

Russian Theatre  
in Practice  
The Director's Guide

*Edited by Amy Skinner*

*methuen* | drama

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# 3

## Nina Simonovich-Efimova: Theatre as Living Sculpture in Motion

*Dassia N. Posner*

*The puppet theatre, simply put, has its own laws, and  
[the puppeteer] is a new kind of actor.*

– NINA SIMONOVICH-EFIMOVA<sup>1</sup>

In 1930, Russian director, visual artist and puppeteer Nina Iakovlevna Simonovich-Efimova (1877–1948) danced with an unusual partner: a life-sized puppet (Figure 3.1).<sup>2</sup> When she designed it, she made no attempt to mask its puppetness: ‘Big Petrushka’ had an absurdly long nose, exposed knee joints, a papier-mâché head and body and high-heeled shoes that attached to the puppeteer’s feet at the toes. Yet even as this inanimate object celebrated its objectness, it came to life through movement. Simonovich-Efimova’s son Adrian later recalled his mother’s dance with Petrushka:

Petrushka takes wide, deep strides, bows deeply to the lady, looks into her face; slowly, with small steps, he leads, holding his head high ... before coming to a stand-still. Of course it is clear that this is a puppet ... but it is also clear that it is he who is leading.<sup>3</sup>



FIGURE 3.1 *Nina Simonovich-Efimova with Big Petrushka (1930). Photo courtesy of the Museum Archive of the Obraztsov State Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow.*

Simonovich-Efimova's understanding of puppets as performance partners brought to life through movement initiated a small theatrical revolution that still reverberates today. For her, all theatre begins with the puppet, a living sculpture in motion. Even in the earliest days of the rise of the director, her definition of directing was radical; for her, a director is a synthetic visual and movement artist who creates, responds to and performs with living objects. Her career was dedicated to establishing an artistic puppet tradition in Russia that would equal the theatre of live actors and expand the possibilities of

puppet theatre, aims that were inspired by her ‘revolutionary’ desire ‘to free sculpture from its imposed role of immobility’ and to free puppetry from its oft-assumed insignificance.<sup>4</sup>

Simonovich-Efimova and her husband Ivan Efimov, two of the founders of Soviet puppetry, were the first Russian visual artists to become professional puppeteers during the tumultuous period that encompassed the First World War, the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War.<sup>5</sup> As a director, Simonovich-Efimova merged visual art, literature and nineteenth-century Russian fairground performance with experimental ideas about what puppetry could be. She was prolific in multiple areas: she created over three thousand works of visual art<sup>6</sup>; she directed and performed in more than thirty hand, rod and shadow puppet productions between 1916 and 1922 alone; and her 1925 book *Notes of a Petrushka Player* (*Zapiski petrushechnika*), adapted into English in 1935 as *Adventures of a Russian Puppet Theatre*, is the first Russian book to detail the practical aesthetics of puppet theatre.<sup>7</sup> This chapter introduces Simonovich-Efimova’s understudied work in the larger context of the early twentieth-century fascination with the puppet, traces the development of her theatre, explores her directorial innovations and nods to her enduring influence on twentieth-century theatre. Practical exercises in this chapter are drawn from or inspired by Simonovich-Efimova’s written advice for beginning puppeteers, part of her larger mission to expand the form by cultivating its creators.

## The puppet in theory and practice

Simonovich-Efimova’s innovations in puppetry theory and practice were part of a much larger fascination across Europe and the United States with the puppet – especially the string marionette. Henryk Jurkowski pinpoints this early twentieth-century phenomenon as the moment when puppetry began to be acknowledged as a legitimate, independent theatrical form:

It was an unexpected stroke of fortune for puppetry that at the beginning of the twentieth century ... puppet theatre was included in the aesthetics debate, thus establishing its uniquely characteristic features, its essence and its specificity. It seemed that puppetry was at last to attain a stable position among all the subjects of aesthetics and was now to be recognised as a form of theatre with its own laws and functions.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous factors contributed to the Russian branch of this marionette madness, including the early twentieth-century proliferation of miniature theatres and cabarets and an increased nostalgia for folk and popular entertainments during the decline and eventual erasure of the Russian fairground (*balagan*).<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, the rise of the director and the explosion of interest in puppets occurred simultaneously. Several directors discussed in this book – Vsevolod Meyerhold, Natalia Sats, Alexander Tairov and others – were fascinated with puppets, drawing inspiration from theatrical theories – by Edward Gordon Craig, Valery Briusov, Feodor Sologub and others – that centred on the marionette metaphor; from the ‘marionette’ plays of Maurice Maeterlinck; and from the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann, who had proposed replacing live actors with puppets a century before in *Strange Sorrows of a Theatre Manager* (1818).<sup>10</sup> A recurrent theme in many such writings was that of the marionette as an ideal actor that yields to the puppeteer’s will. This idea became especially popular among directors who attempted to create a unified theatrical vision yet worked with actors whose training and artistic methods clashed with this unity. Craig, for instance, whose ‘The Actor and the Übermarionette’ was first translated into Russian in 1911, believed the marionette to be an ideal actor specifically because it lacks messy human individuality. By contrast, Meyerhold admired the puppet for its inherent theatricality: because puppet shows ‘inevitably fail to resemble exactly what the spectator sees in real life’, he wrote, they unlock possibilities for artists and audiences to imagine their own worlds.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the ubiquitous theoretical interest in puppets among Russian directors, artists and writers, surprisingly few used actual puppets. The native puppet traditions – *Petrushka* (fairground and street-corner glove-puppet shows) and *vertep* (itinerant folk nativity shows) – were by then in decline. There never had been widespread professional marionette or rod puppet traditions in Russia. Amateurs and children typically performed Russian shadow shows in parlour settings rather than in theatres, despite the avid Russian cross-cultural interest in French puppetry at cabarets like the Chat Noir.

Most artists and writers who did create puppet performances were women. Simonovich-Efimova was the first Russian visual artist to stage puppet shows before the Revolution, shortly after which she founded the Petrushka Theatre. Although Ivan Efimov helped to design the Petrushka Theatre’s puppets and performed in many shows, Simonovich-Efimova was its initiating director, artist, writer, performer, theorist and driving force. Yet she was far from the only woman to experiment with puppets. Visual artist Olga Glebova-Sudeikina created diminutive doll versions of notable Russian theatre personalities. Liubov Iakovleva-Shaporina founded a marionette theatre in Petrograd in 1918. Iulia Slonimskaia, in collaboration with avant-garde artists from the World of Art group, created an opulent marionette show, *The Forces of Love and Magic*, at the St. Petersburg cabaret The Players’ Rest in 1916 and published a seminal theoretical treatise on the marionette that same year.<sup>12</sup>

Within the larger wave of important women contributors to early twentieth-century art, literature and theatre, Simonovich-Efimova and other female innovators seem to have had fewer qualms than some male

counterparts about immersing themselves in historically marginalized art forms – theatre for young audiences and puppet theatre – that they believed provided opportunities to straddle popular and elite culture, theatre for children and for adults, fairground spectacle and fine art. In the age of the rise of the frequently male theatrical director, these women became directors, designers and performers in their own theatres – miniature versions of the artistic worlds pursued by directors who worked in larger, more established venues.

## Beginnings

Simonovich-Efimova's theatrical worldview was informed by several converging influences, the most important of which was her family background in art and education. She and her husband began as visual artists: Nina was a painter and Ivan a sculptor. Born into the vibrant culture of the Russian artistic intelligentsia, Simonovich-Efimova was surrounded by prominent artists from childhood. Her aunt Valentina Serova, composer Alexander Serov's wife, was Russia's first professional woman composer. Her older sister Maria Lvova, a sculptor, was also the subject of the famous *Girl in Sunlight* (1888), painted by their first cousin Valentin Serov, Simonovich-Efimova's artistic mentor and one of her teachers at the Moscow School for Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, from which she graduated in 1911.<sup>13</sup> She also studied in France at the studios of Eugène Carrière (1901–1902) and Henri Matisse (1909–1911).<sup>14</sup> This prolonged exposure to the work of major artists influenced her puppetry in two ways: she viewed the puppet as an ever-moving, ever-changing work of art, and she sought out audiences of fellow artists at her earliest public performances.

Simonovich-Efimova believed deeply that art should serve a beneficial social function, a world view inspired in part by the child-centred educational innovations of her mother, Adeleida Simonovich, founder of the first Russian preschool. It was for the students at her mother's village school that Simonovich-Efimova, in her early teens, first developed *Petrushka* sketches with *guignol* glove puppets her sister had brought from France. After graduating high school in 1896, she began experimenting more seriously with glove-puppet and shadow theatre.<sup>15</sup> Between 1904 and 1906, the year she married Ivan Efimov, she created domestic shadow shows for Serov's children.<sup>16</sup> In Paris (1909–1911), she presented shadow shows at evening gatherings and schools.<sup>17</sup> These domestic and school performances soon led to shows at cabarets and other public venues. In 1914, the Efimovs joined the Moscow Association of Artists, an exhibition society known for fostering 'diverse and controversial trends' in art.<sup>18</sup> Two years later, Simonovich-Efimova was invited to give a puppet show for the association. In this, her first major public performance, she presented *Petrushka* sketches, which were later to become a mainstay of her theatre.

## *Petrushka* and Petrushki

*Petrushka*, ‘the Russian *Punch and Judy* show’, was probably first brought to Russia by wandering Italian Pulcinella players in the early nineteenth century and adapted to a Russian context on Russian fairgrounds and street corners.<sup>19</sup> This glove-puppet tradition features the hook-nosed hero Petrushka alongside a series of other puppets, most of whom Petrushka kills with his slapstick in varied comical ways. As is the case in many world glove-puppet traditions, Petrushka’s shrill ‘otherworldly voice’ is produced with a swazzle (*pishchik*), a tiny wind instrument held in the puppeteer’s mouth.<sup>20</sup> Petrushka players typically performed in a portable booth theatre with curtains and a shallow playboard, a small shelf-like stage framed by the booth’s proscenium opening.

Simonovich-Efimova’s *Petrushka* played with elements of the popular tradition rather than duplicating them: her show opened with a swazzle (to focus the audience’s attention), after which characters instead spoke in rhymed verse; some scenes involve a slapstick (though now it is Petrushka who gets hit); and Petrushka himself is jubilantly mischievous (though no longer violent). Like many other artists of her day, Simonovich-Efimova was convinced that the street and fairground *Petrushka* was stage-worthy but crude, ‘a hooligan entertaining hooligan friends’ – that *Petrushka* needed ‘the artist’ to reach its potential.<sup>21</sup> She was not squeamish about violence per se, but she did believe that post-revolutionary child audiences had already been inundated with too much of it from living through prolonged war and famine – and that a more childlike Petrushka could restore the youth and wonder of even the roughest street children.<sup>22</sup>

Simonovich-Efimova therefore altered the story line significantly; *Petrushka Gets Sick*, first published in 1925, features three characters: Petrushka, an Old Lady and a Nurse-Practitioner (based on the Doctor from the popular tradition). The action consists of Petrushka being bitten by fleas, complaining to the Old Lady and shunning the Nurse’s disturbing ‘cures’. He is the only character to get beaten: the Nurse hits him to find out where it hurts. There is more threat of violence than actual violence: the Nurse’s entrance with a wad of cotton on a stick (reminiscent of a slapstick) sends Petrushka under the bed in terror at the prospect of getting a vaccination. When the Nurse proposes to saw off Petrushka’s leg, Petrushka immediately plays dead. The moment the Nurse leaves, he jubilantly returns to life.

As a director in the *Petrushka* tradition, Simonovich-Efimova mined Petrushka’s range of physical gestures, many of which she describes in the published play’s stage directions. In fact, her script contains nearly as many stage directions as spoken words. Her physically precise information for aspiring puppeteers is reflected in the detail in which she describes the mise-en-scène, both of the puppet and of the puppeteer’s hand in the puppet.

## SIMONOVICH-EFIMOVA IN PRACTICE

## Puppet Mise-En-Scène

The following is an extended excerpt from Simonovich-Efimova's *Petrushka Gets Sick*.<sup>23</sup> Note the technical descriptions of physical action. How do stage directions also function as instructions for puppeteers?

**Nurse-Practitioner:** Where's the patient? Where's the poor thing?

Oh my! He's all skin and bones.

*(Walks up to Petrushka and touches him.)*

He's in such a fever sweat his shirt's soaked through.

*(Puts hands together, walks away, and then comes back to him.)*

Tell me where it hurts.

**Petrushka:** *(He sits up suddenly, his back to her.)*

Forgive me if I sound uncouth.

It's my belly –

**Nurse-Practitioner:** I was told your tooth!

Does it hurt here?

*(She hits him on the head.)*

**Petrushka:** A little higher, lower, to the right, to the left.

*(Gesture with the centre finger up and down, and with the thumb to the left and right.)*

**Nurse-Practitioner:** I need to listen to your chest.

Lie on your left shoulder.

*(Petrushka lies down.)*

Take a deep breath.

*(Taps and listens, three or four times; to do this, the performer very quickly taps Petrushka with the middle finger, and quickly places her head on him, first one ear, then the other.)*

Stick out your tongue ...

**Petrushka:** *(Turns around on the bed, his back toward the audience. The nurse leans over him, facing him, and looks into his mouth.)* Ahhhhhh.

**Nurse-Practitioner:** Your tongue is covered in white bumps.

Your kidneys are starting to grow lumps.

If you want to grow old and wise,

I must have you immunized.

I have the contraption in my pack.  
 Stay put and I'll be right back.  
*(Exits, nodding her head, and returns with a large cotton wad on a stick. Petrushka squeals and hides under the bed.)*

As the scene continues, note, too, the frequent, playful use of rhyme. How is repetition used for comic effect? How do sound and rhyme establish a musical rhythm for the scene?

**Nurse-Practitioner:** *(Looks under the bed.)* Come out, Petrushka,  
 don't take cover.

I'll swab your arm one way or other.

**Petrushka:** *(Continues squealing.)*

**Nurse-Practitioner:** Come on, Petrushka, I don't bite.  
 Hey kids, this won't hurt him, right?

**Kids:** *(They yell back.)* No! No!

**Nurse-Practitioner:** There, you see.

**Petrushka:** *(Rolls over under the bed, so that now he is looking up at her.)*

If you want me to get better,  
 Then my leg off you must sever,  
 Then I'll have no need of socks,  
 The single-legged still take walks.  
 The leg is now the latest fad,  
 And costs a pittance – not so bad!

**Nurse-Practitioner:** I have the contraption in my pack.  
 Stay put and I'll be right back.  
*(She exits.)*

**Petrushka:** *(Claps his hands.)* Oh what a treat, oh what a treat.  
 On trams I'll always have a seat. *(Sits on the bed.)*  
 I'll scratch my leg one last time.  
 Goodbye my le-e-e-g.  
*(Hugs his leg and rocks back and forth on the bed with it.)*

*Nurse-Practitioner enters with a saw.*

**Petrushka:** *(Darting about the stage.)* Kids, yell to her with all  
 your might: Petrushka died under the bed tonight.  
*(Climbs under the bed, droops over the playboard, head  
 down, his squeals gradually growing softer. The puppeteer  
 removes her three fingers from his head and hands.)*

**Nurse-Practitioner:** He's dead? Really?

*(Drags him out from under the bed by the leg and puts him on the floor to her left, where he droops over again. Raps him on the head three times with the tin saw.)*

He's truly dead. Now what a shame.

I'll have to fetch his poor old dame.

*(She exits.)*

**Petrushka:** *(Immediately sits up on the edge of the playboard.)*

Here I am, back from the dead.

I avoided something really bad.

*(Sings, clapping his hands.)*

Tram, tram tasty,

I ate a pastry.

Tram tram tream,

Filled with cream.

*The music picks up his tune in rhythm. Petrushka exits, closes the curtains, reappears, and bows to the applause.*

While Simonovich-Efimova experimented with a wide variety of puppets in later years, the *Petrushka* tradition remained central to her practice. For her, the popular tradition and the puppet type were so inseparable that she termed all glove puppets 'petrushki'.

## Moving sculpture in a mobile theatre

The positive audience response to Simonovich-Efimova's performance at the Moscow Association of Artists encouraged her to continue developing new work. In 1917, she created new puppets and shows – dramatized fables by Ivan Krylov and *Petrushka* plays – for the Café Pittoresque, a luxurious cabaret decorated by avant-garde artists.<sup>24</sup> As Nekrylova notes, the Krylov fables were 'a purely Efimov find, one that in many ways determined the direction of the theatre and its creative character'.<sup>25</sup> These well-known Russian fables inspired the Efimovs to experiment with combined glove-and-rod puppets in what also became first Russian puppet plays to exclusively feature animal characters.<sup>26</sup>

Simonovich-Efimova gave a wide range of additional performances between 1916 and 1918 at literary cafes and cabarets, including a 1916 shadow show at the Moscow cabaret The Bat and an invited performance in Konstantin Stanislavsky's home. She made the decision to embrace puppetry as a lifelong career, however, in 1918. In the wake of the October Revolution, she found it 'psychologically impossible' to

continue easel painting because she felt urgently that art must now serve a social purpose.<sup>27</sup> The Efimovs's response to the Revolution was to use puppetry to bring joy to audiences of peasants, children, workers and artists and to use puppetry as spiritual sustenance during the lean, cold Civil War years.

In 1918, the Petrushka Theatre became itinerant: after building a portable show booth that summer, the Efimovs gave over seventy shows in Moscow and the surrounding area (Figure 3.2). Thus it was that Simonovich-Efimova's understanding of the puppet as a mobile sculpture brought to life through movement translated to mobile art as a way of life. As Nekrylova explains, these itinerant performances

gave them the opportunity to serve a greater number of people, to penetrate remote, god-forsaken places, to perform before any kind of audience, and most importantly, to perform where the theatre itself, especially puppet theatre, did not go, and often could not go. Mass appeal and accessibility were achieved in actual fact.<sup>28</sup>

The Efimovs performed throughout the Moscow Province and up and down the Volga and Kama Rivers at rural 'schools, in hospitals, in train stations, in workers' clubs, in factories, on playgrounds, and on piers', charging a potato or a bowl of porridge for admission during the worst of the famine years.<sup>29</sup> Simonovich-Efimova later wrote, 'Theatre was just what people in the stormy Revolutionary period very much needed, what they watched with great, greedy eyes. Theatre then was like bread.'<sup>30</sup>

In fall 1918, the Efimovs were invited by the Moscow branch of TEO, the Theatre Department of Narkompros, to participate in the first professional Soviet theatre-studio for young audiences.<sup>31</sup> They became resident performers at the Theatre of the Moscow Soviet of Workers, Soldier, and Peasant Deputies at 10 Mamonovsky Alley, a puppet theatre-studio under the leadership of Natalia Sats.<sup>32</sup> Here the Efimovs presented glove-puppet and shadow shows in one theatre (Figure 3.3), while a second stage featured marionette plays by various performers. The Efimovs's shadow pieces were based on Russian fairy tales and poems.<sup>33</sup> Simonovich-Efimova adored the aesthetic possibilities of shadow play and felt that shadow theatre is 'more an artist's theatre than an actor's theatre'.<sup>34</sup> The Efimovs first performed at Mamonovsky Alley in October 1918 and gave roughly twenty shows a month for the eight months following.<sup>35</sup> Due to a prolonged firewood shortage, the theatre was entirely unheated.

After eight months, the Mamonovsky Alley Theatre closed, and the Petrushka Theatre permanently became 'a theatre on foot': between 1918 and 1924 alone, the Efimovs played nearly 600 shows in Moscow and surrounding areas.<sup>36</sup> They developed most of their new work between 1916 and the mid-1930s, after which they created few new shows, probably because their unorthodox performance style 'remained outside the stream



FIGURE 3.2 *The Efimovs' travelling show booth (n.d.). From right to left: Ivan Efimov, Adrian Efimov, Nina Simonovich-Efimova and an unidentified fourth puppeteer. Photo courtesy of the Museum Archive of the Obraztsov State Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow.*



FIGURE 3.3 *Nina Simonovich-Efimova, shadow scene from The Stolen Sun (n.d.). Photo courtesy of the Museum Archive of the Obraztsov State Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow.*

of [the] formation and development' of Socialist Realism, the only legal style for two decades beginning in 1934.<sup>37</sup>

## Theory and practice of a director-puppeteer

Looking back in 1940 on her early performances, Simonovich-Efimova wrote with satisfaction: '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.'<sup>38</sup> Her lifelong goal was simple: to further the art of puppetry however she could. This included expanding the physical vocabulary of puppets, how they were built, for whom they were performed and by whom they were created. She cultivated this expansion by developing practical written resources for aspiring puppeteers.

The earliest formulation of Simonovich-Efimova's theatrical theory was her 1919 article 'About Petrushka' (*O Petrushke*).<sup>39</sup> She also published books and pamphlets on glove, rod and shadow puppets. Her most famous work is *Notes of a Petrushka Player* (hereafter *Notes*), which chronicles her early performances, publishes several plays and drawings, and gives performance, design, and construction advice. Everything Simonovich-Efimova discusses in this book is connected in some way to the greater 'mission of our theatre':

To show how expressive and subtle Petrushka gestures are, how incredibly many of them there are, how nuanced they are ... Our theatre's concern is *not novelty of plot, not novelty of word or of stageworthiness, but a new concept of Petrushka gesture*.<sup>40</sup>

She maintained that a fuller exploration of the expansive range of puppet movement, design and repertoire was key to puppetry being recognized as a valid, unique discipline.

In *Notes*, Simonovich-Efimova challenges several assumptions of the larger theoretical conversation about the marionette. In particular, she defies the common assumption that the puppet is an automaton, a lifeless being or a submissive, obedient actor. By viewing the puppet as a dead object devoid of spontaneity, Simonovich-Efimova contended, many theatre theorists of her day had limited its potential. The assumption of life, she maintained, provides more expansive possibilities in terms of movement, innovation and repertoire. In her words, 'a puppet show begins when the audience believes in the puppet as a living being'.<sup>41</sup>

For Simonovich-Efimova, the physical contact between the puppeteer's body and the puppet is the primary source of the puppet's life. Like George Sand, with whom she felt a particular artistic kinship, Simonovich-Efimova

## SIMONOVICH-EFIMOVA IN PRACTICE

### Life

The puppet comes to life for the audience when it is also alive for the puppeteer. Both puppet design and movement are developed in response to the puppet's materials and latent potential for life, its plasticity. The following exercise, inspired by Simonovich-Efimova's *Petrushka Gets Sick*, is an introduction to exploring the life of objects.

- Look carefully at a glove puppet. Experience its colour, its texture, its plasticity. With the puppet on your hand, move it, exploring its range of motion. How does it *want* to move?
- Bring it to life. How does it discover the world, itself, the audience, you?
- Take away that life. Emphasize its lifelessness, its reversion to objectness.
- Bring it to life again. How is its life different the second time?

maintained that glove puppets, which are intimately connected to the puppeteer's hand, are superior to string marionettes, which are operated from a distance.<sup>42</sup> She argues that

Marionettes are a mechanism, a system of strings, levers, and hooks. They are forced, melancholic. (I am placing the marionette in the worst light in order to contrast her with petrushki.) If she offers a bouquet, 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.<sup>43</sup>

Simonovich-Efimova believed that the hand (soul) of the puppeteer fills the puppet with life as it fills the puppet itself. By extension, the director-artist-puppeteer should be involved in every phase of puppet theatre creation so that the performance itself can be similarly alive: even the playwright should wear a puppet, 'scrutinize [it] like a living being' and respond to it while composing.<sup>44</sup>

Simonovich-Efimova advocates for the value of glove-puppet theatre by contrasting puppeteers with live actors. Many theorists of her day did not consider the puppeteer when writing about the puppet. Simonovich-Efimova instead focuses on the puppeteer's requisite virtuosity and versatility:

The face is replaced in the Petrushka theatre by the performer's hands, 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.<sup>45</sup>

Simonovich-Efimova's likening of the puppeteer to a pianist is not accidental. For her, it was an ethical imperative to pursue a similar level of artistic excellence in the puppet theatre. Her own preparation for the necessary physical and vocal dexterity included immersion in the visual and musical arts and physical training in Lesgaff exercises, 'very complicated combinations of gestures that are implemented from vocal commands rather than from physical demonstration'.<sup>46</sup> She reflects on the value of this early experience:

I put it to the test now when I perform with and speak for two figures worn on my right and left hands. They react differently to what happens and speak with different voices; it is difficult to believe that their nervous systems come from a single mind. But, after all, a musician also plays different parts with two hands and is concerned with many things at once.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to Lesgaff exercises, she suggests Dalcroze eurhythmics, playing musical instruments, singing and music theory, and juggling as techniques for developing dexterity, precision and the simultaneous performance of independent gestures.

## SIMONOVICH-EFIMOVA IN PRACTICE

### Technique

The following advice for basic puppetry technique is excerpted from Simonovich-Efimova's *Notes of a Petrushka Player*.<sup>48</sup> Each suggestion can be experimented with individually in the cumulative development of an overall practice.

*Fundamental requirements:* in the Petrushka [hand puppet] theatre, movements should be very precise, unhurried, and distinct, but all gestures should flow one out of the other.

Do not make superfluous movements that lack meaning; *do not flap the puppet* (beginners love to do this).

In dialogue, the figure who is speaking at a given moment is the one who moves; the one who is silent holds some pose or other. [...]

There should not be a single empty or even remotely uninteresting moment in the play.

Rule #1: *Puppets must be kept vertical.*

Rule #2: *They must be held up at full height.*

Rule #3: *Perform on the downstage plane.*

Seek out gestures and rehearse roles in front of a mirror. [...]

Practical *backstage advice*: always put each puppet in the same spot and place light against dark, dark against light. Then you won't waste even an instant when changing the puppet on your hand – this is essential.

Every puppet is made for a specific hand, *right* or *left*, and it should always be played on that hand. This must be strictly remembered and adhered to.

You yourself should speak for the puppets with which you perform, as do all folk Petrushka players.

It is essential that you train yourself to speak and move simultaneously. [...]

Know your part better than by heart: no name yet exists for the extent of this kind of knowing. You should speak lightly, not only not thinking about what you say, but thinking – attentively thinking – about something entirely different – about how your right wrist is moving just then and what the pinky finger on your left hand is doing. This is how well you need to know it. Then the puppets come to life and become capable of improvisation.

When a virtuoso plays the violin, the instrument takes on a life and a voice. The same thing happens with puppets. They begin to live independently.

For Simonovich-Efimova, rehearsal, especially in its early stages, is a process of playing with puppets to discover the gestures they want to perform:

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' (according to the audience), they get frightened; they convey clearly the nature of their good feelings, they tenderly caress, amicably greet one another, heatedly or fervently take offence, become angry, trembling with their whole body or head; they applaud and dance.<sup>49</sup>

When developing shows, Simonovich-Efimova choreographed every movement, often in front of a mirror.<sup>50</sup> Her plays featured compact, expressive action organically derived from the physical capabilities of the puppet.

## SIMONOVICH-EFIMOVA IN PRACTICE

### Gesture

Inspired by Simonovich-Efimova's 'About Petrushka', the following are prompts for discovering and refining puppet gestures.

- Work in front of a mirror to investigate the full range of a puppet's movement. Use the mirror as a tool for focusing on the puppet from the perspective of an audience member. Pay particular attention to the puppet's materials and design.
- Repeat gestures that work well, exploring variations and nuances as you do.
- Perform multiple gestures in sequence, developing them so that a new gesture grows out of the previous one. Eliminate fussy gestures that lack precise meaning.
- Practise gestures and sequences many times until they can be reproduced instinctively, training as would an athlete, musician or dancer.

Simonovich-Efimova's attentive responsiveness to puppet materials and movement inspired her numerous innovations in puppet design. She experimented tirelessly with expressive costuming and unusual modes of manipulation. She and her husband developed shadow theatre as an art form in Soviet Russia. They designed puppets that could be worn on the head so that more than two characters could appear at once with one puppeteer manipulating them. 'Big Petrushka', introduced at the start of this chapter, was the first of several life-sized puppets in the Petrushka Theatre; their 1934 *Thirteen Writers*, for instance, featured life-sized puppets of famous writers seated around a table. And they actively developed puppetry as a serious form for adult audiences; most notable are their collaborations with the Moscow Satire Theatre (1927, 1933) and their adaptations of *The Enchanted Pear Tree* (from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, 1921) and *Macbeth* (1931).<sup>51</sup>

*Macbeth* featured numerous design innovations, including a new rod puppet design (patented by Simonovich-Efimova in 1926): the puppeteer's hand was inserted into the body like a glove puppet, but the arms and hands were manipulated on rods attached at the elbow for expressiveness of arm gesture. *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* also had 'double profiles': different profiles on the right and left sides of the face so that when the heads were pivoted, they changed expression.<sup>52</sup> The train of *Lady Macbeth*'s dress was attached to Simonovich-Efimova's head so that the fabric itself could express emotion as it danced, was flung in anger or coiled around her like a snake.<sup>53</sup>



FIGURE 3.4 *Nina Simonovich-Efimova, the witches of Macbeth (1931). Photo courtesy of the Museum Archive of the Obraztsov State Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow.*

The three witches became a single puppet (Figure 3.4): ‘a flat outline of three figures made of thick wire, lightly draped with pieces of grey tulle and soft grey silk. When the witches swarm and twirl, a piece of bright blue tulle twists on the folds of the stuff, like a flame amidst[t] the grey shreds of a mist.’ When they fly upwards to taunt Macbeth, ‘their gigantic transparent shadows on the ceiling and walls of the theatre hall seem to stress their ghost-like nature’.<sup>54</sup>

## The legacy of a Petrushka theatre

Over the course of her long career, Simonovich-Efimova reinvented Russian and Soviet puppet theatre by expanding what puppetry can do and be as a performance form. She created an immediate theatre based in popular and folk forms, a theatrical theatre that allows movement to determine action and a responsive theatre in which the director-artist simultaneously controls and is guided by the material world. Her productions sparked a thriving puppet tradition, and her pioneering role in the first Soviet children’s puppet theatre provided a base for the later proliferation of Soviet puppet theatres for young audiences.

Simonovich-Efimova’s greatest contribution to theatre, though, was her insistence that the puppet’s life is a quintessential element of its nature. The miracle of the puppet is that it comes to life anew each time an artist brings

it into play. This seems to be a truth that most puppeteers have discovered in their own experiments. But what was quietly radical about Simonovich-Efimova doing so was that it was in such unassuming, yet stubbornly defiant, opposition to the larger conversation in Russia about the marionette and its seeming nature. Her revolutionary insight, that sculpture, motion and belief together equal life, made later, bolder stylistic experiments more possible: once artists assumed the puppet was alive, many felt freer to play with its boundaries in innovative, fantastical ways.

Simonovich-Efimova directly and indirectly laid a theoretical foundation for the concurrent Soviet puppetry of the 1920s and 1930s: Alexandra Exter created cubist marionettes that revelled in their status as visual metaphors<sup>55</sup>; Vladimir Sokolov, who directed the puppet studio at the Kamerny Theatre, used puppets as distillations of images or thoughts, like abstract paintings in motion<sup>56</sup>; and Sergei Obraztsov, one of the Efimovs's early students, redefined puppetry, even using his own bare hands as puppets.<sup>57</sup> Through Simonovich-Efimova's written work and teaching, she directed the future direction of puppetry; her book, plays and articles were published and read in Russia and well beyond. The American interest in her work is documented on the pages of *Puppetry Yearbook* (ed. Paul McPharlin, founder of Puppeteers of America), a major turn-to source for mid-century US puppeteers. Probably the most famous recent example of the ongoing influence of Efimova's thinking is captured in the name of South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company, inspired in part (via Sergei Obraztsov) by Simonovich-Efimova's belief that 'the soul of the puppet lies in the palm of the hand'.<sup>58</sup>

In Simonovich-Efimova's theatre, the invisible soul is made tangible through responsive physical contact with a puppet in motion. In her dances with 'petrushki', she sought not to create the illusion of life but to expand where life can be found. Her theatrical practice similarly invites a rethinking of the common understanding of where the director can be found. There are many reasons why many of the artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century are attributed to male directors; I'll briefly note two that are germane here. One is insufficient recognition of the important artistic contribution of sustained creative collaborators, the mutually generative artistic partnership of Alexander Tairov and Kamerny Theatre lead actress Alisa Koonen being an example in the context of this book. Another is a too-narrow understanding of what a director can be. Simonovich-Efimova's work prompts an expanded definition of directing in which the director-artist-performer-writer is both inside and outside the production, in which an individual does not *lead* but can *be* all of the artists in a unified production, and in which the artist is perpetually present in the here and now of interactive theatrical space, time, material and audience. Her theatrical worldview also allows for a more nuanced perspective on the practice of directors like Meyerhold, who was often accused of viewing actors as puppets. To heed the puppet, after all, is to open a window into the creative possibilities of the material world.

## Chapter 3

This chapter is adapted and expanded from Dassia N. Posner, ‘Sculpture in Motion: Nina Simonovich-Efimova and the Petrushka Theatre’, in *Women in the Arts in the Belle Epoque: Essays on Influential Artists, Writers and Performers* ©, ed. Paul Fryer (by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc, 2012), Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640. www.mcfarlandpub.com. Some sections also build upon Dassia N. Posner, ‘Life-Death and Disobedient Obedience: Russian Modernist Redefinitions of the Puppet,’ in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, eds. Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London: Routledge, 2014). Translations from Russian are my own unless reproduced from an English-language source.

- 1 Nina Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika i stat'i o teatre kukol*, ed. N. Zhizhina (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1980), 144. Reprinted from Nina Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1925).
- 2 Simonovich-Efimova is commonly abbreviated to Efimova in English translations of her work.
- 3 Adrian Efimov, ‘Dvizhushchaisia skul'ptura’, in *Chto zhe takoe teatr kukol?* ed. N. V. Filina (Moscow: STD, 1990), 80.
- 4 Nina Simonovich-Efimova. ‘Kukol'nyi teatr khudozhnikov’ Typescript, 1940, 1. Efimov collection, GATsTK (Obraztsov State Central Academic Puppet Theatre Museum Archive), Moscow.
- 5 Adrian Efimov, ‘*Macbeth* at the Puppet Theatre of Nina and Ivan Jefimov’. Typescript in English (Moscow: June 1964), 1. Efimov collection, GATsTK, Moscow.
- 6 Miuda Yablonskaya, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900–1935*, ed. and trans. Anthony Parton (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990), 201.
- 7 Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika*, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1925). Simonovich-Efimova's book was reissued with additional materials in 1980 as *Zapiski petrushechnika i stat'i o teatre kukol*, ed. N. Zhizhina; intro. Anna Nekrylova; foreword by Natalia Sats (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1980). All citations are from the 1980 edition. The English version – Nina Efimova, *Adventures of a Russian Puppet Theatre*, trans. Elena Mitcoff (Birmingham, MI: Puppetry Imprints, 1935) – is an adaptation rather than a translation. Although it significantly influenced US puppetry, the English edition does not capture the full depth of Efimova's thinking.
- 8 Henryk Jurkowski, *A History of European Puppetry*. Vol. 2, *The Twentieth Century*, ed. in collaboration with Penny Francis (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 1–2.
- 9 A *balagan* is a temporary wooden booth theatre that was constructed at Russian fairgrounds during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially during the Shrovetide and Easter week festivals. Theatrical performances in these booth theatres were one of the fairground's main attractions; ‘to frequent the *balagans*’ became a colloquial term for going to the fairground

itself. These theatres ranged in size: some housed spectacular pantomimes and large audiences, while others were small puppet booths containing a single puppeteer. The title of Alexander Blok's play *Balaganchik*, famously directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1906, refers to a little *balagan*, a puppet show booth.

- 10 See Dassia N. Posner, *The Director's Prism: E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Russian Theatrical Avant-Garde* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).
- 11 Vsevolod Meyerhold, 'The Fairground Booth', in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. Edward Braun (New York: Hill & Wang, 1969), 129.
- 12 Iulia Slonimskaia, 'Marionetka', *Apollon* 3 (March 1916): 1–42.
- 13 Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 202.
- 14 Nekrylova, Introduction to *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 8.
- 15 Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 202.
- 16 Nekrylova, Introduction to *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 27.
- 17 Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 203.
- 18 John E. Bowlit, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the 'World of Art' Group* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1982), 87.
- 19 See Catriona Kelly's detailed discussion of the popular Petrushka tradition in *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 20 Alexander Gref and Elena Slonimskaia, 'Petrushka's Voice', in *Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, 73.
- 21 Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 119.
- 22 Simonovich-Efimova, 'Kukol'nyi teatr', 3.
- 23 Revised from Nina Simonovich-Efimova, 'Petrushka Gets Sick', trans. Dassia N. Posner, *Puppetry International* 16 (Fall 2004): 29–31.
- 24 John E. Bowlit, 'Cabaret in Russia', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 451–452.
- 25 Nekrylova, Introduction to *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 7.
- 26 Bartram, 'Kukol'nyi teatr', in *Izbrannye stat'i. Vospominaniia o khudozhnike* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1979), 24.
- 27 Nataliia Sats, Forward to *Zapiski Petrushechnika*, 33.
- 28 Nekrylova, Introduction to *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 9.
- 29 Simonovich-Efimova, 'Kukol'nyi teatr', 3.
- 30 Nina Simonovich-Efimova, *Katalog vystavki. Zhihopis'. Grafika. Teatr. Keramika* (Moscow: Sov. Khudozhnik, 1968), 16.
- 31 N. I. Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol, 1918–1932* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1963), 120.
- 32 Alternate names for this theatre include the Puppet Studio on Mamonovsky Alley and the Sats Children's Theatre of the Moscow Soviet. 10 Mamonovsky Alley has since hosted various children's theatres, including the Theatre for Young Spectators (*Teatr unykh zritelei*). Manon van de Water, *Moscow*

- Theatres for Young People: A Cultural History of Ideological Coercion and Artistic Innovation, 1917–2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 246.
- 33 Bartram, 'Kukol'nyi teatr', 26.
- 34 Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 214.
- 35 Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol*, 121.
- 36 Nekrylova, Introduction to *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 9. Smirnova notes that the 'Puppet Studio' on Mamonovsky Alley reopened sporadically in 1919 and 1920 but without the Efimovs. Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol*, 122. After the puppet division was transferred to the Kamerny Theatre in 1920, the First State Theatre for Children opened at Mamonovsky Alley. v [redacted] Water, *Moscow Theatres for Young People*, 45 and N. Kostrova, 'Perv [redacted] yetskie kukol'niki', in *Chto zhe takoe teatr kukol?* ed. N. V. Filina (Moscow: STD, 1990), 90–91.
- 37 Miuda N. Yablonskaya, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900–1935*, ed. and trans. Anthony Parton (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990), 206. The Efimovs created forty-two new shows between 1916 and 1936 but only three between 1936 and 1948, the year Simonovich-Efimova died. See 'Repertuar khudozhnikov N. Ia. Simonovich-Efimovoi i I. S. Efimova v kukol'nom i tenevom teatrah'. Typescript with handwritten additions, n.d., 2 pp. Efimov collection, GATsTK, Moscow.
- 38 Simonovich-Efimova, 'Kukol'nyi teatr', 3.
- 39 Nina Simonovich-Efimova, 'O Petrushke', *Vestnik teatra* 34 (23–28 September 1919): 6–8.
- 40 Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 43–44.
- 41 Efimov, 'Dvizhushchaisia skul'ptura', 80.
- 42 George and her son Maurice Sand began their puppetry experiments in a domestic setting and were among the first in France to establish an artistic puppet theatre. Although Simonovich-Efimova never experimented with the commedia dell'arte themes that captivated the Sands, both idealized glove puppets and experimented with rod puppets. See George Sand, *The Snow Man*, trans. Virginia Vaughan (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1871), 161–162.
- 43 Simonovich-Efimova contrasts gendered pronouns in Russian. Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 49–50.
- 44 Simonovich-Efimova, 'O Petrushke', 8.
- 45 Simonovich-Efimova, *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 43.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 132.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*, 133.
- 49 Simonovich-Efimova, 'O Petrushke', 7.
- 50 Nekrylova, Introduction to *Zapiski petrushechnika*, 7.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 52 Efimov, 'Macbeth', 5.
- 53 *Ibid.*

- 54 Ibid., 9–10.
- 55 Rebecca Cunningham, ‘The Russian Women Artist Designers of the Avant-Garde’, *TD&T* 34, no. 2 (1998): 38–52.
- 56 Jurkowski, *A History of European Puppetry*, 32; Kostrova, ‘Pervye sovetskie kukol’niki’, 90–91.
- 57 Nina Simonovich-Efimova, ‘Ocherki zhizni i tvorchestva I. S. Efimova’, in *Ob iskusstve i khudozhnikakh*, eds. A. B. Matveeva and Adrian Efimov (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), 35.
- 58 Jane Taylor (ed.), *Handspring Puppet Company* (Parkwood, South Africa: David Krut, 2009), 168.

## Chapter 4

- 1 Y. Vakhtangov, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, ed. A. Malaev-Babel (London and New York: Routledge, 2011a), 128.
- 2 K. Stanislavsky, ‘Nadpis’ na portrete’ (*Inscription on a Portrait*), in *Yevgeny Vakhtangov*, eds. Vendrovskaya and Kaptereva (Moscow: VTO, 1984), 429.
- 3 G. Tovstonogov, *Zerkalo stseny (Mirror of the Stage)*, vol. 1 (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1984), 183.
- 4 Vakhtangov’s own Studio changed names several times before it became the State Academic Vakhtangov Theatre in 1926. To avoid confusion, we will refer to it as the Vakhtangov Studio in this chapter.
- 5 Vakhtangov’s *Princess Turandot* had several subsequent revivals; the accurate count of its performances has now been lost.
- 6 Vakhtangov, quoted in N. Gorchakov, *Rezhissyorskiye uroki Vakhtangova (Vakhtangov’s Directorial Lessons)* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1957), 43.
- 7 See Y. Smirnov-Nesvitsky, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1987), 179–180; N. Smirnova, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov* (Moscow: Znaniye, 1982), 10.
- 8 N. Volkov, *Vakhtangov* (Moscow: Korabl’, 1922), 20.
- 9 V. Ivanov, *Russkiye Sezony Teatra Gabima (The Russian Seasons of the Habima Theatre)* (Moscow: Artist. Rezhissyor. Teatr, 1999), 96; V. Ivanov, ‘Ot sostavitelya’ (*From the Editor*), in *Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Dokumenty i svidetel’sstva (Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Documents and Evidence)*, ed. Vl. Ivanov, vol. 1 (Moscow: INDRIK, 2011), 14.
- 10 P. Markov, ‘Printsessha Turandot i sovremennyyi teatr’ (*Princess Turandot and the Contemporary Theater*), in *Printsessha Turandot (Princess Turandot)* (Moscow-Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1923), 49–50.
- 11 In 1919, for example, twelve of Vakhtangov’s most talented students, including Yury Zavatsky, separated from his Studio, leaving Vakhtangov devastated. Some of them, Zavatsky included, later returned to Vakhtangov.
- 12 Vakhtangov, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, 131.
- 13 Ibid., 111.