeless matter. A piece of wood moves, lives, and expresses passions as a special kind of creature, created by the magic of art.

The mechanical qualities that have been falsely attributed to the marionette have occluded its real artistic merit. The representation of a marionette as a passionless automaton methodically fulfilling prescribed actions once and forever does not at all resemble the real marionette, which is eternally changeable, ever unexpected, endlessly varied, truly inspired.

(Slonimskaia 1916 [1990]: 56)

Slonimskaia's observation that the marionette represents "the victory of the forces of life over lifeless matter" is particularly significant, as it makes a distinction between dead and lifeless. Dead implies that the life – the unpredictable nature – has been removed, something potentially desirable in dealing with live actors, while lifeless infers that the puppet simply awaits animation. This gives it the ability to bridge life and death, the souled and the soulless.

Nina Simonovich-Efimova: Filling the puppet with life

In 1916, the same year that Slonimskaia's theatre opened in St. Petersburg, Simonovich-Efimova gave her first public shows in Moscow. Her early *Petrushka* and shadow productions were so well received that she and her husband Ivan founded their own theatre. They initially performed in artistic cafés and cabarets but became itinerant during the lean post-revolutionary Civil War years. They founded what grew into a thriving, established Soviet puppetry tradition. Though Sergei Obraztsov's puppetry style later diverged from that of the Efimovs, they were his first teachers (Simonovich-Efimova 1977: 35).

Looking back in 1940 on their early, itinerant performances, Simonovich-Efimova wrote with satisfaction: "In addition to our direct aim, audience enjoyment, every

show was a sermon for what we were doing and, after five years, puppet ‘Petrushka theatres’ began to appear all over the Soviet Union, first one by one, then by the dozens and hundreds” (Simonovich-Efimova 1940: 3). Simonovich-Efimova’s life-long goal was simple: to advance the art of the puppet. This included expanding the physical vocabulary of puppets, how they were built, for whom they were performed, and by whom they were created.

The earliest formulation of Simonovich-Efimova’s theatrical theory was her 1919 “About Petrushka (*O Petrushke*),” but she also published books, pamphlets, and guides for aspiring puppeteers. She is best known for *Notes of a Petrushka Player* (*Zapiski Petrushechnika*, originally published in 1925; adapted into English as *Adventures of a Russian Puppet Theatre*, 1935), through which she became “the first Soviet puppeteer to begin the conversation about the particulars of puppet theatre, a conversation that continues to the present day” (Nekrylova 1980: 20). *Notes* chronicles Simonovich-Efimova’s early performances, provides insight into her artistic philosophy, publishes plays and drawings, and provides information on puppet design. It also documents the work of contemporary Petrushka players, about whom we otherwise would know little today.⁸

Everything Simonovich-Efimova discusses in *Notes* emerges from her theatre’s mission:

[T]o show how expressive and subtle Petrushka gestures are, how incredibly many of them there are, how nuanced they are ... and above all – greatness (for puppets that have not been invited to join the ranks of the “great” theatrical arts), above all – a new beauty (for artists singled out as outside the limits of “high” art ...). The concern of our theatre is *not novelty of plot, not novelty of word or of staging, but a new concept of Petrushka gesture* [emphasis in original].

(Simonovich-Efimova 1980: 43–44)

She worked to define the nature of the puppet, to establish puppetry’s validity as a unique discipline within the spectator arts, and to expand glove-puppet movement, design, and repertoire. By “Petrushka,” she meant not only the popular entertainment tradition but also glove puppets more generally.

In *Notes*, Simonovich-Efimova validates glove-puppet theatre by comparing and contrasting it with those of live actors and marionettes:

The theatre of people reaches a certain limit and begins to appeal to the puppet: “Revive me, purify me.”

Can we talk seriously of parity with the theatre of actors? ...

The face is replaced in the Petrushka theatre by the palm of the artist’s hand, but this is no worse than a face.

The pianist also plays with the hands, and sounds emerge, and images appear ...

The artist, who simultaneously has a puppet on each hand, plays with the fingers, and, like a pianist, gives birth to images.

The images are not aural, but visual.

There are as infinitely many of them as there are in music, as infinitely great a number of nuances.

(Simonovich-Efimova 1980: 43)

In her understanding, the puppeteer is more versatile than the stage actor because “The actor multiplies his personality with puppets. He does not depend on his partner; he is his own partner” (Simonovich-Efimova 1980: 43).

Simonovich-Efimova “believed that the essential truth lies in the puppet itself, in its limitless expressive capacity,” particularly with regard to gesture (Jurkowski and Francis 1998: 105). Simonovich-Efimova outlines in detail gestures at which glove puppets excel:

These little actors do not have facial expressions, but they do have effective gestures: they kiss, fight, bow (what’s more, their bow can have all the nuances of a bow), they bless each other ... they die “stupendously,” they get frightened; they convey clearly the nature of their good feelings, they tenderly caress, amicably greet one another, warmly or fervently take offense, become angry, trembling with their entire body or head; they applaud, dance.

(Simonovich-Efimova 1919: 7)

When developing shows, she choreographed each gesture, typically in front of a mirror (Nekrylova 1980: 7). She suggested that if a performance is to be unified and the story to fit the character, the artist should be involved in every phase of puppet-theatre creation: even the playwright should wear and interact with puppets during the writing process.

Like Slonimskaia, Simonovich-Efimova responds to contemporaneous conversations about the marionette. She, too, defies the notion of the puppet as an automaton, a lifeless being, or an obedient actor. The assumption of life, she held, provides more fruitful possibilities for movement and repertoire. To her, “a puppet show begins when the audience believes in the puppet as a living being” (Efimov 1990: 80). She celebrated this life through choreography and through a repertoire that explored the life-death of the puppet. Paradoxical though it might seem, she emphasized the puppet’s lifelikeness by staging plays in which a puppet dies or triumphs over death.

Interestingly, her response to the widespread marionette metaphor was to reject the marionette. Like George Sand, with whom she felt a particular artistic kinship, she maintained that glove puppets are superior to marionettes, as they are less representational and are in direct contact with the body of the puppeteer:

Marionettes are a mechanism, a system of strings, levers, hooks. They are something forced, melancholic. ... If she offers a bouquet,⁹ the scent of its flowers is mixed with the smell of the sweat of the operator who has slaved over the creation of this act of offering. ...

She is a bourgeois among puppets.

But Petrushka is a flame; in him is spontaneously poured the inspiration of the artist.

Because a live human hand is in him! The palm replaces the face ... There is no intermediary in the form of strings and operator.

(Simonovich-Efimova 1980: 49–50)



Figure 13.2 Nina Simonovich-Efimova and Big Petrushka (1930). Photo courtesy of the Museum Archive of the Obraztsov State Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow

For Simonovich-Efimova, the hand (soul) of the puppeteer fills the puppet with life as it literally fills the puppet itself.¹⁰

The Efimovs experimented insatiably with expressive costuming and with unusual modes of manipulation. They developed shadow theatre as an art form in Soviet Russia and designed puppets worn on the head so that multiple characters could appear simultaneously with one puppeteer manipulating them. During the early Soviet period, when most puppetry was either agitprop or for children, they also created shows for adults, including adaptations of *The Enchanted Pear Tree* (1921) and *Macbeth* (1931) (Nekrylova 1980: 24). For *Macbeth*, they invented a new kind of rod puppet (patented by Simonovich-Efimova in 1926), with rods attached at the elbow to free the movement of the puppet's hands. *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* each had two profiles so that when they were pivoted they could change expression (Efimov 1964: 5). The Efimovs also created giant puppet shows, including "Big Petrushka" (1930), in which Simonovich-Efimova danced with a life-sized Petrushka, intentionally blurring the line between agency and manipulation.

Conclusion: Embracing duality

Slonimskaia's and Simonovich-Efimova's writings provide useful models for thinking about how practice can inform theory in the puppet theatre, but also for viewing theatre more generally from the perspective of the puppet. Their assumption of life and agency in the lifeless material world provides expansive opportunities for



Figure 13.3 Nina Simonovich-Efimova, the witches of *Macbeth* (1931). Photo courtesy of the Museum Archive of the Obraztsov State Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow

interacting with the physical environment of the theatre; fabric, light, and sound, from their expanded perspective, might become tangible and intangible characters. Their articulation of the puppet's disobedient obedience invites a humble, responsive means of animating these surroundings, replacing the image of the tireless puppet with that of tireless experimentation by the puppeteer.

These two women's ideas laid a theoretical foundation for the Soviet puppetry of the 1920s and 1930s, including that of Alexandra Exter, Vladimir Sokolov, and Sergei Obraztsov. Exter turned Kamerny Theatre actors "into living sculptures by treating the costumes as fluid plastic entities" (Cunningham 1998: 43) and created cubist marionettes for an unrealized 1926 film. Sokolov, who headed a puppet studio at the Moscow Kamerny Theatre,¹¹ used puppets as visual representations of ideas or thoughts, much like a painting in motion that was "free from any similarity to the human form" (cited in Jurkowski and Francis 1998: 33). Obraztsov boldly redefined the puppet, using his bare hands to form part or all of its body, challenging notions that a puppet needed to be representational.

The significance of Slonimskaia's and Simonovich-Efimova's ideas extends far beyond the individuals they influenced directly, however. They resonate deeply with many contemporary puppetry experiments, regardless of any traceable genealogy. Basil Twist's abstract shapes and Philippe Genty's dream-like fabrics; Handspring Puppet Company's belief that the life of the puppet springs from direct physical contact with it; Julie Taymor's exposing of the puppet's mechanics to make its life more miraculous; Kneehigh Theatre's innovative interactions with their material environment; and Eric Bass's rehearsal process (described elsewhere in this volume) that "listens" to the puppet's visual dramaturgy are but a few examples.

In challenging common perceptions of the puppet, Slonimskaia and Simonovich-Efimova significantly expanded the puppet's theatrical and philosophical potential.

While Craig, Sologub, Briusov, and others focused on the puppet's deathlike, mechanical, or obedient qualities, Slonimskaia and Simonovich-Efimova explored alternate perspectives and, in so doing, bridged seeming binaries. Both women came to understand that the puppet is simultaneously alive *and* dead, obedient *and* disobedient. As they discovered, the puppet's inherent duality and liminality, its refusal to be defined from a single perspective, is precisely why we find it so eternally fascinating.

Notes

This chapter builds upon my book chapter "Sculpture in Motion: Nina Simonovich-Efimova and the Petrushka Theatre," in Paul Fryer (ed.) *Women in the Arts in the Belle Epoque: Essays on Influential Artists, Writers and Performers*, McFarland Press, 2012: 118–135. Sincere thanks to Laurence Senelick; Colleen McQuillen and the University of Illinois Chicago Russian Modernism Workshop; and Maria Il'ina and the Obratsov Theatre and Museum, without whom this work would not have been possible. Thanks, too, to the University of Connecticut School of Fine Arts for awarding me a Dean's Grant to travel to Russian archives, and to the Northwestern University School of Communication for giving me leave time to write.

- 1 Often referred to simply as Efimova, her married name, in English translations of her work.
- 2 Jurkowski is summarizing Roger Daniel Bensky's discussion of *Ubu Roi* in *Structures textuelles de la marionette de langue Française* (Paris: Editions A. G. Nizet, 1969).
- 3 Discussion at Puppetry and Postdramatic Performance: An International Conference on Performing Objects in the 21st Century, University of Connecticut, Storrs, April 3, 2011.
- 4 See A. V. Leifert, *Balagany* (Petrograd: Izdanie ezhedel'nika Petrogradskikh-gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov, 1922); Vladimir Perets, *Kukol'nyi teatr na Rusi*. (Moscow: 1895, reprinted 1991); and Nikolai Vinogradov, *Bielorusskiy vertep* (St. Petersburg: Tipografia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1908).
- 5 Slonimskaia and Sazonov gave private performances before presenting at the Players' Halt.
- 6 For a list of illustrious attendees, see Sazonov (1990: 24).
- 7 Slonimskaia's marionette essay has yet to be published in English. All excerpts from it, as well as all other Slonimskaia and Simonovich-Efimova translations from the Russian in this chapter, are my own.
- 8 These include Ivan Zaitsev, Anna Dmitrievna, Stepan Bulynkin, Pavel Sedov, Vasilii Sizov, and others. See Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski Petrushechnika*, 1980: 181–193.
- 9 Simonovich-Efimova contrasts the gendered pronouns in the original Russian. "Marionette" is feminine and "Petrushka" is masculine.
- 10 These ideas were likely inspired by a scene in Sand's 1859 novel *The Snow Man* (*L'homme de neige*, 1871: 161–162), in which a puppeteer argues that mechanical, lifelike marionettes are eerily similar to automata and that the puppeteer's hand imbues glove puppets (*buratini*) with life.
- 11 See Jurkowski and Francis (1998: 32). The Mamonovskii Lane Puppet Studio was transferred to the Kamerny in 1920. At least until Sokolov's emigration to Germany, Kamerny actors were required to train with puppets (Kostrova 1990: 90–91).

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