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Arti dello Spettacolo / Performing Arts

Vera Komissarzhevskaya meets Eleonora Duse

The “Joan of Arc” of the Russian scene and the “Divina” of Italian theatre

edited by Donatella Gavrilovich - Gabriella Elina Imposti

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Bearers of Light: The Search for the Sacred in Vera Komissarzhevskaya and Wassily Kandinsky

Donatella Gavrilovich (Translated by Gabriele Poole)

Any comparison between Wassily Kandinsky, the theorist of non-figurative art, and actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya may seem rather daring. Even more daring the idea that they may have influenced one another in their respective fields. However, from the end of the nineteenth century to first two decades of the twentieth century, the interaction among the arts was so strong that it is more productive to avoid rigidly focusing one's analysis on individual disciplines. The idea of a relation between the two artists was suggested by a series of considerations, derived from their writings and from the motivations of their artistic research, which have led me to identify a common ground.

Wassily Kandinsky and Vera Komissarzhevskaya were almost the same age. They grew up in the same cultural atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Russia. For both, the main objective was freeing themselves from the grasp of the dominant positivist materialism through a spiritual refinement based on the concepts of inner necessity and of "Light".

In 1888, Vera Komissarzhevskaya wrote to Vera Soloveva¹:

[...] people who renounce, to the extent that it is possible, their private life for something higher [...] will never fall under the first blow of destiny, so generous in dispensing them; these people never lower their hands, they recoup and advance again, ready for anything, for the sake of a little flame shining far far away, even if they can only see that little flame, even if they will not reach it, yet it shines for them, it gives strength, faith, thanks to which they will do something, some more, some less, but at least they will do something².

Curiously, some time later, Kandinsky echoed her words. At the beginning of his famous theoretical work *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Concerning the Spiritual in Art), published in 1911 in Munich, but whose first version was dated 1904, Kandinsky spoke of «the encircling darkness», the period in which every spiritual tension had been suffocated and life was reduced to its mere material aspect:



Fig. 1 Photo portrait. Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 1906. (Ju. Rybakova, *V. F. Komissarževskaja. Letopis' žizni i tvorčestva*, Ros.Ins.Ist.Iskusstv, Sankt Peterburg 1994).



Fig. 2 Photo portrait by anonymous author. Wassily Kandinsky. 1913 ca. (W. Kandinsky, *Rückblicke*, Sturm Verlag, Berlin 1913).



Fig. 3 Vera Komissarzhevskaya in the role of Desdemona in Othello di W. Shakespeare. 1900. Alexandrinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg. "A.A. Bakhrushin" State Theatre Museum, Moscow.

This nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, has not yet past. The awakening soul, while trying to free itself, is still under its domination. Only a feeble light flickers, like a tiny star, in the vast encircling darkness. As a presentiment, the soul does not as yet courageously admit its fear, that the light might be a dream and the encircling darkness, reality³.

The little flame burning in the distance, the flicker in the encircling darkness is transformed for both in a hypostasis of knowing, in a light that unveils the hidden essence of things and opens the dimension of the *sacred*. The creation of form for Komissarzhevskaya came from an inner necessity, a spiritual need that involved all her being:

[...] only one thing is important, that in one's soul the part one has acted has remained impressed... If you are seized by the inspiration, then the keys must start playing, which up to now had remained silent inside of you, and there suddenly the desire arises to sing, to say something new through these keys [...]⁴.

In his book, Kandinsky expresses himself in similar terms: «The soul is a piano of many strings. The artist is the hand through which the medium of different keys causes the human soul to vibrate»⁵. A lover of music and of the theater, considered as the ideal place for the synthesis of all arts, Kandinsky opposed naturalism, using music as an example of a language emancipated from the imitation of reality. With a reference to the exaggerations of Stanislavsky's theater, Kandinsky wrote:

The imitation of the sound of croaking frogs, noises on a chicken farm, the sharpening of knives may be worthy of a vaudeville stage and may be very entertaining as an amusement. In serious music, however, such digressions can only constitute a warning against the failure of "representing nature". Nature has its own language which has an irresistible power over us. This language cannot be imitated. If a chicken farm is represented in music in order to create thereby the atmosphere [*Stimmung*] of nature and with it present this atmosphere to the hearer, we find that this is an impossible and unnecessary problem. Such a feeling can be created by any art, not by outward imitation of nature, but by artistic representation of this atmosphere through its innermost values⁶.

Kandinsky's criticism is echoed by the spontaneous, but no less penetrating comment by Komissarzhevskaya on the acting of the Moscow Art Theater: «They surprise me with their skill, but I do not feel in them the aroma of life»⁷. Even though, ever since her debut in 1889, public and critics had described her acting as anti-conventional, simple and realistic, it had nothing to do with Stanislavsky's naturalism. Instead, both Komissarzhevskaya and Kandinsky shared an anti-naturalistic tendency born out of the same internal necessity, which led them to a form of lyrical ab-

stractionism in their respective fields.

Led by the desire to express on the stage her particular vision of life and of the world, Komissarzhevskaya tried to arrive at the essence of things through intuition and to express them and communicate them to the public in a simple fashion. Similarly, for Kandinsky it was the voice of the soul that dictated the necessary form, extracting it from external or internal nature⁸, and the work of art was born mysteriously, in ways which at times he himself did not understand. Both artists believed that it was pointless to imitate reality, but neither did they reject it and find refuge in ivory towers. The relation with nature was indeed essential for them.

In many letters written by Komissarzhevskaya during her tours in Russia, we find lyrical descriptions of landscapes, from the sun parched expanses of the Asian deserts to the sea at night in Crimea. During her work breaks, Komissarzhevskaya enjoyed taking long walks alone in the countryside. Of the places in which she wandered for hours, she absorbed the smells and enjoyed the emotions, turning her thoughts to the intrinsic spirituality of all things, to their existing in an eternal becoming. «Nature reinforced her determination to achieve a great artistic creation»⁹. In the same way, during his formative years in Odessa, Moscow, Achtyrka and Abramtsevo, Kandinsky began by painting studies of the landscape and of natural elements in transformation, like the clouds and the light¹⁰, and, through a process of formal internalization of his subject, gradually arrived at abstractionism. In the same years, the painter Michail Vrubel¹¹ was searching for lyrical correspondences and consonances between the cosmos and the individual, while the writer and painter Elena Guro was orienting her theoretical work towards an animistic conception. For Guro, the universe was a pulsating being in all its forms, communicating with all its parts and in which every part merged with the others in a global connection¹². In 1913, Kandinsky too arrived on his own to a similar view:

Everything "dead" trembled. Not only the stars, moon, woods, flowers of which the poets sing, but also a cigarette butt lying in the ashtray, a patient white trouser button looking in the street [...]

everything shows me its face, its innermost being, its secret soul, which is more often silent than heard. Thus every still and every moving point (=line) became equally alive and revealed its soul to me¹³.

Guro, too, searched for the secret essence of things. She intuited the existence of a threshold between the visible and the invisible, which she had to gradually learn how to cross. Guro had grown up in the countryside near Luga, while Komissarzhevskaya had grown up in the estate of Marino near Vilnius. Both had come into contact with the nature of the North, which ancient Pagan religion and folk tales described as being animated. They both perceived its beat, they felt themselves “inside” the water of the brook freeing itself from the grip of the ice or the heart of a birch tree.

«God, how I love the spring!», wrote Komissarzhevskaya, «It is so dear to me and how I believe in it [...] The snow is already dying [...] The shrubs, the brooks, the grass timorously, shyly is already reawakening to life, they feel that only a little effort is required and that there will be no obstacles [...] And I with them feel my liberation»¹⁴.

In the novel, *Bednyi Rycar'* (The Poor Knight)¹⁵, written between 1910 and 1913,

but published in Russia only in 1991, Guro wrote:

They¹⁶ woke up in the heart of the birch tree and the small branches of the tree sprung around them like a cloud. And she knew that the meaning of the tree was the heart and the halo. The heart is tied to the depth of the earth and the branches belong to the sun and the air, that is to the sky. Under the ground, the roots reproduce upside down the halo of the crown and in this lies the immense meaning for the dark earth¹⁷.



Fig. 5 Illustration. Elena Guro, *The Poor Knight*. 1911. Gouache. (E. Guro, *Nebesnye verbljuzhata*, Izdastelstvo Rostovskogo universiteta, Rostov-na-Don 2014, p. 163).



Fig. 4 W. Kandinsky, *Composition VII*. 1913. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Contact with nature stimulated the same perception in Guro and in Komissarzhevskaya: that of “being in” a single magical flow of vital and positive energy. They inebriated themselves reaching a sort of ecstasy that left them dazed after having perceived in a moment the very essence of the animate or inanimate being with which they had come into contact. It was not a transformation into something else but rather a current of energy, which hit the senses and shook them with the force of the emotions and sensations going from one being to the other, connecting every element to the whole that lives all around us, the organism that breathes our same breath. Emotions and sensations that Kandinsky also felt when watching the sun set over Moscow:

The sun melts all Moscow into one spot which, like a mad tuba, sets one's whole inside, one's whole soul vibrating. [...] Pink, lavender, yellow, white, blue, pistachio green, flame-red houses, churches—each an independent song—the raving green grass, the deep murmuring trees, or the snow, singing with a thousand voices [...] To paint this hour, I thought, would be the most impossible and the greatest joy of an artist.

These impressions repeated themselves every sunny day. They were a pleasure which shook me to the bottom of my soul, which raised me to ecstasy¹⁸.

Inner necessity, animism, imagination and artistic ecstasy led these artists to the dimension of the sacred, to the creation of a world that was no longer divided «[...] in *I* and *not I* [...] but is absolutely permeable to light [...] breathes the proximity of Christ»¹⁹. This view was inspired by the aesthetics of Savva Mamontov²⁰, which following the philosophical humanitarianism of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, was based on the universal concepts of Truth (Faith) and Beauty (Art), not in opposition to one another but in a harmonic equilibrium. Painting, song, dance or drama had to lead spectators to perceive the force of the divine energy that had created its finished form. Mamontov inspired all the most important Russian artists of the late nineteenth century who joined his Moscow circle and then the colony in Abramtsevo, and adopted his motto of searching for and expressing “Truth in Beauty”²¹. Abramtsevo was the birthplace of the Russian “Renaissance”, where the likes of his wife's nephew Stanislavsky and his contemporary Wassily Kandinsky developed artistically. Kandinsky was introduced to the circle by his father²², a Siberian merchant and a friend of the Mamontov, as well as a passionate lover of Byzantine art and Russian folklore²³. Here Kandinsky had a chance to learn from important painters, like Ilya Repin, Wassily Polenov, the Vasnetsov brothers and Vrubel, who guided him in the study of drawing, graphic arts and painting²⁴. This artistic family included relatives and friends, who participated with the same spirit in the production of theatrical performances²⁵. Among these were

also the tenor Fedor Komissarzhevsky and his daughter Vera²⁶. In Mamontov's vision, the spectator was like a brother²⁷ with whom one had to share the experience of spiritually refining oneself through art. This was distinct from the principles of both the St. Petersburg symbolists, who saw themselves as priests of arts performing a ritual in front of the faithful, and those of director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who invoked «cells of creative solitude», the theater as hermitage, the actors as *raskolniki* [dissenters] and invited artists to «despise the crowd»²⁸. It was precisely the question of the relation with the public that led to the break between Meyerhold and Komissarzhevskaya in 1907²⁹. Unlike Meyerhold, Komissarzhevskaya wanted to share with the public/people the miracle of artistic creation. Kandinsky had a similar vision: his desire to “make the viewer enter the painting” meant establishing an interaction between the person observing the painting and the author of the work through the medium of visual signs. The painting, like the character on the stage for Komissarzhevskaya, was not a mere professional product. In both artistic expressions it was possible to discern the sacred gesture of the artist that had generated it. Kandinsky wrote that the work of art «becomes an entity, an independent spiritual life, which as a being» and that the artist was a priest, a «servant of the highest whose duties are precise, great, and holy»³⁰. Komissarzhevskaya had a similar view:

She believed that human fantasy imbued with feelings was capable of penetrating a deep world, to find the key to the enigma of life, and the actor for her was a priest, a shaman, a person capable of immersing himself into the spiritual recesses. [...] She did not base herself on the axioms that were mandatory for everyone, on the fact that two times two is four, but she approached her theater methods through intuition, guided by her faith in the fact that art sheds light “on the very roots of life”. Those who were close to the theater knew, [...] with what joy for artistic creation her nature lived and burned, eternally agitated, full of fantasy and ecstasy³¹.



Fig. 6 Studio of Elena Mrozovskaja. Photo portrait of Vera Komissarzhevskaya in the role of Rosi in *The Battle of the Butterflies* by H. Sudermann. 1896. Alexandrinsky Theatr, Saint Petersburg.

The young actors and directors Michail Chekhov³² and Evgeny Vakhtangov, like the dancer and choreographer Kasyan Goleizovsky³³ were attracted to this aesthetic vision that the actress, the painter and the writer Guro communicated to them in different ways and at different times. Vakhtangov³⁴ and Komissarzhevskaya, in particular, had a lot in common in their ways of conceiving the theater and sharing the experience of the search for Truth and Beauty. Between 1900 and 1903, for example, the actress signed some of

her letters to Khodotov, whom she considered one of her pupils, with the pseudonym, “Your Light”³⁵ and Vakhtangov, too, often used the word. For example, in a letter of 1918 sent to all members of the Council of his Studio he writes: «Because the light that you, thanks to me, bring now out of here, to other groups, was brought to you by me»³⁶. Komissarzhevskaya and Vakhtangov, like Kandinsky, felt to be the bearers of a truth that had to be protected, spread and handed down to posterity.

For this reason, I call them “bearers of Light”.

Their artistic experience, aimed at rediscovering spirituality in life and in the arts, is usually seen as part of the mystical philosophical and literary milieu of Russian Symbolism. However, if one considers other areas, such as visual arts or archeology, it is possible to develop different interpretations, which open unexplored horizons especially in regards to acting.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Vrubel rediscovered sacred art, which had dominated Russia up to the time of Peter the Great, and gave it new life, grafting the modern vitality of painting from life onto the Byzantine compositional stereotype³⁷. He rediscovered the sacred character of art through the rituality of the gesture of the icon painter, who believed himself to be only an instrument in the hands of God and his work an epiphany of the Truth. Let us think now of the complex meaning that the term *obraz* still has in Russian theater³⁸. This term refers to the image that acquires an autonomous life on the stage, the very essence of the character. If we think that the first meaning of *obraz* is “sacred image, icon”, one can hypothesize its derivation from the ancient concept of icon as



Fig. 7 Michail Vrubel, *Demon Seated*. 1890. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

talking image of the divine. The form acted by the actor in the theater becomes a “being” and acquires a “personality” in the same way a devotional painting does.

But what was the spiritual path that the actor had to follow in order to conceive this form, to materialize it on the stage and communicate it to the spectator? And did the “inner necessity”, which mysteriously governed the creation of this form, described by Kandinsky, Komissarzhevskaya and later Michail Chekhov, have a common origin?

The inner necessity arose from the same desire to open a path through the “encircling darkness” of materialism, freeing oneself at the same time from the ties of Western culture. In 1890, Vrubel painted *Demon Seated* with an explicit reference to Mamontov’s titanic work to bring about the rebirth of all arts in Russia. The demon represented the spiritual greatness of the Russian soul in its visceral union with the primitive elements from which it had been generated.

In a letter to his sister, Vrubel explained that the term *demon*³⁹ (demon) had nothing to do with the Russian word *bes* (devil), but came from the ancient Greek *δαίμων* which meant soul. The demon «[...] seeks to pacify the passions that seize it and the knowledge of life and does not find the answer to his doubts neither on Earth, nor in heaven»⁴⁰. The etymology of the term was not so important to Vrubel in itself, as much as an evidence of the role of ancient Greek as one of the matrixes of the Slavic language. The demon came from the dark abyss of Greek tragedy, from the man sung by the chorus of the first stasimon of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, and announced an epochal revolution: the transition for matriarchal to patriarchal society. And it was precisely in matriarchy that Slavophile artists identified the other original root of the culture and religion of the ancient Slavs, which the Russian people jealously preserved and handed down through fairy tales, myths, folk songs and the cult of the Humid Mother Earth. The *nòmina*, the ancient non-written laws of the gods, were the expression of matriarchy⁴¹. They became obsolete with the rise of patriarchy. Antigone had appealed to the universal laws of the sacred, which did not acknowledge the authority of the *nomos* and of the *tyrannos*. More than a thousand years later, the *nòmina* continue to be invoked in Russia in order to rediscover the sacred aspect of life in a world that is losing it. Rediscovering the sacred meant finding the ancient balance that connected every animate and inanimate being to the cosmos. The words of Antigone, who refused any compromise and rejected Creon’s reasons of state with the words: «ούτοι συνέχθειν, αλλά συνφιλειν έφυν»⁴², were echoed in every gesture and in the behaviour of Vera Komissarzhevskaya, both in her life and on the stage.



Fig. 8 Walter Crane, *The Swan Maidens*. 1894. Oil and mixed technique on paper. Private collection.

The actress publicly sided in defense of the victims of the *progroms* and of the reprisals for the failed revolution of 1905. She fought against the oppression of the people and especially of women. She refused to compromise with Stanislavsky, who, against her, had privately reintroduced the abolished “monopoly” of playwrights. She used the theater to awaken the consciousness of the people and fight against the prevailing materialism in the name of authenticity, human dignity and the sacredness of life. In her fight, Vera Komissarzhevskaya was not alone. At the dawn of the twentieth century a thousand Antigones rose in Europe and rebelled against the dominant logic of bourgeois power which had undermined the ancient ethical principles, reducing human beings to mere “personas”⁴³, in order to rediscover an identity independent of the roles decided by society.

Poets, painters, playwrights were quick to perceive this change, which destabilized men’s certainties, representing the new woman alternatively as a prostitute, a *femme fatale*, angel woman, the eternal feminine. Particularly significant was the transfiguration of the female body into that of a bird or a fish, found in many graphic and pictorial works of the time,

such as the famous illustrations for Wilde's *Salomé* (1893) by Audrey Beardsley or Walter Crane's painting *The Swan Maidens* (1894), which depicted different stages of mutation, with obvious references to Greek and Northern myths, and, in particular, to that of the ancient Greek sirens, the bird-like beings who seduced and devoured men⁴⁴.

This ambiguous representation of woman as siren, butterfly, bird or serpent, a fascinating but dangerous creature, was transformed into a positive one by woman artists, who turned it into an expression of freedom and rebirth. Loïe Fuller transfigured dance wrapping her body in long veils, creating the kinetic image of a flower that opens, of a butterfly in flight, or the spires of a serpent. Isadora Duncan danced bare-footed, following the movement of the waves, evoking lyrical images. Vera Komissarzhevskaya based the rhythm of her speech on breathing and introduced songs, music and dance even where the stage directions did not call for it⁴⁵.



Fig. 9 Vera Komissarzhevskaya in the role of Nora, *Tarantella*, in *Doll House* by H. Ibsen. 1904.

Komissarzhevskaya's Dramatic Theater, Saint Petersburg. "A.A. Bakhrushin" State Theatre Museum, Moscow.

All of them had in common the same extraordinary energy, based on the rhythm of natural

drives that surged, evoking something that went beyond them as individuals.

It was no chance that it was these three artists, two North-Americans and a Russian, who determined a radical change of direction in dance and theater.

In 1900, Vrubel, painted the *Swan Princess*, once again a hybrid figure, a face of a woman on the body of a swan, wearing a pearl diadem on her forehead. The enormous eyes of this fairy-tale creature, taken for the story of the Czar Saltan, evoked the eyes of Komissarzhevskaya who in October 1896 had played for the first time Nina Zarechnaya, in Chekov's *The Seagull*. Komissarzhevskaya felt the deep meaning of the identification of Nina with this totemic animal, and made it her own.

They gave me the role of the Seagull a few days before the show, I didn't know the play. The first time I read *The Seagull* at night. I cried the entire night. In the morning I loved *The Seagull*, it was mine, I had lived through the soul of the Seagull.... Being like the Seagull is my bliss⁴⁶.

The "δαίμων", expression of ancient patriarchal Greek society, had become incarnated after thousands of years in the body of a woman. The ancient "bird goddess," the only one capable of connecting the human to the divine, and the earth to the heavens, was reborn to give voice to the unwritten laws, to what is eternal and sacred. And Vera Komissarzhevskaya, this new Scythian Amazon with wings, had become the expression of a matriarchal society that the Russian people had never forgotten, preserving its memory through rituals and symbols, through fairy-tales, myths and songs, and, especially, through the cult of the Humid Mother Earth. She was the Russian expression of a divinity common in all the prehistoric world: the Great Mother⁴⁷.

For thousands of years, classic culture had tried to repress, like Apollo had fought Python, any symbolic element associated to the matriarchal tradition. Symbols like the serpent, the winged Sirens, the Sphinxes, the Harpies, were transformed into horrible monsters, even though they remained deeply embedded in the collective unconscious.

In nineteenth century Russia, the cult of the ancient pagan divinities survived alongside Christianity in the so-called *Dvoeverie* (Double Faith)⁴⁸ and the Russian artists began to search for a national identity in this matriarchal culture, in what remained of it, turning their gaze to the Orient.

The painter Natalia Goncharova wrote:

I have gone through all that the West could give, up to the present, and also through all that my homeland has created based on the West. Now I shake the dust off my feet and leave the West, for I believe its meaning to be extremely superficial and irrelevant. My road leads to the original source of all the arts, towards the East⁴⁹.

And it was in Siberia, in the valleys of Altai, that, between 1863 and 1869, Wassily Radlov⁵⁰ had carried out an archeological campaign, bringing to light 150 Scythian *kurgan* (tombs), in which a large number of objects and sculptures made of ceramics, wood, gold and other materials were found⁵¹. The results of the campaign were published by Radlov in German and Russian between 1882 and 1896⁵². Radlov explained the myths and the world view of the Scythians⁵³, writing a study on Shamanism, which was still practiced in those regions. The interest of Russian intellectuals was enormous and grew even greater in 1899 with the publication of the first volume of *Russkie drevnosti* (Russian Antiquities)⁵⁴, which for the first time gathered in a single study all the Scythian finds recovered until then. In the study, the authors hypothesized the existence of a close relation, a sort of ancient connection, between the populations that had settled in the Russian steppes in Asia and Europe. Thus the Scythian became an archetype of the Russian national identity. Through its folk art, which lacked any monumental works, it became possible to connect Slavic Russia to the ancient world⁵⁵. This connection influenced late nineteenth-century Russian art and the Russian Avant-Garde. All this fueled the love for the motherland, which had been invoked by the Slavophile movement since the first half of the nineteenth century against Western customs and culture, brought to Russia at the time of Peter the Great. If one recalls that Savva Mamontov was Siberian, one understand the reasons that lead him to act as a patron of the studies on Slav folklore, popular art, epic poems and myths. In 1879, Mamontov commissioned to the painter Viktor Vasnetsov a series of paintings on these subjects⁵⁶, including *Boi skifov so slavyanami* (The Battle of the Scythians against the Slavs) painted in 1881, which gave an heroic and dramatic import to the clash between the two people, which in reality never occurred. In 1879 and 1904, Slavophile Mamontovian musicians, painters, singers and writers began an experimental collaboration that laid the foundations for the future achievements in all the arts. Among these was Vrubel who wrote:

I am now again in Abramtsevo⁵⁷ and again I am pervaded, no, I'm not pervaded, rather I feel in me that intimate national melody that I would love to fix on canvas and in decorations. It is the music of the entire man, the one not dismembered by the abstraction of the ordered, differentiated and pale West⁵⁸.

In 1896, Vasnetsov painted *Sirin i Alkonost. Pticy radosti i pečati* (Sirin and Alkonost. Birds of Joy and Sorrow)⁵⁹ and, in 1897, *Gamayun, ptitsa veshchaya* (Gamayun, prophetic bird), Sirin, Alkonost and Gamayun were the birds of the Slav paradise, with the heads of women and the body of birds. Vera Komissarzhevskaya was particularly impressed by *Gamayun, prophetic bird*.



Fig. 10 V. Vasnetsov, *Gamajun, prophetic bird*, 1897. Oil on canvas. The Daghestan Museum of Fine Arts, Makhachkala (Russia).

This mythological being had the gift of wisdom and of the knowledge of all things terrestrial and divine. The actress was so struck by the painting that she identified with the bird and began to sign some of her letters of 1900 with the pseudonym “Gamayun”.



Fig. 11 *Statuette of bird-woman*. 5900-5700 a.C. Sesklo, Megali Vrisi, Tirnavos, Thessalonica (M. Gimbutas, *Il Linguaggio della Dea*, Venexia, Roma 2008, p. 35).

Going beyond the usual opposition between Westerners and Slavophiles, all Russian intellectuals and artists applauded the advent of this new figurative theme, which opened a new vision of the world, of life and of the sacred, which had its roots in the *humus* of primitive matriarchal culture, antithetical to classic Greece. The mythological beings of the Slav paradise were not disquieting or terrifying like the harpies and winged Sirens of the Homeric tradition, which in those years we can find in Waterhouse's paintings or Doré's illustrations. Even the metamorphosis of the maidens into birds, typical of Russian fairy-tales, had no connection with Beardley's *femme fatale*. According to the those who studied them, these hybrid beings and their fairy-tales mutations had instead «archaic, totemic roots, dating back to the 'pamater' of the clan or to the Goddess»⁶⁰. The cult of the Great Goddess was common among the Scythians, but, according to Tamara Talbot Rice, the populations of Southern Russia had been adoring her for a long time as evidenced by the inclusion of numerous representations of her in funerary trousseaus⁶¹. This was confirmed by the Lithuanian archeologist Marija Gimbutas⁶², who first studied the small feminine statues of the Bird Goddess and the Serpent Goddess found in the most important sites of the Paleolithic and Neolithic in southern-eastern Europe.

Gimbutas interpreted them as representations of a single universal Great Divinity, namely the Great Mother⁶³. The serpent and the bird were considered as water creatures, sources of life, the key element of the feminine and their representation signified the rising of the goddess from the water to the sky. The prehistoric statues, unlike the mythological beings cited above, have woman bodies and their face covered with masks of birds or serpents, typical of Shaman rituals, common among ancient Scythians and still practiced in Siberia. In the Western patriarchal tradition (Greek myth and Christian symbology), the female body is transformed into that of an animal because it evokes lust and fear (consider the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch) and for this reason is perverse and damned. The face remains that of a woman in order to reassure, attract and

then destroy men. In prehistory, instead, the body of woman, because of its power to give birth, was considered a natural tie to the earthly, while the head was believed to be the seat of the spirit, the connection with the divine⁶⁴. For this reason the community limited exclusively to women this social function of mediator with the sacred. The face of the Shaman was covered by the totemic animal, which helped undo the ties with one's self and begin the "Shaman flight" for the good of the entire community. The ultimate meaning of Komissarzhevskaya's total identification with the "seagull", to whom she said she was tied for eternity, can be explained along these lines. To the end of her life, the actress held dear and played on stage two heroines: Larisa, the protagonist of *Bespridannitsa* (Without a Dowry, 1879) by Aleksandr Ostrovsky, and Nina, the protagonist of Chekov's *Chajka* (*The Seagull*, 1895).

As noted by Julia Rybakova, while in Chekhov's play, the seagull functions as a symbol of Nina, in Ostrovsky's play the identification between the protagonist and the seagull is more subtle and more profound, since the name Larisa itself comes from the ancient Greek word (*λάρος*) for seagull⁶⁵.

Both playwrights used the archetype of the bird-woman as a positive one, to convey the rebellion against the models imposed by bourgeois society and at the same time the desire for a rebirth and the affirmation of life and its values.



Fig. 12 Vera Komissarzhevskaya in the role of Larisa in *The Maiden with no Dowry* by A. Ostrovskij. 1896. Alexandrinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg. "A.A. Bakhrushin" State Theatre Museum, Moscow.

The fusion of the Komissarzhevskaya with her totemic animal remained deeply impressed in the collective imagination. It is interesting to note that the title chosen for the volume published *in memoriam* of Vera Komissarzhevskaya was “Alkonost”⁶⁶, the mythical bird-woman represented in Vasnetsov’s painting. After many years a Soviet scholar wrote of her: «Komissarzhevskaya’s acting itself was an invitation to ‘tempest’, to active protest, to action. In those years when the revolutionary movement was developing, Komissarzhevskaya had become the ‘stormy petrel’ of the Russian stage»⁶⁷.

The winged woman symbolized all the power of the shaman ritual of the “trip”. Only the bird-woman was capable of freeing herself from matter and rising to the skies, affirming the absolute aspiration to the sacred of the human being in its totality. She was capable of “journeying” in a *trance* to the world of spirits, going beyond the human to perform her “service” for the entire community. This social purpose distinguishes the idea of female shaman from that of the “priest of art” elaborated by the symbolists, which referred to an exclusive, intimate and personal relation with the divine: a sort of ecstasy, similar to that described by Christian saints and martyrs.

In Christianity, ecstasy was conceived as the cancellation of the self and identification with God, symbolically expressed through the concept of “Light”. In the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schelling rediscovered ecstasy⁶⁸. For Schelling, ecstasy was the infinite activity with which God had created the world, an experience humans could relive through *artistic ecstasy*, which was the tangible manifestation of the Absolute, in which the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind are joined in an harmonic synthesis leading to a cosmic communion with Nature⁶⁹. Schelling believed in complete circularity between Nature, the visible spirit, and Spirit, the invisible one. The concept of Nature thus represented the organic identity of spirit and matter. This vision was shared by Guro, Kandinsky and Komissarzhevskaya, but the original source was the cultural mix of Slavophilia, Pan-Slavism, the rediscovery of the myths of the ancient Slav and Scythian populations described above. In her letters, the only testimony of her ideas that has survived, Komissarzhevskaya repeatedly states that the words she uttered were the expression of the divine.

Not all is provisional and exterior, here now, in this moment, *eternity* speaks to You through me. Yes, yes, eternity, because rarely is my soul so concentrated, like now, and is so acute as to see everything, it can do this only in *those* instants, and I feel that I have to still go on living and *do something great*, and this awareness does not come from something superficial, something human, no, this is the voice

of the Almighty, and he who does not respond to my appeal in this moment commits a sin⁷⁰.

In 1902, Komissarzhevskaya wrote to the actor Khodotov: «The soul must reflect the eternal and the eternal means only one thing: the soul. This means that only one thing is important: the life of the soul in all its manifestations»⁷¹. From her debut in Vilnius, in 1894, Komissarzhevskaya surprised the public and the critics with silent scenes that “electrified” the spectators and left them speechless, with an action expressed through a gaze that had the intensity of electric current, arousing in viewers an «immense artistic pleasure»⁷². She was capable of arousing strong emotions that shook people, involving them in something that went beyond theater. In 1904, the critic V. Bozhovsky wrote that one could not speak of acting, because it was impossible to establish the boundary between the life of the artist and the life on the stage⁷³. At the end of each performance, the public would implore her to go on acting, they would cry, they would write thank you notes: they adored her. The photos taken at her funeral on February 19, 1910, in St. Petersburg, document the incredible crowd watching her hearse go by:

No Russian writer, artist, or politician ever had such a funeral. Her frail body was taken from Tashkent to St. Petersburg, from Asia to Europe, and at every station, at every village, the entire population would come to see it. The Russian people in tears bid her farewell⁷⁴.

What did Vera Komissarzhevskaya give to so many people? Why this veneration? They had nicknamed her Joan of Arc, because they acknowledged her as a leader, inspired and guided by God. In 1901 Nina Pavlovna Annenkova-Bernard wrote for her the play *Doch naroda* (The Daughter of the People), which the actress never staged. In 1902, however, she had considered staging it at the Aleksandrinsky Theater, and had offered Khodotov the following reasons:

Remember my feverish ardor when I spoke of Joan of Arc? Here everything must be decided. Even if this work were a hundred times weaker, it would be even more my testing ground, because in it I will be able to express or not be able to express my words,

not my words, but the open confession of my belief. If I am not capable of creating in this play, it means I am not an artist, it means that I cannot give myself to that in which *only* the Eternal speaks⁷⁵.

Thus, for her, being an artist meant giving herself, «[...] to that in which *only* the Eternal speaks»⁷⁶. Moving from this consideration, one must try to understand what type of “acting” communication Vera Komissarzhevskaya had adopted in order to transform the art of the stage into a sacred ritual. At the time, the witnesses were impressed with her singing accompanied by her guitar, by her magnetic eyes, the dance movements in which the actress’s body seemed to vibrate with a strong inner energy, the rhythm of the voice based on her breathing, her words as an expression of the divine or her appearance on stage in which «the scene seemed to light up in splendor»⁷⁷. All these aspects recall the experience of the shaman ritual, and the intense participation of the spectators, completely captivated by the Komissarzhevskaya’s presence on stage, also brings to mind the Shaman ritual in which the participation of the people is a fundamental aspect. One should also consider the social and political commitment of the actress in that convulsive moment in history. Vera Komissarzhevskaya did not interpret a character, nor did she identify with someone else, nor did she play herself: she transformed herself into what was different from her and what she brought to the stage was pure spirit. Through a gradual refining, from the Earth to the sky, Vera Komissarzhevskaya eventually brought on stage the pure essence, the eternally alive spirit of the character. Driven by an inner necessity, she gradually entered, through “hypostases of light”, into another dimension. Creating a theater of interiority was her dream. And Vera Komissarzhevskaya was able to achieve it almost unconsciously, because on the stage she experienced a sort of *trance*, of which she was only partially aware. She overcame reticence and fear in her effort to communicate to others the “Truth”, which drove her to speak, achieving this hypnotic state also off the stage.

Once I told You that when I had a run in with Samoilov in Vilnius⁷⁸, I gathered round some of the

people of the company and told them what I thought of the whole business. I talked for at least twenty minutes, without getting tongue-tied even once, with clarity, with passion, almost elegantly. And You know that I am not really capable of it and, when I returned home, I was completely exhausted, almost *as if I had been in a state of hypnosis* [emphasis mine]. Words often help people act deviously, find an expedient, do something despicable, but, *when the soul wishes to get rid of all this even for only a second and rise, the words too*⁷⁹, like everything in those moments, raises it and it cannot help, at least in that instant, speaking in a different way, with a new, extraordinary language, unusual for everyone and for the soul itself [emphasis added]⁸⁰.

The character was created mysteriously under the influence of the inner necessity. It was the supreme synthesis between the spiritual and emotional spheres of Komissarzhevskaya and the sphere of the universal form, of the *obraz* or image of the character, which came to life on the stage. Using the sparse means of an ancient ritual, the Shaman-actress led the spectator through the rarefaction of her being to the miracle of artistic creation. And the internal energy, which she irradiated on the stage, created an anomalous tension within the spectators. The writer Aleksey Remizov wrote: «I once dreamed of the Komissarzhevskaya as a Sphinx – in that fear lay the entire enigma»⁸¹. But Remizov was not the only one to be impressed by the actress, to the point of imagining her as the terrifying and enigmatic mythological monster.



Fig. 13 Lev Bakst, *Elyseum*. Water color on cloth. 1906. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Fig. 14 *Statuette of the Great Mother*. Around 6000 B.C. Çatal Hüyük. Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara.

In 1906, the painter Lev Bakst painted the curtain of the new theater of Komissarzhevskaya's Dramatic Theater, of which we have only a sketch entitled *Elyseum*.

The painting represents the Elysian Fields, where lived the souls of the deceased favored by the gods. A Sphinx is present, partially hidden by the leaves of an extremely tall cypress. The presence of the winged beast with the muzzle of a goat, suspended in flight over the Elysian fields, is strange and certainly not a casual element. For the art historian Irina Pruzhan, the Sphinx is a symbol of Fate⁸². While this interpretation is in line with the ideas of St. Petersburg symbolists, I do not find it convincing. In Komissarzhevskaya's theater «[...] all cleaned up like a cruise ship and bare like a Lutheran church»⁸³, the curtain specifically functioned as a “manifesto”, that is, it immediately communicated to the spectator the purpose: the theater of interiority spread its boundaries from the contingent to the spiritual.

What then was the meaning of the Sphinx? And for what reason was she depicted in flight or, better, suspended between the visible world and the spiritual one?

Before appearing in ancient Greece, this mythological beast had an apotropaic function as well as serving as a magical protection of the tombs.

But the Sphinx was also one of the symbols of Astarte, the ancient Semitic goddess, known in all the Near East and in the Eastern Mediterranean, from the early Bronze Age to the classic age, and venerated as the Mother Goddess by all Indo-European people⁸⁴.

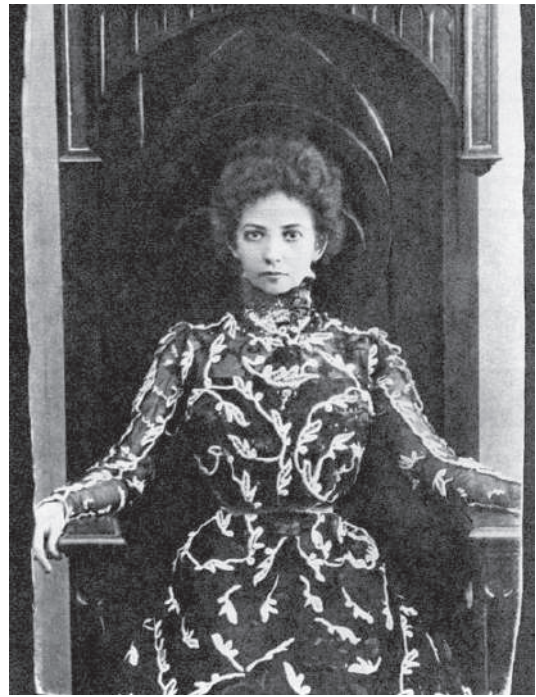


Fig. 15 *Photo portrait*. Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 1900 ca. “A.A. Bakhrushin” State Theatre Museum, Moscow.

The Sphinx painted by Bakst was therefore a symbol of the Great Mother.

Suspended in flight over the Elysian Fields, the Sphinx was the being capable of connecting the two worlds⁸⁵, the invisible and the invisible ones, and Vera Komissarzhevskaya was identified by Bakst with this aspect of the Sphinx, the one that Remizov had dreamt about. This interpretation is supported by another significant element present in the painting: the cypress in front of the monster. This tree was considered by pre-Hellene populations as the “Tree of Life” and was sacred to Astarte⁸⁶. The cosmological value of the tree, through which the Shaman is capable of escaping this world and rise or fall through multiple levels of being, was shared by all ancient civilizations⁸⁷.

The Sphinx suspended among the leaves of the cypress represents therefore the flight of the Shaman that Vera Komissarzhevskaya was capable of performing, developing her imagination within her own inner reality. The hypostases of light were the degrees of knowledge, which lead her to step over the threshold between the visible and the invisible thanks to a state of *trance*, which impressed forever in the spectators the memory of her eyes.

Andrei Bely said that she was «all eyes: two blue-green-grey, enormous eyes whose dark eye-sockets electrified me»⁸⁸, while Blok described them as being of «a bottomless blue»⁸⁹. Yet, they were proportioned and her iris was dark brown. The two poets, like Remizov, described the emotion they had felt watching her act and Blok, who had perceived the special state of *trance* in which she acted, was able to rationalize it and express it poetically:

Vera Fedorovna Komissarzhevskaya could see much further than the common eye can see; it could not have been any other way for in her eyes there was a sliver of a magic mirror, like the boy Kaj in Andersen's fairy tale. For this reason did those large blue eyes, looking at us from the stage, surprise and fascinate us so much: their gaze alluded to something immensely greater than her own person⁹⁰.

The evocative power of the spiritual form of acting of Vera Komissarzhevskaya, the cosmic animism of Elena Guro and the lyrical Abstractionism of Wassily Kandinsky were all born of the same Humid Mother Earth. None of them ever founded a school, nor could they

have given that what they looked for was dictated by an inner necessity. But they were bearers of the Light, capable of navigating the “encircling darkness”, and to show to those that came after them the flame glittering in the distance.

Notes

1 Vera Soloveva was the wife of the doctor who treated Komissarzhevskaya in Lipeck, after she attempted suicide. In 1883, Komissarzhevskaya had married count Vladimir Muravev, an amateur painter, who had an affair with her sister Nadezhda. Having discovered the affair, Vera decided to kill herself. She was saved by her parents who took her to the thermal baths of Lipeck, where she stayed from 1885 to 1887. It was here that she decided to dedicate her life to the theater.

2 V.F. Komissarževskaja, *Pis'ma aktrisy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, A. Al'tšuller, *Iskusstvo* (edited by), Leningrad-Moskva 1964, pp. 31-32. All translations except when otherwise noted by Donatella Gavrilovich -Gabriele Poole.

3 W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, H. Rebay (edited by), Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Gallery Press, New York, 1946, p. 10.

4 N. Chodotov, *Blizkoe-dalekoe*, Academia, Leningrad 1932, p. 184.

5 W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, cit., 43.

6 Ivi, p. 36.

7 N. Chodotov, *Blizkoe-dalekoe*, cit., p. 180.

8 Ivi, p. 103.

9 P. Markov, *Vera Fedorovna Komissarževskaja (1864-1910)*, *Iskusstvo*, Moscow 1950, p. 38.

10 D. Gavrilovich, *Kuindži, Vasnecov, Kandinskij e le nuvole*, in «*Te-rzoOcchio*», n. 4 (77), 1995, pp. 24-27.



Fig. 16 *Photo portrait. Detail.* Vera Komissarzhevskaya was fond of saying: “I shall never die”

11 Michail Vrubel (1855-1910) was one of the most famous artists of the Russian Art Nouveau. His studies on form and color paved the way to non-figurative art. He was part of the Mamontov Circle, working both as stage designer for Mamontov's Private Opera (1885-1904) and as a painter and ceramist.

12 Guro developed this view together with her husband, the painter Michael Matyushin, in a work on the fourth dimension written around 1912. Cfr. A. Povelichina, *Michail Matjuschin – Die Welt als organisches Ganzes*, in *Matjuschin und die Leningrader Avantgarde*, Exhibition Catalog, Karlsruhe 27 April – 9 Juni 1991, Oktogon, Stuttgart 1991, p. 30.

13 Kandinsky, *Reminiscences (1913)*, in *Modern Artists on Art: Second Enlarged Edition*, Robert L. Herbert (edited by), Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York, 2000, p. 22.

14 Cfr. P. Markov, *Vera Fedorovna Komissarževskaja (1864-1910)*, cit., pp. 38-39.

15 E. Guro, *Bednyi Rycar'*, in *Nebesnye verbljužata*, Izdastelstvo Rostovskogo universiteta, Rostov-na-Don 2014, pp. 147-214.

16 The writer is referring to the protagonists of the novel Elza and Wilhelm, the dead son who returns to earth as a spirit to help her know the soul of all things.

17 E. Guro, *Bednyi Rycar'*, cit., p. 153.

18 Kandinsky, *Reminiscences (1913)*, cit., p. 21.

19 V. Ivanov, *Marginalia*, in «Trudy i dni», nn. 4-5, 1912, p. 45. The passages are taken from Ivanov's review of Guro's book *Osenij son* (Autumn dream, 1912).

20 Savva Ivanovich Mamontov (Yalotorovsk 1841- Moscow 1918) was the inventor and promoter in Russia of modern theater directing and the "aesthetics teacher" of his wife's nephew Konstantin Stanislavsky. He came from a rich family of Siberian merchants, who moved to Moscow in 1848. A shareholder in the public railways, he is known as a patron of the arts and an amateur playwright, singer and sculptor. In 1873, he founded the famous artistic circle based in Moscow and in Mamontov's estate in Abramtsevo, which included the greatest painters, musicians and actors of the time. In 1878, the circle began to stage domestic plays, which were important as experiments in combining various arts, and whose results were developed by the *Chastnaja Russkaya Opera* (Private Opera Mamontov, 1885-1904).

21 A. Gusarova, *Vrubel'*, Fabbri Editori, Milano 1966, p. 6.

22 From the age of thirteen, Kandinsky spent all his summers in the company of his father, Wassily Silvestrovich Kandinsky, between Moscow and Achtyrka. Here the rich merchants Abrykosov, with whom the Kandinsky were related, who had an estate a few miles from Abramtsevo.

23 J. Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky*, Fabbri Editori, Milano 1993, p. 20.

24 Cfr. D. Gavrilovich, *Astrazione, romanticismo del colore. Kandinskij e il suo rapporto con l'arte e il teatro soprattutto nell'area della cultura realista e simbolista russa*, in *Verso la sintesi delle Arti*, J. Nigro Covre (edited by), Bagatto Editore, Roma 1993, pp. 46-76; D. Gavrilovich, *I maestri russi del giovane Vasilij Kandinskij: un percorso di ricerca*, in *Contemporanea. Scritti di Storia dell'Arte per Jolanda Nigro Covre*, I. Schiaffini, C. Zambianchi (edited by), Campisano Editore, Roma 2013, pp. 99-104.

25 Cfr. D. Kogan, *Mamontovskij kružok*, Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, Moskva 1970.

26 Vera Komissarževskaja followed with interest the performances of the Private Opera, where Nikolai Arbatov, the future director of her Dramatic Theater, began working. Komissarževskaja was introduced to Mamontov by Viktor Shkafer. Cfr. V. Škafer, *Sorok let na scene russkoj opery. Vospominanija*, Iskusstvo, Leningrad 1936.

27 The example was followed by Leopold Sulerzhicky in 1913 in Crimea, where, with the help of Stanislavsky, he realized his dream of

building an hotel for spectators next to where the plays were staged, so that they could get to know the actors of the First Studio. Consider the importance of the above for the directors of the twentieth century, including Jerzy Grotowski, in whose work one sees the echo of the experiments of the Mamontov circle.

28 V. Meyerchol'd, *K proektu novoj dramatičeskoj truppy pri Moskovskom Chudožestvennom teatre (1905)*, in Id. *Stat'i. Pis'ma. Besedy*, vol. I, Iskusstvo, Moskva 1968, p. 90. Italian translation in D. Gavrilovich, *Profumo di Rus'. L'arte del teatro in Russia. Scritti di artisti, pittori e critici 1860-1920*, Bulzoni, Roma 1993, pp. 205-206.

29 D. Gavrilovich, *Vera Fedorovna Komissarževskaja. Una donna "senza compromesso". La vita e l'opera dell'attrice russa dal 1899 al 1906*, UniversItalia, Roma 2015, pp. 286-290.

30 W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, cit., pp. 91, 93.

31 N. Chodotov, *Dalekaja, no blizkaja*, in V.F. Komissarževskaja, *Pis'ma aktricy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, cit., pp. 226-227.

32 Chekhov was very interested in Kandinsky's essays and particularly in his concept of inner necessity and imagination. Cfr. D. Gavrilovich, *Affinità elettive: Michail Čechov and Vasilij Kandinskij. Il concetto d'immaginazione e di necessità interiore nella cultura figurativa e teatrale russa dei primi del Novecento*, in *Sentieri Interrotti/Holzwege*, vol. 2, D. Gavrilovich, G.E. Imposti (edited by), Universitalia, Roma 2012, pp. 97-118.

33 In 1915 Goleizovskij joined Mayakovskij's futurist group, where he met Elena Guro, as he tells us in his memoirs. On the affinities between Kandinsky and Goleizovskij: Cfr. R. Jacobson, *Deux aspects du langage et deux types d'aphasie*, in «Les Temps Modernes», vol. I, n. 188, 1962, p. 863.

34 On the day he was admitted to a sanatorium in 1918 in a page of his diary Vakhtangov, who was seriously ill, described his meeting with Komissarževskaja in 1909 in Moscow. He had had himself hired as walk-on in order to be able to see her act up close.

35 Khodotov explained that the actress was for him the light of the soul and of the intellect. Cfr. Ju. Rybakova, «Eti ognennye pis'ma...». *Pis'ma V.F. Komissarževskaja k N.N. Chodotovu. Sostavlene, kommentarii, vstupil'naja stat'ja*, Sankt-Peterburgskij muzej teatral'nogo i muzykal'nogo iskusstva, Sankt Peterburg, 2014, p. 20.

36 E. Vachtangov, *Il sistema e l'eccezione. Taccuini, lettere, diari*, F. Malcovati (edited by), F. Gori, M. Guerrini (translated by), La Casa USHER, Firenze 1984, p. 92.}

37 Cfr. D. Gavrilovich, *Dall'evocazione visiva del testo poetico allo spazio scenico parlante: la sperimentazione sinestetica in Russia*, in *Le immagini vive*, C. Occhipinti (edited by), in «Horti Hesperidum», vol. I, 2016, pp. 187-208.

38 Cfr. E. Faccioli, *L'Obraz e le sue declinazioni nel teatro russo-sovietico. Prime riflessioni*, in *Sentieri Interrotti/Holzwege*, cit., pp. 87-97.

39 Cfr. G.E. Imposti, *Il tema dell'angelo caduto e della "peri" nella letteratura russa da Zhukovsky a Esenin*, in «Quaderni di Studi Indo-Mediterranei», vol. IV, 2011,

pp. 203-224. As the author explains, in early nineteenth-century Russian literature, Wassily Zhukovsky, after his reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Klopstock's *Messiah*, became fascinated by the figure of the fallen angel, present in both poems, and invented the Russian archetype of the mythical demon, which was taken up also by other authors.

40 D. Kogan, *Vrubel'*, Iskusstvo, Moskva 1980, pp. 148-158.

41 Cfr. J.J. Bachofen, *Il Matriarcato. Ricerca sulla ginocrazia del mondo antico nei suoi aspetti religiosi e giuridici*, Einaudi, Torino 1988 (ed. orig. *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*, Stuttgart 1861); G. Steiner, *Antigones*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1996.

42 «I was not born to hate, but to love». The line is from Sophocles, *Antigone*, E. Anania (edited by), Le Monnier, Firenze 1973, v. 523, p. 57.

43 I am using the term *persona* in the original Latin sense of "speaking through", which referred to the mask used by Latin actors to represent the character. I am also using Carl Gustav Jung's notion of *persona* as public personality, as opposed to the private one.

44 Cfr. A. Liberati, *Sirene. Immagini di un archetipo fra il XIX and il XX secolo*, in «Ricerche di Storia dell'Arte», n. 57, 1995, pp. 23-37.

45 In February 1891, she played alongside Stanislavsky the role of Betsy in Lev Tolstoy's *Plody prosvěščenija* (The Fruits of Enlightenment). The critics expressed their surprise at her singing some parts of the dialogue. Cfr. «Artist», February 1891, p. 147.

46 V. F. Komissarzhevskaja, *Pis'ma aktrisy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, cit., p. 17. In Russian the word *chajka* (seagull) is feminine. Komissarzhevskaja is referring to the play, the character and the bird with which she identifies.

47 Cfr. M. Gimbutas, *The language of the Goddess. Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, Thames & Hudson, New York 2001 (tr. it. *Il Linguaggio della Dea*, Venexia, Roma 2008). The Great Mother was for primitive men the Goddess, a personification of nature, fertility, maternity, creation, death, representing the generosity of the Earth. Some populations who identified her with the Earth called her Mother Earth; for ancient Slavs she was "Mat'-Syrja-Zemlja", or Humid Mother Earth. Cfr. M. Gimbutas, *The language of the Goddess*, Thames & Hudson, New York 2001.

48 C. Pieralli, *La tradizione epica orale delle byliny russe: Mat'syrja zemlja e il culto della terra*, in «eSamizdat» 2005 (III) 2-3, pp. 297-308.

49 N. Gončarova, *Prefazione*, personal exhibition catalogue, Moscow 1913. Italian translation M. Böhmig, *Le avanguardie artistiche in Russia*, Laterza, Bari 1979, pp. 116-117.

50 Wassily Radlov (1837-1918) was one of the founding father of Russian Eastern studies, an archeologist, ethnographer, and a pioneer in historical studies of Turkish languages. In 1894, he was nominated director of the Anthropological and Ethnographic Museum of

St. Petersburg.

51 Ju. Kirjušin, N. Stepanova, A. Tiškin, *Skifskaja epoha gornogo Altaja*, Izdatel'stvo Altajskogo universiteta, Barnaul 2003, p. 9.

52 Cfr. V. Radlov, *Mifologija i mirosoczercanie žitelej Altaja*, in «Vostočnoe Obozrenie», n. 7, 1882 and n. 8, 1883; *Aus Sibirien*, Lipsia, 1884; *Das Schamanentum und seine Kultus*, Lipsia, 1885; *Sibirskie drevnosti*, in «Materialach po Archeologii Rossii, Izdavaemich Imperatorskoj Komissiej», Sankt Peterburg 1884, 1888, 1894, 1895, 1896; *Altas der Altertumer der Mongolei*, Sankt Peterburg 1892.

53 The Scythians were a semi-nomad population of Siberian origin, which settled in the region between the Don and the Danube, in the tenth century B.C. Later, during the sixth century B.C., they extended their dominion to the Balkans and then to northern Italy.

54 N. Kondakov, I. Tolstoy, *Russkie drevnosti v pamjatnikach iskusstva*, vol.1-6, Tipografija Ministerstva putej soobščeniija (A. Benke), Sankt Peterburg 1889-1899.

55 T. Talbot Rice, *Gli Sciti, Il Saggiatore*, Milano 1958, p. 176.

56 AA.VV., *Istoria russkogo iskusstva*, vol. 2, edited by M. Nekljudova, *Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo* (edited by), Moskva 1980, p. 118.

57 Vrubel is talking of his stay at Savva Mamontov's estate in Abramsevo, where from spring to autumn the artists of the Mamontov circle lived.

58 D. Kogan, *Vrubel'*, cit., p. 117.

59 For the Russian Orthodox Church Alkonost personifies God's will. She lives in paradise but goes into our world to deliver a message. Her voice is so sweet that anybody hearing it can forget everything. Cfr. I. Marchesini, *Per un recupero della "изящная словесность" osservazioni sul linguaggio proetico di Saša Sokolov*, in «Slavica Tergestina», vol. 14, OpenstarTs, rivista online Università di Trieste, marzo 2012, p. 64.

60 E. Bazzarelli, *Introduzione*, in A. Afanas'ev, *Fiabe russe*, Fabbri Editori, Padova 2002, p. 28.

61 T. Talbot Rice, *Gli Sciti*, cit., p. 80.

62 Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994) was a world specialist of the Indo-European Bronze Age and of the prehistory of Bati and Slavs. Gimbutas dedicated herself to an exhaustive study of the iconography and symbolism of the Neolithic period to uncover its social and mythological significance. She reinterpreted European prehistory in the light of her knowledge of linguistics, ethnology and history of religion, elaborating a "matrifocal" theory, in contrast with traditional ideas on early European civilization.

63 Cfr. M. Gimbutas, *The language of the Goddess*, cit.

64 V. Noble, *Il risveglio della dea*, TEA, Milano 2005, pp. 47-48.

65 Ju. Rybakova, *Vera Fedorovna Komissarzhevskaja*, in V. F. Komissarzhevskaja, *Pis'ma aktrisy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, p. 16.

66 Cfr. *Alkonost: Sbornik pamjati V. F. Komissarzhevskoj*, Izdatel'stvo Peredvižnoj teatr P. P. Gajdeburova i N. F. Skarskoj, Sankt Petersburg, 1911.

67 P. Markov, *Vera Fedorovna Komissarzhevskaja (1864-1910)*, cit., p. 57.

68 A. Dal Pozzolo, *La fede tra estetica, etica ed estatica*, G. B. Press, Roma 2011, p. 64.

69 Cfr. L. Pareyson, *Lo stupore della ragione in Schelling*, in AA.VV., *Romanticismo, esistenzialismo, ontologia della libertà*, Mursia, Milano 1979.

70 The letter was written in 1900 and addressed to the director of the Aleksandrinsky Theater Evtichy Karpov. V. F. Komissarzhevskaja, *Pis'ma aktrisy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, cit., letter n. 86, p. 82.

71 Ivi, letter n. 141, pp. 115-116.

72 M., *Teatr i iskusstvo*, in «Vilensky vestnik», n. 226, 21 October,

1894, p. 3.

73 Ju. Rybakova, «Eti ognennye pis'ma...». *Pis'ma V.F. Komissarževskaja k N.N. Chodotovu. Sostavlene, komentarii, vstupil'naja stat'ja*, cit., p. 213.

74 I. Nemirovsky, *La vita di Čechov*, Lit Editori, Roma 2012, p. 162.

75 V.F. Komissarževskaja, *Pis'ma aktrisy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, cit., pp. 115-116. Letter to actor Nikolai Khodotov in April 1902.

76 Ivi, p. 116.

77 I. Potapenko, *Neskol'ko let s A.P. Čechovym. Čechov v vospominanijach sovremennikov*, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, Moskva 1952, p. 253.

78 The director was Pavel Samoilov (1866-1931), with whom the actress worked in Vilnius in the 1895/96 season.

79 Kandinsky wrote: «The word [...] constitutes an inner sound».

Skillful application (in its poetical meaning)

of the word itself, which, as an artistic necessity. Is repeated twice or three times. If not more frequently, not only intensifies the reiterated sound, but also brings to light unsuspected spiritual properties dwelling in the word itself»; in W. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, cit., p. 28.

80 The letter, dated July 1900 and addressed to director Evtichy Karpov, was published in V.F. Komissarževskaja, *Pis'ma aktrisy. Vospominanija o nej. Materialy*, cit., letter n. 90, p. 86

81 A. Remizov, *Bespridannica*, in *Pljašuščij demon*, Paris 1949, p. 41. Italian translation A.M. Ripellino, *Il trucco e l'anima. I maestri della regia nel teatro russo del Novecento*, Einaudi, Torino 1974, p. 136.

82 I. Pružan, *Lev Samojlovič Bakst*, Iskusstvo, Leningrad 1974, p. 105.

83 O. Mandelštam, *Il rumore del tempo- Feodosia-Il francobollo egiziano*, Einaudi, Torino 1980, p. 78.

84 Cfr. M. Stone, *When God Was A Woman*, Harvest/Harcourt Brace, San Diego, New York, London 1976.

85 Sphinx, Σφίγξ, comes from the Greek, Σφίγξ, from the verb σφίγγω, meaning "to tie, hold or embrace".

86 A. Perugi, *I Cipressi del Colle*, in *La notte del santuario. Dall'antico Santuario di Santa Croce ai cipressi della Madonna del Colle di Lenola*, a cura di M. Izzi, Il Valico Edizioni, Firenze 2002, p. 88.

87 G. Fogliani, *Alle radici dell'albero cosmico. L'albero come asse del mondo nella mitologia europea*, in «InStoria», XCIV, n. 63, March 2013. http://www.instoria.it/home/albero_cosmico.htm.

88 A. Belyj, *Meždu dvuch revoljucij*, Iskusstvo, Leningrad 1934, pp. 386-387.

89 A.M. Ripellino, *Il trucco e l'anima. I maestri della regia nel teatro russo del Novecento*, cit., p. 103.

90 A. Blok, *Pamjati V.F. Komissarževskaja* (1910), Italian translation A.M. Ripellino, *Il trucco e l'anima. I maestri della regia nel teatro russo del Novecento*, cit., p. 139.