

# ESCAPE

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## Revolutionising puppet theatre

**Naima Morelli discovers the tale of Coppelia, a modern-day puppeteer and her Siberian master.**

There are only two people in the world who have mastered the wrist puppet technique. One is cybernetics engineer Vladimir Zakharov from Tomsk, Siberia. The other is Jilenia Biffi, an Italian girl living in Tuscany, who goes under the stage name of Coppelia.

In the early 1990s, Zakharov revolutionised puppet theatre by inventing wrist puppets. These marionettes bend their wooden arms, blink, move their fingers and talk, manipulated by the puppeteer's barely perceptible hand movements. "I saw Vladimir performing at a festival in Parma," says Coppelia. "I fell in love with his wrist puppet and I immediately set out to Siberia to take private lessons." She stayed in Tomsk for three months. "Vladimir is a one-man theatre. He is the light technician, costume designer, script writer, set designer and voice actor."

With her vintage clothing, cropped hair and remarkable face, Coppelia looks like a character out of a steampunk comic book. She was born in the province of Milan, and in her childhood was influenced by the local Meneghino marionette traditional shows. "It was something very different from my current research, but perhaps it is what sparked my early interest in this particular form of theatre."

### How was Coppelia Theatre born?

It all started five years ago, when I decided to have a career change after a serious motorbike accident. The doctors said I wouldn't be able to walk again without crutches. I proved them wrong – now I can even walk in heels. At the same time, I felt I deserved a gift. That's why I went back to my childhood dream, leaving my previous life behind. I found a teacher and next thing I knew, I was off to Siberia. When I returned to Italy I reconnected with my old friend Valentina Vertigo, a talented video-maker. That's how our project started, exploring both cinema and theatre. From there it has grown exponentially thanks to collaborations.

### What were you doing prior to puppeteering?

In my 20s I was pursuing an academic career. I have two degrees, one in science of education and a second in anthropology. I was always interested in both science and art, coming from an artistic lyceum. You can find these two aspects commingling in our shows. The scientific side is key, together with the alchemic and philosophical element.

### Can you tell me about the first meeting with your teacher Vladimir Zackarov?

It was one of the biggest emotional moments of my life; a defining moment. I was 33 when I started looking for a maestro to learn marionettes. I wasn't that young and I felt I didn't have time to waste. I have been taught to always shoot for the stars, so I picked the five teachers I liked the most in the whole world and stalked them. I had been lucky to see Vladimir's show in Italy. It was beautiful, it unsettled me. It was poetic and technologically complex at the same time. At the end of the show I was in tears and I went straight to him asking him to take me as his student – just like they used to do back in the 400s.

### How was your experience in Russia?

Wonderful. I'm from the North, so I immediately fell in love with the snow and the Russian people. I believe snow develops intelligence. Russians are deep intellectuals. Tomsk is a university city, very lively with lots of art and theatres. I loved the place, but I couldn't stay long-term because of visa restrictions. The maximum stay allowed is three-and-a-half-months. Because of the nuclear powerplants there are still many restrictions, even if the situation is improving compared to the past.

### Tell us about your maestro.

Vladimir is a genius. He is Ukrainian by blood and studied engineering in Tomsk. He went into the woods to cut wood and he built his theatre with his own hands. His place looks like a chalet from outside, but inside you find an amphitheatre and several workshops. Vladimir's background as an engineer is evident in the complexity of the automatons and marionettes that he builds.



### **How did your apprenticeship work?**

In three months I learned to build the marionettes and control them. It was a bit of a mess, because Vladimir didn't speak any Italian and I didn't speak Russian. But I learned by observing and imitating. One day a week we had an English translator, Vladimir's partner Olga. I gathered all my doubts for that particular day, and I was able get all my questions answered.

### **Were there other students?**

No, it was just him and me. It's only the two of us in the world that know the complete technique. Vladimir had another pupil, but he only got as far as learning how to move the head joint. Sometimes, marionette buyers learn how to partially move them. It is important, though, to have built the puppet yourself in order to work it out and to know how to repair its fragile mechanism. You know, to do theatre you don't really need to learn such a difficult technique. It's a very particular pathology, wanting to learn marionettes. But I'm a workshop girl, not an actress. I love this form of theatre mediated by the object.

### **On a visual level, your shows are inspired by the Spanish-Mexican surrealist painter Remedios Varo. Where does the interest in this artist come from?**

Remedios Varo was an incredible woman. I came to know about her work through some friends' libraries and got my hands on a book about her by Diego Sileo. I first read the book back in 2007, way before thinking of Coppelia Theatre. When it came to deciding on a theme for our company's show, though, I had to look no further.

### **After the lights go off, you not only explain who Remedios Varo was, but also describe the wrist puppets technique, giving the public a bit of the back story. Why do you do this?**

Yes, that's very important to us. We always look for a connection with the public – which is harder in animation theatre compared to traditional theatre. As for Remedios, there is this historiographical problem with women in surrealism. For centuries, they have been misrepresented only as muses. That wasn't true – many women gave blood, sweat and tears for their art. Among them, Remedios was the one I love the most.

### **What about the role of collaborations in Coppelia Theatre?**

At Coppelia Theatre we have a hybrid range of competences. We like to bring together music, costumes and puppets. The original piece is a concert as well, with original music for piano, musical saw and cello played live. There is interaction between cinema, theatre, animation, painting and sculpture. The marionettes themselves are not just symbols; I spend three months making a puppet because I want to create an artistic object, a unique piece with strong formal research.

### **Coppelia Theatre is based in Italy but also works abroad. Where are your next horizons?**

We are working on two different plans; the live shows and the animation cinema. We are going to film a new video and tour festivals, theatres and art galleries. Also, we are planning to work abroad more and more – that's where the money to sustain our production and research is.

But we don't want to abandon Italy. We are developing a network called Araneum Artis. Seven women in seven centres scattered between Tuscany, Latium and Campania. We are building this independent cultural centre to make up for the lack of institutional support. In short, we will just work and fight as Valkyries to keep on doing what we love.