

A Petrushka Reimagined

This is probably not the *Petrushka* that you are expecting.

For anyone familiar with this celebrated, recommissioned piece from the legendary Ballets Russes' repertoire, this production of *Petrushka*, conceived by choreographer Ella Rothchild for the OBV, departs extensively from the original storyline and setting, and creates an entirely new interpretation for Igor Stravinsky's iconic ballet score. Where the original ballet envisioned a puppet coming to life, struggling with its volatile human emotions on the backdrop of a distracted society, here it is society who struggles with its corrupted humanity, puppeteered through its impaired morality to face the fragility of its own mortality.

This text will attempt to recount some background of the original *Petrushka* production and its plot and delineate the corresponding features alongside the major transformations that Rothchild's version proposes as a new, petrifying vision, for this tempestuous milestone in 20th century music.

The original production

Premiered on June 13th, 1911 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, *Petrushka* was the second of three commissioned ballet scores, between *The Firebird* (1910) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913), that Stravinsky created for the Ballets Russes before WW1.

Following the overwhelming success of *The Firebird* - which granted Stravinsky overnight international recognition - Sergei Diaghlev, the Ballet Russes' renowned impresario, requested the composer to propose a new work for the company's upcoming season. Initially Stravinsky suggested a piece based on a dream he had of a pagan sacrificial ritual to the gods of spring. However, stalled by the complexity of developing this ambitious composition, when the impresario visited him in Switzerland in autumn 2010 Stravinsky instead played parts of a different piano concerto that he had recently begun to conceive. He titled it "The Cry of Petrushka", having in mind an image of a puppet coming to life. Diaghilev, intrigued by its potential, asked Stravinsky to develop it into his next ballet score. He then engaged Alexandre Benois to devise the script with Stravinsky as well as design the stage and costumes. The writing of the musical score developed as the storyline formulated between the two. When the script matured, Michel Fokine was handed the choreography. Rehearsals began in spring 1911 and up until the very last dress rehearsal alterations were made to the plot and its staging.

Unlike *The Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring* which were situated dramatically in an imagined mythical or pagan world, *Petrushka* takes place in a very specific setting - the colorful Shrovetide Fair in St. Petersburg, a popular event in the city's mid 19th century urban life and its leisure culture. Both Stravinsky and Benois had vivid nostalgic memories of visiting it as children, and recreated it, together with Fokine, as a locus of cultural fusion that captured conflicting aspects of Russian modernity (local folklore with avant garde; realism together with symbolism) while envisioning its outer exuberance and inner torment.

The first halves of scenes one and four of the original ballet go to great extent to depict the fair's attractions and its partakers. The production's scenario, musical score, choreography and design alike, put much nuance in portraying the faircomers as a group of individuals representing different parts of society that are all intertwined together at the fair, consuming or activating its diverse entertainment. We meet a mixture of rustic and higher classed carnival comers: street peddlers and drunks, coachmen, soldiers, officers, wet nurses, gypsies, dancers, acrobats, musicians and more. In the crowded space bustling with many simultaneous miniature plots and details, each group or individual is momentarily focused upon within the overall commotion, portraying a multifarious tableau of this society.

Stavinsky's stratification method accentuates this dynamic and heterogeneous world by rapidly juxtaposing and overlapping musical references from a variety of sources pertaining mainly to high and low Russian music along with some influences from the west. Collaged together, they create an immensely vigorous and rhythmically changing score that captures the fair's hustle and bustle. Later on, this will dissolve into creating the pathos and erratic inner world of the dolls that have come to life, famously incorporating bitonality to portray *Petrushka's* unstable duality as a puppet bearing human emotions and his inner struggle.

After establishing in detail the excitement and disarray of life at the fair - in comes the fairy tale aspect of the plot. The first scene continues when a *Magician*, referred to at times as a *Charlatan*, appears on site, enchanting the crowd who gathers round him with his flute. He then opens the curtains of a theater exposing three life size puppets: *Petrushka*, a *Ballerina* and a *Moor* who come alive to the gesture of his flute turned wand. The dolls dance in front of the delighted crowd while the magician instigates a rivalry between *Petrushka* and the *Moor* for the attention of the *Ballerina*. The second scene continues with *Petrushka* in his chamber frustrated by his confinement and his lonesome awkwardness. He then pursues to court the *Ballerina* who is pushed inside his cell by the *Magician*, disheartened by her rejection. The third scene takes place in the chamber of the *Moor* (depicted originally as somewhat of a racist caricature, in blackface, playing with a coconut) where the *Ballerina* is brought in to, again by the *Magician*. Here the courtship is successful (introduced musically by a Viennese waltz) and when *Petrushka* bursts in, trying to prevent this affair, he is chased and beaten by the *Moor*.

Back to the fairground in the fourth scene, the carnival continues in full commotion unaware of the dolls' behind the scenes drama and climaxes in a masquerade where a devil makes an appearance. Suddenly the dolls rush on site continuing the chase that results with the *Moor* killing *Petrushka*. The astonished crowd who witnesses the murder demands an explanation from the *Charlatan*. He pulls out a puppet of *Petrushka* showing them that it was all mere fabrication. As *The Charlatan* is left alone in the nocturnal fairground the figure of the reanimated *Petrushka* reappears above the puppet theater, menacing the *Charlatan* from afar only to collapse to his second death - putting to doubt the question of what is real and what not.

The original plot puts at its center a world where the real and the imaginary overlap - the world of humans and that of the dolls. The *Petrushka* doll, a local Russian version of the commedia dell'arte's Pulcinella figure, was a common hand puppet in popular street theaters such as at the Shrovetide fair.

Though they were familiar with its origins, the Stavinsky-Benois script highly detours from the puppet's traditional characterization as a vile, murderous trickster, and rather exceptionally portray him as a loney, awkward, doll, eventually being the victim in the story instead of the perpetrator.

The concept of a doll coming to life was prominent in 19th century ballet and opera all over Europe, from *Coppelia* to the *Nutcracker*. Nonetheless, in most of these plots there is a clear separation (by dream or trickery) between the human world and that of the puppets. *Petrushka* offers a more ambiguous overlapping of these worlds and brings to question more significantly the mere possibility for clear distinction between what is real and what is imagined, bringing together society and the phantoms (or puppet) that haunt it.

In this new version of *Petrushka* the notion of the puppet takes on a variety of different interpretations, appearing in both material and metaphorical ways. With a completely different setting and plot line, the tormented struggle with human emotion, portrayed originally by *Petrushka*, is no longer reserved for the doll, but rather an omnipresence.

Reimagining *Petrushka*

The first striking difference between the original production of *Petrushka* and the current one, appears with the opening of the curtains. Whereas the original production and Benois' lavish decor and costumes celebrate in colorful detail the vibrant Shrovetide fairground, with its specific Russian 19th century urban backdrop, Rothschild's vision (with stage designer Eva Veronica Born) sets her plot in a vast colorless wilderness with no urban, carnival or for that matter any societal feature at sight. It is now a desolate, arid landscape that bears no tangible reference to a specific time, place or culture, thus suggesting this initially predominantly Russian tale as an ubiquitous allegory.

The festive carnival goers of the original piece have turned here into an intoxicated, violent mob. No longer the delighted mass, consuming their distractions at the fair, but rather one that finds its amusement brawling in crude mayhem. We are thrust into their grotesque altercation as it is already unfolding, without reason as to how it was instigated, as though this is the constant state of affairs in this imagined world. The *Crowd* seems as from a declined society, once, perhaps heterogeneous and civilized but now wallowing in brutality. Where the original scenario, choreography and costumes made detailed emphasis on the variety of the fair comers based on a signification of their class or occupation, here their societal background is implied by the variety of dark outfits (by Teresa Vergho), their silhouettes alluding to a status they might have once had, but which is now equally tattered as they all uniformly take part as perpetrators in the gruesome rampage.

In the first part of the opening scene, Rothschild works in distinct contradiction to Stravinsky's ever changing musical composition. Whereas Fokine used the rapid rhythmic transformations to accentuate the distinct groups or individuals one at a time in accordance to the changing score, here Rothschild ties the occurrences and figures together, closely intertwining them in a defying continuous slow motion. Playing against the music, the choreography translates the intense collisions of the musical collage

narratively rather than rhythmically, while the rhythmic gap between them creates a grotesque effect on the entangled violent chaos portrayed on stage.

As the drum roll appears in the middle of the first scene announcing originally the arrival of *The Charlatan*, this here marks the end of the prolonged altercation that results in one individual from *The Crowd - The Mortal* - collapsing on the ground. *The Crowd* now syncs to the score, shifting into an entranced unison, as though activated by an invisible hand. Moving in unity, as though lacking personal will, they portray a set of suppressed, fabricated emotions. A sense of horror and sorrow emerges within them, at first somewhat artificially but gradually dissolving into a manifestation of possible cumbersome remorse.

As in the 1911 production, here too scenes two and three are the more intimate parts of the plot. Nonetheless, unlike in the original ballet where they take place in the interior chambers of the puppets, as to portray their inner life, here we are left in the same barren landscape where the plot continues. There is no spatial distinction between “inner” and “outer” worlds and the idea of the puppet takes on new forms where different kinds of puppets appear alongside their puppeteers, unraveling the binding relations between them.

In the second scene, we remain with the almost lifeless *Mortal* and a small group from *The Crowd*. At the sight of this individual’s near demise, a latent sentiment of empathy emerges within the group now turned into caregivers, as they nurse him as solicitous puppeteers, struggling to keep him alive. Placing the scene on the score that was originally *Petrushka*’s solo in his room, Stravinsky’s bitonality for the puppet’s theme no longer portrays the ambiguous traits and inner conflicts of the doll grappling with its human emotions, but rather a struggle between the will to hold on to life and the inevitable surrender to its expiration. And it is only when faced with the frailty of mortality, that the possibility of a more compassionate human interaction is introduced.

In Rothschild’s storyline, scene three is where the appearance of the puppet takes on a palpable form when a lifesize puppet *Donkey* (fabricated by Jan Maillard) enters the space, operated by eight dancers. The image of the donkey does not stem from the original *Petrushka* (not even from the fourth scene’s masquerade), but complies with Rothschild’s usage of animal puppets in her earlier work as figures that absurdly expose human vulnerability.

The donkey has a mixture of qualities attributed to it. Though known for its steadiness and loyalty, it is mostly regarded in popular culture as an un-esteemed animal lacking grace or wit, and is often abused. It was nonetheless a source of worship in ancient cultures, as well as a symbol of peace, and referred to in the scriptures, both in Judaism and christianity, as the chosen animal to carry the prophet. Here, *The Donkey*’s appearance is navigated through the oriental score that Stravinsky originally assumed for *The Moor*. He is wandering in the barren space, infusing it with a preposterous dreamlike aura. Clumsy and unpretentious, it portrays an eerie reminiscence of plain innocence which later literally disassembles to its core at the harsh sight of *The Mortal*’s body grasping with his last breaths. The puppet’s mysterious presence can be seen as a mediator to an afterlife or as marking a shift into a mythical world which will ensue.

The fourth scene takes on a gloomy form, as *The Crowd* re-enters the space defeated, in a dance macabre of sorts. *The Mortal* is among them. The somber atmosphere stands in sharp contrast to the lively score which originally took us back to the bustling carnival scene. From within this new state of

being the mythical and the physical worlds merge, and sorrow and grief shape into a new and peculiar rite of worship where *The Donkey* is given a sacrificial role through which *The Crowd* regroups. This leads to a collective reenactment of trauma, commemorating the *Mortal* and thus recognizing their own mortality, in a memento mori of sorts.

In some sense Rothschild's interpretation draws a connection between *Petrushka* and Stravinsky's following ballet score - *The Rite of Spring*. It proposes a reversed line where a distracted, unleashed civilization is pulled back to its violent pagan roots. The turbulent *Petrushka* score, with its pronounced clash between musical cultures, is realized here as a vision of humanity struck by the consequences of its inherent primordial brutality.

In the original production of *Petrushka* the end of the plot was unresolved until the very last dress rehearsal when Fokine came up with the idea of *Petrushka's* pantomime after his reappearance on the theater's rooftop, haunting the *Charlatan* in the emptied fairground, then collapsing to his second death. In Rothschild's variation, death likewise reappears in the end of the closing scene where the last moments of *The Mortal* are collectively replicated and replayed by the now more docile *Crowd*. Here the return of the repressed appears more as a ceremonial summoning, a shared performance of death. Will we be able to find compassion and heal after all what we have done to each other?