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Origins of the Russian Puppet Theater: An Alternative Hypothesis

The Russian puppet theater (*kukol'nyi teatr* or Petrushka) is not well known in the West. There are passing references to it in general histories of puppetry and the like, but unfortunately these are more often confusing than enlightening. One learns, for example, that the Old Russian version of the Polish marionette theater, the *szopka*, was the “*bertep* [sic] meaning Bethlehem,”¹ or that the first known description of a Russian puppet show appears in “Adam O’Leary’s [sic] *Travels in Russia and Persia*.”² Perhaps even more unfortunate, Petrushka has been neglected by native scholars as well. Their failure to deal seriously with the origins of the Russian puppet theater has been particularly glaring, and they have also largely ignored its early history. Most have, in fact, been content to view the entire period before the 1630s, when Adam Olearius appeared with his famous illustrated description of a performing Russian puppeteer, as *terra incognita*.³

The few scholars who have studied the early history of Russian puppetry have generally sought its roots in one of three foreign cultures—Italian, Byzantine, or Chinese. The greatest number of these scholars contend that

1. Bil Baird, *The Art of the Puppet* (New York, 1965), p. 67. The author must mean *vertep*, the Ukrainian word for “cave” or “manger” which is analogous to the Polish *szopka*. We will not concern ourselves here with the Ukrainian *vertep*, since it did not play a major role in the evolution of the secular puppet theater in Russia. Originally a Christmas play performed by students, the *vertep* has been compared to the morality and mystery plays of Western Europe. It was brought to the Ukraine from Poland in the late sixteenth century and eventually spread to Belorussia and Great Russia. During the course of the seventeenth century it did have some impact on the evolution of the Russian legitimate theater. V. N. Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, *Russkii teatr ot istokov do serediny XVIII v.* (Moscow, 1957), pp. 76–82.

2. Paul McPharlin, ed. and trans., *A Repertory of Marionette Plays* (New York, 1929), p. 291. The reference here is obviously to Adam Olearius, the Dutch scholar-traveler who accompanied an embassy from the Duke of Holstein to Muscovy and Persia in the 1630s.

3. The complete text of Olearius’s description of the Russian puppet theater appears toward the end of this article. A comprehensive history of the Russian puppet theater remains to be written. The earliest attempt at writing a scholarly account of Russian puppetry was made by V. N. Peretts, *Kukol'nyi teatr na Rusi* (St. Petersburg, 1895). Peretts’s study is quite brief and begins only in the early seventeenth century. Among the most recent studies is N. I. Smirnova’s *Sovetskii teatr kukol* (Moscow, 1963), which contains two solid chapters on the earliest period. A delightful fictionalized account of the early history of Petrushka was recently published by B. A. Privalov, *Petrushka — dusha skomorosh'ia* (Moscow, 1963).

the Russian puppet theater was borrowed from the West, more specifically from Italy. They argue that the prototype of the Russian puppet hero, Petrushka, is the Italian Pulcinella, who was brought to Russia from Italy, via Germany, in the early seventeenth century by the *skomorokhi*, the itinerant Russian minstrel-entertainers.⁴ The close similarity between Petrushka and Pulcinella is regarded as sufficient proof of the Italian or West European origin of the Russian *kukol'nyi teatr*.⁵

Less widely accepted is the hypothesis that the Russian puppet theater had its roots in Byzantium, and could have been brought to Kievan Rus' by visiting mimes as early as the tenth or eleventh century.⁶ To support this argument its proponents point to the frescoes adorning the western staircase of the Kievan Saint Sophia.⁷ Among the scenes depicted in these eleventh-century frescoes, frequently referred to as the "*skomorokh* frescoes," is one in which two performing acrobats, six musicians, and two actors are engaged in an apparent dialogue. One section of these frescoes, however, is quite enigmatic. Pictured on the extreme left are two men standing behind what appears to be a miniature or puppet stage. A third person stands in front of the stage, pointing to it. According to Veselovsky, it is entirely possible that the fresco depicts a troupe of puppeteers preparing to give a performance.⁸

Some scholars have raised the possibility that the puppet theater may have been brought to Russia from China by way of the Mongols. After all, it was the Mongols who were instrumental in transmitting their knowledge of Chinese lantern pictures or shadow puppetry to the Turks.⁹ Could they not have done the same for the Russians?

4. In fact, according to A. M. Veselovsky, the *skomorokhi*, as bear-tamers, probably visited Germany and Italy as early as the sixteenth century or even earlier, bringing the puppet theater back with them to Russia at this time. See his *Razyskaniia v oblasti russkago dukhovnago stikha*, pts. 6–10, in *Sbornik Otdeleniia russkago iazyka i slovesnosti Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk*, 32, no. 4 (1883): 187. On the *skomorokhi* see Russell Zguta, "Skomorokhi: The Russian Minstrel-Entertainers," *Slavic Review*, 31, no. 2 (June 1972): 297–313.

5. A. Alferov, "Petrushka i ego predki," in *Desiat chtenii po literature*, 4th ed. (Moscow, 1915), p. 195. In the West the puppet theater had become a popular form of secular entertainment by the twelfth century, and there is evidence that even earlier, between the seventh and ninth centuries, puppets had been put to the service of the church. Hermann Reich, *Der Mimus*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Berlin, 1903), pp. 833–34; Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles* (New York, 1963), p. 167.

6. In the Eastern or Byzantine Empire the puppet theater was flourishing as early as the sixth century. Reich, *Der Mimus*, p. 834; Nicoll, *Masks*, p. 167.

7. Illustrated in Nicoll, *Masks*, p. 159, fig. 107. See also N. P. Kondakov, "O freskakh lestnits Kievo-Sofiiskago sobora," *Zapiski Imperatorskago russkago arkheologicheskago obschestva*, n.s., 3 (1888): 287–306; D. Ainalov and E. Redin, *Kievo-Sofiiskii sobor: Issledovanie drevnei mozaicheskoi i freskovoi zhivopisi* (St. Petersburg, 1889), pp. 103–17.

8. Veselovsky, *Razyskaniia*, p. 188.

9. N. N. Martinovitch, *The Turkish Theatre* (New York, 1933), pp. 29–30; Baird, *Art of the Puppet*, p. 84.

Although all three of these explanations are plausible, each has serious drawbacks. Petrushka's striking resemblance to the Italian puppet hero Pulcinella is indisputable. But so is his relation to the English Punch, the French Polichinelle, the German Hanswurst, the Czech Kašpárek, the Hungarian Vitéz Lászkó, and the Turkish Karagöz, among others. Rather than proving his Italian or Western origin, the similarity between Petrushka and these other puppet heroes seems to indicate the universality of the character, regardless of his ethnic background.

Veselovsky's contention that the extreme left section of the Saint Sophia staircase frescoes represents a troupe of Byzantine puppeteers preparing to give a performance appeared until recently to have considerable merit. Certainly there could be no denying that Byzantium once exerted a strong cultural influence on Kievan Rus'. However, in 1967 two Soviet scholars published an important article, based on research carried out after the most recent and extensive restoration of the Saint Sophia frescoes, in which they demonstrated conclusively that what had so long been thought to be an early example of the Byzantine puppet theater was in fact a Byzantine pneumatic organ.¹⁰

The possibility of tracing the origins of the Russian puppet theater to China through the Mongols cannot be dismissed out of hand either. As Vernadsky has so ably demonstrated, the Mongols did not always leave only destruction and ruin in their wake after conquering and subjugating much of Russia.¹¹ The main difficulty here is to reconcile the Chinese technique of shadow puppetry or lantern pictures with the Russian hand and string puppets. In Turkey the lantern technique, which we know was introduced by the Mongols, has survived to this day. In Russia, with perhaps one very questionable early exception, there is no evidence of its ever being used.¹²

10. S. A. Vysotsky and I. F. Totskaia, "Novoe o freske 'skomorokhi' v Sofii Kievskoi," in *Kul'tura i iskusstvo drevnei Rusi: Sbornik statei v chest' professora M. K. Kargera* (Leningrad, 1967), pp. 50–61.

11. George Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven, 1953), pp. 333–90.

12. It should be noted here that the "exception" is indeed intriguing despite its questionability. It arises from a statement made by Baird (*Art of the Puppet*, p. 84 and illus. p. 27) in which he speculates that the ancient ancestors of the Slavs, the Scythians, as well as some of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia could have been familiar with shadow puppetry as early as 500 B.C. "It is known," he writes, "that the Scythians of the third and fourth centuries B.C. made handsome silhouettes of leather. And in the burial grounds among the Altai Mountains near Outer Mongolia, along the old trade route between China and Russia, there have been found cutout leather animals, one a moose that could well have been a shadow figure." One is more inclined, however, to agree with Karl Jettmar, who describes similar leather silhouettes as appliqué decorations, quite common among the nomadic peoples of this area. Some have been found, for example, in the Altai region of Central Asia adorning the exterior of a wooden sarcophagus and a saddle dating from the Scythian era. Karl Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, trans. Ann E. Keep (London, 1967), pp. 95–97, 123, 125.

Despite their weaknesses, these three traditional hypotheses must be acknowledged to have some merits, particularly the arguments on behalf of the Western or Italian origin of Petrushka. The *kukol'nyi teatr*, even in its early stage, was probably subject to considerable foreign influence. Those persons most closely identified with the early history of puppetry both in Russia and elsewhere were by nature itinerant and widely traveled. There is evidence not only that Russian *skomorokhi* had visited Germany and Italy as early as the sixteenth century but that German *Spielleute* and Byzantine mimes had even earlier (certainly no later than the thirteenth century) made their way into Kievan Rus' and Muscovite Russia.¹³ Surely there must have been some exchange of technique and method, if not repertoire, among these various troupes of entertainers. But one should not confuse influence with origins. And it is here precisely that we take issue with the traditional interpretations.

By blurring the distinction between influence and origins, scholars have inadvertently overlooked many centuries of native East Slavic sociocultural development, especially in popular mythology and folk ritual. In the process they have also lost sight of the elementary fact, acknowledged by most authorities, that puppetry, like drama, had its genesis in religion and religious ceremony.¹⁴ The masks and anthropomorphic images which were the essential trappings of many primitive religions were with time and the impact of civilization and Christianity gradually cast aside, becoming the ready "tools of the trade" for the early puppeteer. Precisely how this transformation from religious idol to secular puppet occurred in a given society is as difficult to explain as the unique transformation of Greek ritual to Greek drama. This should not, however, deter us from presenting here what we feel to be persuasive evidence in support of the indigenous origins of the *kukol'nyi teatr*, and from offering this as an alternative hypothesis to the three we have examined.

Although little evidence survives regarding official public worship among the pagan ancestors of the Eastern Slavs, certain of their traditional rituals, especially those bound up with the agricultural year, have been preserved to our own day. Among these the best known is the cycle of rites with the general theme of bidding farewell to winter and ushering in spring and summer. The winter part of the cycle includes the two festival periods of Koliada (Christmas, New Year) and Maslenitsa (pre-Lent or Mardi Gras); the spring part of the cycle includes Rusal'ia (Trinity Sunday) and Kupalo (Feast of Saint John

13. Zguta, "Skomorokhi," pp. 299–300.

14. Baird, *Art of the Puppet*, p. 35; Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol*, pp. 13–14. Professor Vernadsky, in his *Origins of Russia* (Oxford, 1959), makes the following observation in the course of his description of the festivities surrounding the Maslenitsa or pre-Lenten festival: "Companies of itinerant actors and musicians (*skomorokhi*) performed short plays, some of them remnants of the old sacred drama of the heathen times. . . . An outgrowth of these shows was the puppet-theatre (Petrushka)" (p. 112).

the Baptist or Midsummer). In pre-Christian times the two winter festivals corresponded, more or less, to the winter solstice and spring equinox respectively, while the spring festivals were observed around the time of the summer solstice.

Among the most ancient of the customs associated with Koliada, the first of the two winter festivals, is the wearing of masks and costumes. Both in antiquity and in more recent times masks were an essential feature of this annual winter observance. The masks were almost exclusively of animals, the most favored being the goat, the aurochs, the horse, the bear, and the wolf. According to most scholars it was probably the Koliada, with its pagan "dramatic" performances, that the eleventh-century Bishop of Novgorod, Luka Zhidiata, had in mind when he warned his flock to shun *moskoliudstvo*.¹⁵ Though in recent times these games have acquired a far less serious tone, they originally served a magical or semireligious purpose (to wit the bishop's concern and admonition to his flock), since they were intended to secure a good harvest and the like for the coming year.¹⁶

The second of the two festivals associated with the winter cycle is Maslenitsa. Like the Mardi Gras and carnival in the West, to which it has frequently been compared, Maslenitsa is celebrated during the week immediately preceding the beginning of Lent.¹⁷ Since it was originally celebrated around the spring equinox, in March, the Maslenitsa has often been described as a ritual of bidding farewell to winter. Like the Koliada it is characterized by the wearing of masks and costumes. In addition, however, it has preserved certain ancient features which link it with Russia's pagan past. The culminating highlight of the Maslenitsa festival is the carrying in procession and eventual destruction (by drowning, burning, or burial) of Winter, symbolically represented by an image or puppet of straw or wood, called variously Iarilo, Chuchilo, or Chudo.¹⁸ The religious overtones of this ceremony are obvious.

15. N. N. Evreinov, *Istoriia russkogo teatra s drevneishikh vremen do 1917 goda* (New York, 1955), p. 28. The exact meaning of the term *moskoliudstvo* is still problematic. For a complete, annotated text and commentary on Luka Zhidiata's sermon wherein this reference occurs see A. I. Ponomarev, ed., *Pamiatniki drevne-russkoi tserkovno-uchitel'noi literatury*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1894), pp. 14-24.

16. For some surviving nineteenth-century examples of these Koliada games see P. V. Shein, comp. and ed., *Velikoruss v svoikh pesniakh, skazkakh, legendakh i t. p.*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1898), pp. 314-27.

17. For a comparison of Maslenitsa and the Western carnival see V. F. Miller's "Russkaia maslenitsa i zapadno-evropeiskii karnaval," in *Rechi i otchet chastnoi gimnazii Perepelkinoi* (Moscow, 1884), pp. 1-49. D. Rovinsky has reproduced a series of twenty illustrations depicting the week-long activities connected with Maslenitsa in eighteenth-century Russia in his *Russkiiia narodnyia kartinki*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1900), pp. 351-54.

18. An interesting comparison has been drawn between the rites surrounding Iarilo and the ancient Greek Charilo by G. Calderon in his article "Slavonic Elements in Greek Religion," *Classical Review*, 27 (1913): 79-81.

The god of darkness and death, symbolizing winter and represented here by the puppet, is physically annihilated to make way for spring, the harbinger of new life and plenty.

Rusalia and Kupalo, the two festivals dominating the spring cycle, were originally celebrated as one, at the time of the summer solstice in June. After the introduction of Christianity in 988 the church tried to substitute Trinity Sunday and the Feast of Saint John the Baptist for the pagan rituals associated with this part of the calendar year. As frequently happened in such cases, instead of supplanting the pagan rites the two church feasts became identified with them—Trinity Sunday with Rusalia and Saint John's Day with Kupalo. Both Rusalia and Kupalo bear a strong resemblance to Maslenitsa in at least one important respect. In both, puppetlike straw images provide the focal point for the rites associated with them.

The Rusalia festival is particularly rich in music and dance. Much circle dancing and choral singing (performed simultaneously and called *khorovody*) takes place. This culminates in a tug of war in the open fields over the *rusalka* puppet, which is eventually torn apart and scattered to the four winds, making the world safe for another year from these menacing female spirits.¹⁹ In some regions the straw puppet is burned or drowned.²⁰

In the ceremonies for Kupalo, in addition to music and dance, fortune-telling and leaping through open bonfires by young, unmarried couples provide the most characteristic diversion. A male and numerous female straw puppets are made for the occasion. Because the young men repeatedly "abduct" the female puppet, the girls must make new ones to replace her. Eventually the puppet couple, "Kupalo" and "Marena," are either torn and scattered about or drowned.²¹

It should be readily apparent, even from this abbreviated description of the important annual festivals which for centuries dominated the calendar year of the Eastern Slavs,²² that puppets and masks played an integral part

19. The Rusalki were reputed to be the spirits of drowning victims, premature babies, and infants who died unbaptized (the latter sometimes also called Mavki). In the spring they roamed about the fields and allegedly tickled people to death or drowned those who went near water.

20. A good description of the tug of war and scattering of the *rusalka* puppet is provided by A. Veselovsky in his article "Genvarskii rusalii i gotskii igry v Vizantii," *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnago prosveshcheniia*, September 1885, p. 4. Other methods of disposing of the puppet are described by Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, *Istoriia russkogo teatra*, 2 vols. (Moscow and Leningrad, 1929), 1:169–70. Special songs for Rusalia can be found in P. P. Chubinsky, comp. and ed., *Trudy Etnograficheskoi statisticheskoi ekspeditsii v zapadno-russkii krai*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg, 1872), pp. 187–92.

21. Chubinsky, *Trudy*, pp. 193–98 (description of Kupalo rituals and games); pp. 199–233 (Kupalo songs).

22. Only quite recently B. A. Rybakov, in his important article "Kalendar' IV veka

in many of these religious rituals. Furthermore, it is probably no accident that the *skomorokhi*, who had their origin in the popular pagan cult of ancient Rus', were also the first Russian puppet masters.²³ Together with the *volkhvy*, who constituted the official priesthood of pre-Christian Rus', the *skomorokhi* were intimately involved in the cult of the people with its wealth and diversity of ritual. As former priests or cult leaders they were the logical inheritors of the "puppets" or images which were an important part of that ritual and which, after the introduction of Christianity, became, like the *skomorokhi* themselves, anathema to the church.²⁴ What the *skomorokhi* "inherited" was more an idea or technique, and not necessarily, as the foregoing sentence may imply, a physical pantheon of anthropomorphic deities which they hastened, rather sacrilegiously, to convert on stage into less than divine—and often vulgar—puppets.

The relation of the *skomorokhi* to the puppet seems quite natural in yet another way. As Veselovsky has so meticulously demonstrated, the modern Russian word for puppet, *kukla*,²⁵ did not always refer to a marionette.²⁶ As late as the nineteenth century it had in certain regions, notably the provinces of Orlovsk and Pskov, the connotation of sorcery or witchcraft.²⁷ It may be that the *kukla* or puppet was originally used by the *skomorokhi*, who were sometimes looked upon as warlocks, as a medium for inflicting harm on their

iz zemli Polian," *Sovetskaia arkhologiiä*, 4 (1962): 66–89, brilliantly and conclusively demonstrated that the annual agrarian festivals of the proto-Slavs can be traced back at least to the fourth century A.D.

23. I. Beliaev was the first to postulate the theory that the *skomorokhi* were native in origin, with roots deep in early Russian paganism. See "O skomorokhakh," *Vremennik Imperatorskago obshchestva istorii i drevnosti rossiiskikh*, 20 (1854): 70–71. A. Afanas'ev elaborates on this theme in the first volume of his *Poeticheskaia vozreniia Slavian na prirodu* (Moscow, 1865), pp. 336–39.

24. It is obvious that some of the images or "puppets" which had originally been the focal point of religious worship among the Eastern Slavs continued to be used, in spite of official proscription, even to recent times in conjunction with some of the cyclic festivals of the countryside.

25. The earliest reference to the Old Slavonic word *kukla* occurs in the fifteenth-century edition of the tenth-century Bulgarian *Khronografiä Ioanna Malaly*, in which the original Greek τῶν σκηναίων (meaning "of the stage," "theatrical") is rendered as *kukla*. I. I. Sreznevsky, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevne-russkago iazyka po pis'mennym pamiatnikam*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1893–1912; reprint, Graz, 1955), p. 1360. The word *kukla* does not appear in any native Russian source until the early seventeenth century. Here it also carries the broad connotation of "theatrical performance," in the Greek sense of the term, and appears to be borrowed from Canon 51 of the Trullan Church Council (Constantinople, 692), where mimes and theaters are singled out for censure. N. Tikhomirov, ed., *Pamiatniki otrechennoi russkoi literatury*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1863), p. 313. See also V. J. Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven (Folklore Fellows Communications, no. 43)* (Helsinki, 1922), p. 254.

26. Veselovsky, *Razyskaniia*, pp. 189–95.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

enemies (that is, as voodoo dolls). Illustrating this is a story dating from the seventeenth century attributed to Simon Azarin, an elder of the Trinity-Sergius Monastery. In a village not far from the monastery a band of *skomorokhi* had given a performance at the conclusion of which they passed the hat around, so to speak, for voluntary donations. A certain woman in the audience refused to make a donation, whereupon, says the author, the *skomorokhi* cast a spell on her, making her deathly ill, and warned of even worse evils that would befall her.²⁸

Thus a progression from pagan religious rite to secular marionette seems to have occurred among the Eastern Slavs just as it did, according to Baird, in a number of other early societies.²⁹ The question that remains is when the *skomorokhi* first began using puppets for nonritualistic, entertainment purposes. Was it, as some have suggested, in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, shortly before Olearius had chanced upon the *skomorokh*-puppeteer whom he so vividly described in his *Travels*? Our own view is that it was much earlier, as the following discussion should demonstrate.

In 1733 there appeared in the *Sankt-Peterburgskiiia vedomosti* an anonymous article entitled "O pozorishchnykh igrakh, ili komediakh i tragediakh," in which the author discussed in print for the first time in Russia the characteristics of the *kukol'nyi teatr*. Also significant is the author's use of the relatively modern Russian word for puppet, *kukla*, to describe one of the theatrical arts included under the general heading of *pozorishche* (sometimes also *pozor*).³⁰ "Among the *pozorishchnye igry*," he writes, "one must also include the *kukol'nye igry* in which the performances are given not by live actors but rather by puppets."³¹ A brief description of the potential range and scope of puppets as actors follows.

One will therefore probably search in vain to find early references to the Russian puppet theater under its relatively modern name, *kukol'nyi teatr* or *kukla*.³² This can be further demonstrated by two seventeenth-century documents. In Tsar Aleksei's famous *gramota* of 1648, through which he sought to proscribe all manner of popular festivals and superstitions in Russia, he

28. Simon Azarin, *Kniga o chudesakh pr. Sergiia*, ed. S. O. Platonov (St. Petersburg, 1888), pp. 46-47.

29. Baird, *Art of the Puppet*, p. 34.

30. Among the several meanings which Sreznevsky (*Materialy*, 2:1090-92) gives for these two synonymous Old Russian words are the following: spectacle, performance, presentation, and show.

31. "O pozorishchnykh igrakh, ili komediakh i tragediakh," *Sankt-Peterburgskiiia vedomosti*, no. 44-46 (1733), pp. 175-76, as cited in Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol*, p. 18.

32. The earliest known use of the word *kukla*, in its modern Russian meaning of "puppet" or "puppet theater," dates from 1699. S. K. Bogoiavlensky, comp., *Moskovskii teatr pri tsariakh Aleksce i Petre: Materialy*, in *Chteniia v Imperatorskom obshchestve istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom universitete*, bk. 2 (1914), p. 78.

singles out for censure the *skomorokhi*.³³ He condemns them repeatedly in this widely circulated document for their Satanic games, their scandalous tales, songs, and dances, their bear and dog acts, their masquerades, and finally their “*pozorishche* on the streets and in the open fields.”³⁴ Nowhere in this lengthy and exhaustive enumeration of the professional stock in trade of the *skomorokhi* is the *kukol'nyi teatr* or *kukla* ever mentioned. And surely by 1648 and even earlier, as Olearius has so vividly demonstrated in his illustration, the puppet theater had become an important part of a *skomorokh* entertainment. Is it not safe to assume, then, that the reference here to *pozorishche* is in fact a reference to the puppet shows of the *skomorokhi*?

In an earlier seventeenth-century document, an *ukaz* of the Patriarch Filaret dating from 1628, there is also a stern denunciation of all surviving folk games and festivals with pagan overtones. Among the practices condemned by Filaret is one which can be translated literally as “going about with mares.”³⁵ In the Olearius illustration of the *skomorokh* entertainment there is a mare pictured on the portable stage which the puppeteer has raised over his head. Furthermore, of some twenty-three surviving original episodes involving the traditional puppet hero Petrushka, twenty refer to his bargaining with a gypsy over a mare.³⁶ Olearius has evidently reproduced one of these most popular of episodes from “Petrushka” in his illustration.³⁷ Consequently, the reference by Filaret to “going about with mares” can be interpreted only as an allusion to the puppet shows of the *skomorokhi*. Again there is no mention here of *kukol'nyi teatr* or *kukla*.

In the foregoing digression we have tried to show that even as late as the mid-eighteenth century the term commonly used to refer to puppetry in Russia was *pozorishche*. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries *pozorishche* was used exclusively to render the Greek word for “theater” or “theatrical performance” (θέατρον).³⁸ By 1284 it was no longer used as part

33. Aleksei's *gramota*, the original version of which was dated December 5, 1648, was addressed to the *vovoda* of Belgorod, Timofei Fedorovich Buturlin, but was actually intended for all of Russia. Reprinted in full by P. I. Ivanov, *Opisanie Gosudarstvennago arkhiva starykh del* (Moscow, 1850), pp. 296–99. See also N. Kharuzin's informative article “K voprosu o bor'be moskovskago pravitel'stva s narodnymi iazycheskimi obriadami i sueveriiami v polovine XVII v.,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, no. 1 (1897), pp. 143–51.

34. Ivanov, *Opisanie*, pp. 296, 297.

35. Relevant excerpts from Filaret's *ukaz* are cited in A. S. Famintsyn's *Skomorokhi na Rusi* (St. Petersburg, 1889), p. 182.

36. Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, *Russkii teatr*, p. 60.

37. An excellent text of “Petrushka” can be found in P. N. Berkov's anthology, *Russkaia narodnaia drama XVII–XX vekov* (Moscow, 1953), pp. 113–23. A badly translated, abridged version of the play appears in McPharlin, *Repertory of Marionette Plays*, pp. 291–300.

38. Sreznevsky, *Materialy*, 2:1090.

of a translation but appeared independently in the *Kormchaia kniga Riazanskaia*, still retaining its original Greek meaning of “theater” or “theatrical performance.” However, in this particular instance we find *pozorishche* listed along with *igrishche*, a term long regarded by scholars as an Old Russian equivalent for a dramatic performance usually involving real actors.³⁹ A distinction between *pozorishche* and *igrishche* is obviously intended in this thirteenth-century collection of ecclesiastical law from Riazan. According to Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, the common people have always looked upon these two terms as distinct—regarding *pozorishche* as the forerunner of the modern word for “theater” (in the sense of performance or spectacle) and *igrishche* as the early equivalent of “drama.”⁴⁰

Sources such as the *Povest' vremennykh let* contain frequent references to *igrishcha* in the context of ritual games associated with the primitive cult of the Eastern Slavs.⁴¹ As in ancient Greece, these games represent the earliest stage in the evolution of drama in Russia. To this day the popular Russian expression for a wedding (a thoroughly dramatic affair lasting several days, with a traditional cast of characters and a standardized, unwritten script) is *igrat' svad'bu*.

In light of the linguistic and other evidence that we have presented above, is it not possible that the reference in the *Kormchaia kniga Riazanskaia* to *pozorishche* is in fact an allusion to a nondramatic theatrical performance, one differing from the *igrishche* not only in tone and content but also in its reliance on puppets rather than live actors as *dramatis personae*? And would this not then in effect place the origins of the Russian puppet theater sometime in the late thirteenth rather than the early seventeenth century, as many have alleged?

The early history of the Russian puppet theater is intimately bound up with the history of the *skomorokhi*, the original Russian puppeteers. By the thirteenth century these itinerant minstrel-entertainers had completely abandoned the politically strife-torn and somewhat intolerant lands of Kievan Rus' for the much freer atmosphere of Novgorod and its northern territories.⁴² In northern Russia they continued to flourish, many of them abandoning their vagabond ways for a more settled and secure life on the land or in the town while still continuing to practice their venerable profession. During the second half of the sixteenth century, the center of their activity shifted from Novgorod to Moscow, largely as a result of Ivan IV's Oprichnina and his outright

39. Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, *Russkii teatr*, pp. 6–7.

40. Ibid., p. 6.

41. Sreznevsky, *Materialy*, 1:1021.

42. Zguta, “*Skomorokhi*,” p. 301.

annexation of Novgorod in the 1570s. The Second Novgorod Chronicle tells us that in September 1572 Ivan ordered all of the *skomorokhi* from Novgorod and other nearby towns to be rounded up and, together with their trained bears, transported to Moscow.⁴³

There is no doubt, however, that the *skomorokhi* had become a familiar sight throughout the Muscovite lands, as far east as Kazan in fact, much earlier than the 1570s.⁴⁴ For example, a charter granted by Prince Iurii Vasilievich of Dmitrov on January 14, 1470, to the Trinity-Sergius Monastery (located some forty-eight miles north of Moscow) specifically prohibits the minstrel-entertainers from performing or entertaining in the villages and hamlets belonging to the monastery.⁴⁵ Sigismund von Herberstein, the ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire to Moscow in 1517 and again in 1526, described how some of the itinerant *skomorokhi* had died from exposure during the severe winter of 1526.⁴⁶ And the *Stoglav* of 1551 warned that they were a cause of great concern among both the people and the authorities, because they traveled about in such great numbers (sixty to a hundred).⁴⁷

By the 1630s the puppet show had already become an integral part of a *skomorokh* entertainment. According to Olearius, “[the Russian] dancing-bear impresarios have comedians with them, who, among other things, arrange farces employing puppets. These comedians tie a blanket around their bodies and spread it above their heads, thus creating a portable stage with which they can run around the streets, and on top of which they can give puppet shows.”⁴⁸ The illustration accompanying this description of a *skomorokh* entertainment shows a dancing bear with his trainer, two musicians, one playing an oval *gushli* and the other a *gudok*, and a puppeteer giving a performance. With respect to the latter, note should be made of the portable stage which he is using. It is made by tying a blanket at the waist and, with the help of two wooden poles, raising it over the head. This leaves both of the operator’s hands free to manipulate the hand puppets. This kind of one-man, portable puppet stage seems to be unique to Russia. Not only is it a tribute to the genius of the

43. *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 30: *Novgorodskaia vtoriaia (arkhivskaia) letopis'* (Moscow, 1965), p. 189.

44. By 1565 Kazan could boast eight professional *skomorokhi*, one of them a woman. See “Pistsove knigi goroda Kazani 1565–68 gg. i 1646 g.,” in *Materialy po istorii narodov SSSR*, vol. 2: *Materialy po istorii tatarskoi ASSR* (Leningrad, 1932), pp. 14, 18–19, 23–24, 33, 36, 43.

45. *Akty sobrannye v bibliotekakh i arkhivakh rossiiskoi imperii arkhiegraficheskoiu ekspeditsiei Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk*, vol. 1: 1294–1598 (St. Petersburg, 1836), p. 62.

46. Sigismund von Herberstein, *Descriptions of Moscow and Muscovy*, ed. Bertold Picard, trans. J. B. C. Grundy (New York, 1969), p. 19.

47. *Stoglav*, chap. 41, ques. 19.

48. S. H. Baron, trans. and ed., *The Travels of Olearius in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Stanford, 1967), p. 142 and illus.

skomorokhi, but it also implicitly confirms a long tradition of puppetry among them.

The scene depicted on Olearius's stage is obviously taken from an early version of "Petrushka." The hero, Petrushka, is shown bargaining rather vigorously with a gypsy over a mare, while his wife looks on. At least twenty different versions of this scene have survived.⁴⁹ It is impossible to say what other plays, besides the numerous adventures of Petrushka, were included in the repertoire of the *skomorokh*-puppeteers. Much of their original repertoire was, like the *byliny* and *istoricheskie pesni* which the minstrel-*skomorokhi* recited, transmitted orally and never written down. It is safe to assume, however, that because of the itinerant nature of the productions, the repertoire would have been limited by the amount of equipment that could be brought along.

Shortly after Olearius had witnessed his first *skomorokh* entertainment and puppet show, the fortunes of the Russian minstrel-entertainers took a decided turn for the worse. With some prodding from the ecclesiastical authorities Tsar Aleksei issued his famous *gramota* of 1648, "On the Righting of Morals and the Abolition of Superstition."⁵⁰ In it he outlawed the *skomorokhi* and all of their entertainments, which, as we have seen, included the *pozorishche* or puppet theater.

The *skomorokhi* never recovered from this blow. The Russian puppet theater, on the other hand, not only survived but found new life in Aleksei's own lifetime and during the reign of Peter the Great and his successors. Like so many other aspects of Russian society and culture, however, it was subjected to progressively stronger foreign influence and came to lose much of its native character. One learns, for example, that in 1660 a certain Ivan Gebdon, an English merchant living at court to whom the tsar frequently turned for foreign goods and services, was commissioned by Aleksei to bring back from Germany to Moscow an unspecified number of puppet masters.⁵¹ In 1699 a certain Russian puppeteer (no longer called a *skomorokh* but rather a *komediant*, a term obviously borrowed from the West) by the name of Ivan Antonovyi was buying his puppets from Denmark. He had ordered thirty of them from a certain Gottfried Kaulitz, who delivered only six, for which breach of contract he was severely beaten by Ivan.⁵² A year later, in 1700, Peter the Great

49. Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, *Russkii teatr*, p. 60.

50. See note 33.

51. I. Ia. Gurliand, *Ivan Gebdon — kommissarius i rezident: Materialy po istorii administratsii moskovskogo gosudarstva vtoroi poloviny XVII veka* (Iaroslavl, 1903), p. 49.

52. Fortunately for the historian, this beating caused a minor diplomatic incident between Denmark and Russia. The Danish envoy in Moscow lodged a formal complaint

himself dispatched (for reasons which are not clear) a trio of Prussian puppeteers to go on tour and give performances in selected Ukrainian towns.⁵³ In fact, by the mid-eighteenth century, touring German, Italian, and French puppet companies had become quite common not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg but in smaller Russian towns as well.⁵⁴

If Petrushka was not totally forgotten during this period of accelerated Westernization in the arts, then he was certainly somewhat eclipsed by all of the foreign heroes and their exploits. Some of the surviving playbills from the period bear this out. In 1733 in St. Petersburg, for example, the touring puppet company of Johann Christofor Zigmund was showing, among others, "Adam and Eve" (a comedy), "The Crucifixion of Christ," "The Life and Death of Don Juan," "King Agasfer and Queen Esfir," "King Admet and the Strength of the Mighty Hercules," and "Princess Florian and the Beautiful Bancefori."⁵⁵

To what extent native Russian puppeteers or *komedianti*, the spiritual successors of the *skomorokhi*, continued to bring the adventures of Petrushka to the people of the countryside during this period of strong foreign influence is difficult to say. That they did is certain, however, since Petrushka not only survived this foreign intrusion but, even more important, remained untainted by it. The twenty-three separate episodes about him that have come down to us, in manuscript form, from the nineteenth century attest to that.⁵⁶ Furthermore, his very name, like that of Punch in England, has become so closely identified with puppetry in Russia that today the two have become synonymous. To his countrymen Petrushka was and is the Russian puppet theater.

on behalf of Kaulitz with Peter, who ordered an investigation into the whole affair, a transcript of which has survived. Bogoiavlensky, *Moskovskii teatr*, pp. 77–80.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

54. Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol*, p. 19.

55. *Otchet imperatorskoi publichnoi biblioteki za 1868 god* (St. Petersburg, 1869), pp. 205–6, as cited in Smirnova, *Sovetskii teatr kukol*, p. 19.

56. Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, *Russkii teatr*, p. 60.