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Petrushka's Voice

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Our theatre, The Vagrant Booth,[1] has been studying traditional Russian puppet theatre for over 20 years. We focus on exploring traditional culture as it relates to today. We do not seek simply to insert traditional elements into contemporary theatre but rather to determine how traditional theatre can fully exist in the context of today's world. From this perspective, the Petrushka theatre is an ideal model for us. Our more than a decade of experience performing Petrushka shows before a variety of audiences – at universities, before children, in political clubs, before crowds on the streets of Moscow, London, Boston, etc. – has convinced us that the ancient Petrushka theatre is modern, relevant, and vibrant for contemporary audiences.

This chapter describes our role and philosophy in continuing the tradition of using a *pishchik* (swazzle), or voice modifier, in traditional glove-puppet theatre. We examine the role of the voice modifier in creating performance structure, as well as in composing performance rhythm and defining the nature of the central character. Finally, we suggest that the voice modifier is a "proto-instrument" that has been preserved in the theatre since human culture existed in a syncretic state.

The swazzle in Petrushka theatre

The voice of Petrushka is one of the most interesting and ancient tools of this theatre. Petrushka's laughter is absolutely memorable and distinctive enough to be heard above the polyphonic noise of the street. It is produced with a special tool – the voice modifier. Voice modifiers are rarely used in the puppet theatre today. This is probably due not only to the level of skill required to use them but also to an insufficient understanding of their role in performance. In our opinion, there is a sphere in which neglecting to use the traditional technique of modifying a puppet's voice distorts not only the form but also the meaning of the performance. Without using a swazzle, the main character of the traditional puppet theatre loses his connection with his archetype and with the entire history of the puppet theatre and becomes a simple character for children's shows.

There are two basic types of voice modifiers in world puppet theatre: mirlitones and reed aerophones (wind instruments). Mirlitones modify and intensify a sound produced by the artist's voice by means of a vibrating stretched membrane (Likhach 2001: 161). "Comb singing" is a well-known example of a simple mirlitone, as are the

Figure 6.1 Petrushka, The Vagrant Booth Theatre. Photo courtesy of the authors

kazoo and the zobo.[2] Such mirlitones are used in the Turkish Karagöz theatre, in African puppet theatre (Darkowska-Nidzgorski and Nidzgorski 1998: 109), in Southeast Asia, and in the Tamil shadow theatre in India (Proschan 1981: 528).

In the Petrushka theatre and in Punch and Judy shows, reed aerophones are more widespread. Reed aerophones produce a sound by making a body of air vibrate as it passes through the reed (Keldysh 1990: 47). *Pischiks* or *govoroks* – the types of swazzles used in the Russian Petrushka theatre – have a reed that is made in the form of thin membrane (usually cotton twill) stretched in the gap between two curved plates.[3] The principle is similar to that of blowing on a blade of grass stretched between the thumbs. However, the swazzle is placed in the mouth between the soft and hard palate so that it produces a rasping sound; at the same time, it allows the artist to articulate and to speak reasonably clearly while the actual vocal cords don't produce any sound. It also leaves the artist's hands free to manipulate the puppets. A well-trained artist can remove the swazzle and put it back into position with the tongue extremely quickly, alternating between the swazzled sound and the "normal" human voice, thus carrying on a dialogue between the characters at a rapid pace. The main distinctive feature of the swazzle is that sound vibrations are produced by the reed membrane, while the artist's vocal cords are not used; therefore, the vocalized sound becomes distorted and "artificial."

Speech, music, and rhythm

The voice modifier is not an especially suitable contrivance for delivering monologues; furthermore, it is not always possible to articulate all sounds distinctly while using a swazzle.[4] The distinctness of the speech produced with it depends on the

construction of the swazzle, on the material from which it is made, on the tension of the membrane, and, of course, on the artist's individual skill. For this reason, questions about how to use this instrument, and, more importantly, why it is useful for the puppet theatre remain of primary importance.

It is common practice for hand-puppet theatres to include in their shows a character, sometimes called a bottler or musician, who serves as an interpreter or narrator and explains and comments on everything that happens on the stage. This narrator, who stands outside the booth both in the Petrushka theatre and in Iranian theatre (Solomonik 1990: 116, 126), but is hidden from view in Chinese hand-puppet theatre (Obraztsov 1957: 254–257), comments on the puppets' actions and explains words that are difficult to understand. The primary way in which the narrator interprets the puppet's speech is by repeating a puppet's phrases in interrogative form.[5] The following example is a dialogue from a puppet play from our theatre:

PETRUSHKA: How much?
MUSICIAN: How much does the horse cost?
GYPSY: One million!
MUSICIAN: One million?!
PETRUSHKA: You're nuts![6]

The role of the narrator in this scene is not only to comment on the puppet's actions and to explain otherwise hard-to-distinguish phrases distorted by the swizzle; the narrator also organizes the performance and provides a link between the puppets and the audience. As O. Darkowska-Nidzgorski writes: "The modification of the voice often makes speech difficult to understand; thus the presence of a narrator is essential" (Darkowska-Nidzgorski and Nidzgorski 1998:112). She goes on to quote Nigerian puppeteer Moussa Mamane, who observes:

> The function of this kind of artist, who accompanies the entire performance from beginning to end, consists not only in the interpretation of the puppets' words, but in acting as the puppets' partner and messenger. This omnipresent person is always on the move; he is always fussing, sometimes addressing the puppets, sometimes the musician, and sometimes the audience. He interprets, asks, answers and comments; he asks for applause and encourages the audience to be generous. It is he who starts to dance or joins in when the puppets strike up a song.
>
> (quoted in Darkowska-Nidzgorski and Nidzgorski 1998: 112)

Similar behavior is common in many world traditions (Solomonik 1992: 20–24; Nekrylova 1988: 36).[7] However, the repetition of basic words is not the only way to facilitate a conversation between the puppet and the spectators; there is a range of sound patterns that accentuate the puppet's behavior and that are clear to an audience without verbal dialogue. Laughter, sobbing, sighs, and exclamations – all of these are the instruments of a puppet's speech that are strengthened by the puppet's artificial voice. Petrushka's laughter stands out in this regard. This laughter is a distinct characteristic of the puppet, not comparable to anything and absolutely

irreplaceable; it is an inherent feature of the tradition, like Punch's enormous nose. This laughter supports almost every action of the puppet, shapes its character, explains its behavior in many aspects, and, finally, determines the puppet's relationship to other characters and with the audience. When the laughter is not heard, even for a short period, our audiences often looks puzzled, as if all the sounds of the performance have been "shut off." A Petrushka performance's vocal range is essentially captured in the alternation between Petrushka's laughter and other sounds.

The swazzle and Petrushka slapstick should be considered an inseparable pair of musical instruments (wind and percussion), a pair that has a long history in the puppet theatre. In this regard, the role of the swazzle in shaping the performance is essential. The duet of swazzle and slapstick is the very music of the performance. This music is so self-sufficient, its rhythm is so clear, so complementary to the performance, and so full of rhythmic movement, that the spoken dialogue often seems unnecessary. "The fact that puppeteers around the globe use voice modifiers," Proschan writes, "suggests to me their profound (albeit unstated) understanding of how they work – that is, their awareness that speech itself is redundant, and that reduction in the sign and restriction of the signal are possible without sacrificing intelligibility" (Proschan 1981: 534). In our experience, this has been confirmed when we have played Petrushka shows before foreign audiences; when the audience laughs, there is no doubt that the stage actions are understood.

The melodic potential of the swazzle as a wind instrument is very diverse: the rhythmic, tonal, and timbre nuances allow for a wide expression of Petrushka's mood range. It is also possible to use swazzles for the mimicking of various sounds – for example, a bird singing or even a fart. We watched a performance of Indian theatre from Rajasthan performed by Puran Bakht, who held a *boli*, an Indian variant of a swazzle, between his teeth to accompany dancing puppets. Puran Bakht manipulated all the puppets, mimicking the energetic singing of the whirling puppet dancers with a voice ideally suited to the puppets, while at the same time, his *boli* was the leading instrument of the accompanying orchestra.[8]

A call from the Other world

The question remains as to why the puppet theatre still insists on using this complex contrivance. Proschan has offered two explanations:

> A number of possible motivations are at work, to different degrees in each tradition. … The distinctive sound of the voice modifier alerts audiences to the arrival of the puppeteers and the beginning of the performance, for example.
>
> Another … is … extremely important: the squeaky voice is inherently funny, especially to the children who often compose the largest part of the audience. …
>
> (Proschan 1981: 541)

Half a century earlier, Soviet puppeteer N. Simonovich-Efimova wrote something similar: "This broken, sharp whistle coming out of curtains that are waving because of its blow … arouses the interest of the audience and makes the spectators concentrate their attention on the little stage" (Simonovich-Efimova 1980: 116).

We do not deny these conclusions, but believe there are additional, more significant, reasons to use a swazzle, an instrument particular to the puppet theatre. The modified voice belongs to a particular kind of puppet that has ties with an archaic, ancient theatre, though puppeteers and spectators don't always realize this. Petrushka's strange voice mentioned above – as well as his exaggerated nose, his hump, and his clothes – are all characteristics that separate him from other characters and set Petrushka against "this" world, the human world. By way of example, Darkowska-Nidzgorski's description of Nigerian puppet theatre identifies a connection between a modified voice and *the other world*:

> Listening to puppeteers from Niger and Nigeria, we noticed that all of them spoke in [the] same snuffling voice. … According to anthropologists, this snuffling voice is connected with death … so puppeteers' snuffling voices take on special significance. In this specific context, the puppeteer who produces "a voice of the other world" emphasizes the supernatural level of his art and its contrast to the world of living.
>
> (Darkowska-Nidzgorski and Nidzgorski 1998: 111)

The swazzle is a dual-purpose instrument for modulation of human speech and for musical accompaniment that has maintained its function and construction since the first records of its use in the early seventeenth century.[9] However, this "artificial" voice is also a "proto-instrument" that connects the puppet with the world beyond and with the syncretic period of human culture.

The nature of Petrushka performances changes fundamentally, depending on whether or not the puppeteer uses a swazzle. This is often the case in Russia, where the practice of Petrushka shows was interrupted for at least a half century under the Soviet regime, but also in England, where Punch has been "alive" for centuries. Being educated in the tradition of literary theatre, most contemporary Russian puppeteers pay attention only to the spoken dialogue of the characters published in texts of old puppet plays, forgetting that a folk performance is an evolution not only of text but also of music, sound, and image.[10] Many also neglect the fact that Petrushka's otherworldly voice drives the performance rhythmically and expresses the essence of the performance, creating a dialectic between a strange character "from another world" and the more recognizable characters of the comedy, those who represent human society and speak in "human" voices. Mamane has perhaps expressed this idea best: "I am the one who puts something into my mouth, but it is the thing I hold in my hand that makes me do it" (quoted in Darkowska-Nidzgorski and Nidzgorski 1998: 109). Those who work "inside the booth" have learned that the peculiar voice of the puppet belongs to the puppet and not to the puppeteer, and that it is from a world removed in place and ancient in time.

Notes

1 *Brodiachyi Vertep*: literally, "Wandering *Vertep*."
2 The kazoo and zobo are wind instruments that originated in Africa and are commonly used in U.S. jazz bands (Likhach 2001).

3 We believe the ability of flexible material to change a tone's pitch, depending on the intensity of the air supply, to be one of the main reasons that wind instruments with flexible (not "hard") reeds in puppet theatre are so widespread. This construction gives the artist the ability to raise and lower the pitch of the puppet's voice by intensifying or lessening the air supply. Aerophones with "hard" reeds (such as a clarinet) exhibit such characteristics to a lesser degree.
4 I. Komarova and the authors of this essay conducted a number of experiments with The Vagrant Booth theatre studying the "phonetics of the swazzle" before coming to these conclusions.
5 Unfortunately, this method is rarely recorded in many documents of the past. As Nekrylova (2003: 27) observes: "As to precise records of lexical, visual, and playing parts of the performance, they simply don't exist."
6 All performance citations are from our own Vagrant Booth Petrushka production.
7 The narrator is one of oldest characters in the Petrushka theatre. We consider Petrushka to be a representative of the "other" world and the narrator a "link" between "that" world and the world of living. Consequently, the meaning of the narrator transforms from "an interpreter" to "a ferryman." But the narrator's role, not limited to this, is so varied that it requires a special study that is beyond the scope of this chapter.
8 It should be noted that the performance had a prologue during which the puppets representing gods (who were larger than the other puppets) talked in human voices. Only during the main performance, when "real puppets" appeared, did they begin to sing in "puppet" voices.
9 We believe the swazzle to be a more ancient instrument, despite Proschan's observations that "The use of voice modifiers in folk puppetry is recorded in brief and tantalizing notices scattered throughout the historical and ethnographic treatments of puppetry" (Proschan 1981: 547). By way of evidence, he observes that puppet shows:

> … in Seville in 1608 used a *cerbatana* ("pea-shooter" or "blow-gun") and Covarrubias … in 1611 remarks on the use of a *pito* ("whistle") by the puppeteers of Castile, with an interpreter in front of the stage to repeat the lines. Turning to Italy, we learn … that the seventeenth-century Pulcinella puppeteers used a *pivetta* (diminutive of *pivo*, "whistle") to recite the stories, with one puppeteer providing all the voices, or several, each one with a *pivetta* of a different size, providing the voices of the various characters. … The earliest evidence from England is ambiguous: in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* of 1614, there is a puppet-play-within-the-play, and the puppets are described as "neighing" and "whinnying" with a "treble creaking." But, the puppets' creaking is interpreted to the audience by Leatherhead, who repeats line by line what the puppets are saying. … By the 1660's Punch had arrived in England, and his use of the swazzle or swotchel (from German *schwassl*, means "conversation, chatter") was firmly established.
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> (Proschan 1981: 547).

10 Until now there haven't been any serious attempts to analyze records of Petrushka's performances in relation to the phonetic specifics of the swazzle. Several sketches recorded in the form of verbal dialogue could, in fact, simply be attempts of eyewitnesses to describe not only the aural but also the visual impression of the performance. Otherwise, when information is given by professional Petrushka players, they typically don't record details that seem obvious, such as repetition.

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