

A New Virtual Museum dedicated to the actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya. An International Project.

Donatella Gavrilovich and Artem Smolin

The Project by Donatella Gavrilovich

In 2013 the University of Rome “Tor Vergata” signed a five-year cooperation agreement with the St. Petersburg State University of Information Technologies, Mechanics and Optics (ITMO) (Russia). The aim was to apply the new technologies to theatrical cultural assets.

In April 2014 I was invited at St. Petersburg University as the scientific coordinator of the collaboration agreement. Within the general framework of the proposed activities and purposes the Russian engineers and I decided to set as our first goal the creation of a virtual museum, dedicated to the Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya (1864-1910), of which that year marked the 150th birth anniversary.

Artem Smolin, Head of the Department of Engineering and Computer Graphics, and I wrote the project and I submitted it to the evaluation committee of a procedure issued by the University of Rome “Tor Vergata” for financing the mobility of 16 lecturers-professors in an exchange shared program of teaching and research at European and extra-European level (2014-2016) and we won it.

We chose the Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya because her personal and artistic life so full of events is still very appealing to today's people. An exceptional protagonist of the Russian theatre scene she aroused admiration and scandal on the occasion of her debut at the Imperial Theatre in 1896 for the naturalness of her acting. Her search for new forms

of expression was a source of inspiration for the Russian directors and actors of the twentieth century (Malaev-Babel 2016: 60-68). In 1904 Komissarzhevskaya founded the Dramatic Theatre in St. Petersburg with the intention of fighting against the monopoly established by Stanislavsky to oppose her popularity. She also fought against the Tsarist regime in defence of the victims of the pogroms and the failed 1905 revolution and embrace socialism. This is why the Russian people nicknamed her “Joan of Arc”¹. Her thoughts have reached us through the hundreds of letters she wrote to the greatest writers, artists, musicians and stage directors of her age. Yulia Rybakova, Russian scholar who collaborated in our project, discovered them during the Soviet era². In these letters the actress talks about her private and artistic life and feelings, but she also reflects on the problems of the existence, on the fate of humanity, on the faith in God. In some of these Komissarzhevskaya describes the beauty of nature and she feels to be an integral part of it. She observes the immensity of the starry sky and in her letters she does not only write about the feeling produced by this vision, but also of how it reminds her of Galileo's studies. She had a deep and broad knowledge of Western and Russian scientific, philosophical and literary tradition (Komissarzhevskaya 1964: 224). The actress interacted with writers such as Maxim Gorky and Anton Chekhov, discussing about their dramatic works. She also discussed with great directors such as Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Evreinov about the expressive forms of acting, the set-up problems of the theatrical performances and production rights (Stanislavskij 1960: 298, 300-301). She expressed the need to deal with the issues of the modern woman and claimed she did not to understand the characters of Ophelia or Juliet (Komissarzhevskaya 1964: 87-89).



Fig. 1 Vera Komissarzhevskaya in the role of Ophelia in Hamlet by W. Shakespeare. 1899. Alexandrinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg. "A.A. Bakhrushin" State Theatre Museum, Moscow.

Vera wrote to young actors in order to encourage them to observe the reality in which they live, because she claimed it was impossible to ignore the poverty of the Russian people. According to her, an actor cannot remain indifferent to racial violence, and to political and social injustice because actors have the task to awaken people's consciences. During Komissarzhevskaya's tour in 1908 in USA, she released some interviews for the American daily newspapers, in which Vera discussed the results of acting researches and expressed her dream.

My object in coming to that great country [...] is to familiarize the American people with Russian dramatic art [...]³.

I am always searching for the new form, the new dramatic idea and the new inspiration. I search and I search. That was why I opened my own theatre in St. Petersburg – to hunt for the new form and to keep on hunting. That is one reason why I have come to America – to – New York. I try to discover the new things and I am always looking for progress⁴.

It is not true that I produce only dramas of the present day at my Dramatic Theatre in St. Petersburg. The real drama is not the drama of the present or the drama of the past. It is the eternal drama – perhaps the drama of the future, who knows? It is the drama not of one locality, but the drama of all the world: the international drama⁵.

Several photographs show us how Vera Komissarzhevskaya acted, how she naturally played a character, how she was able to express the finer nuances of the human soul.



Fig. 2 Vera Komissarzhevskaya in the role of Nora in Doll House by H. Ibsen. 1904. Dramatic Theatre, St. Petersburg. "A.A. Bakhrushin" State Theatre Museum, Moscow.

In autumn 2014 Artem Smolin and I began to work together to design the Virtual Museum structure. In Russia I investigated the iconographic materials and the documents held in several museums and libraries and I prepare a draft of the project. In the framework of the project cooperation the St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music and the State Central Theatre Museum "A.A. Bakhrushin" provided the material necessary to create the Virtual museum, dedicated to Vera Komissarzhevskaya. Thanks to this collaboration, the virtual visitors can now access resources that had been impossible to consult to the wide public. For instance, the filmed funeral of Vera Komissarzhevskaya, found thanks to Rybakova's researches in the archives of St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music a few years ago, was soon made available in the section *In memoria* of the virtual museum.



Fig. 3 Screenshot. The filmed funeral of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. Section *In memoria*. Virtual museum. 2016.

In 2015, on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Vera Komissarzhevskaya I also organized an exhibition and the international conference *Vera Komissarzhevskaya meets Eleonora Duse. The "Joan of Arc" of the Russian scene and the "Divina" of Italian theatre in Venice*, at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini.



Fig. 4 Vernissage of the Exhibition *Vera Komissarzhevskaya meets Eleonora Duse*. Biblioteca della Manica Lunga. Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia. March 4, 2015. (Photo A. Smolin).

My intention was to deepen the research about this important figure of the early twentieth-century of the Russian theatre. It must be considered that this was one of the first events organized in the West to introduce Vera Komissarzhevskaya to the wide public and to compare her to the famous Italian actress, Eleonora Duse⁶. During the presentation of the Virtual Museum in Venice, Lucie Kempf of the University of Lorraine (France), said that she intended to join our project to translate in French all the texts. Kempf declared the importance of this International cooperation to reach the common aim to disseminate Komissarzhevskaya's artistic activity. In 2016, we completed the project and the virtual museum in Russian is now available on line at <http://verakomina.ifmo.ru>

About virtual museums by Artem Smolin

In the postmodernism and post-post modernism, virtual museums become ideal experimental environment for modelling socio-humanistic researches. The main functions of the traditional museum – storage, processing and studying exhibits – get in the virtual mu-

seum new experimental sounding (Smolin – Spiridonova – Borisov – Kuchin 2014: 233-239). Professor Alexey Lebedev, the pioneer of creation of the virtual museums in Russia and the founder of the Museum of Russian Primitive⁷, considers that a virtual museum can only be a virtual architecturally built space in which museum objects are placed. Therefore, a virtual museum must represent a collection of the grouped and classified exhibits in a specially built digital space. These two components define two key vectors of the development of the virtual museum. On the one hand, the form of the virtual museum is ultra innovative and possesses all the features of post-postmodernism. On the other hand, a virtual museum imports traditional and theoretical approaches into an Internet environment. Classification of virtual museums:

Electronic database with multimedia components (web-portal, informational multimedia system etc.).

Virtual tours, based on panoramic photography.

3D virtual museums (databases with elements of three-dimensional modelling or 3D worlds).

For example, Valentino Garavani Virtual Museum displays an impressive collection of creations of the famous fashion designer.



Fig. 5 Portal. Valentino Garavani Virtual Museum.

The difference between website, database and virtual museum is very thin.

In the period of post-postmodernism, virtual reality became one of the basic ideas of contemporary culture and science. Virtual museums realize one of the basic principles of virtual reality: the viewer enters this environment and can feel certain emotions and impressions.

A virtual museum is not just the structured content, but it is also the concept of the two-dimensional or three-dimensional virtual space, in which the user is traveling as if he were in a real museum. You can surf the virtual rooms, travel on different aspects of the life of a great man and so on. All depends on the concept. For example, the team of the ITMO University, together with the St. Petersburg State University, created the project Multimedia Information System "Ancient Fortresses of the North-West of Russia"⁸.

This project was created within the framework of the grant of the Russian Humanitarian Scientific Foundation, in the period 2012-2014 (Smolin – Borisov – Slobodyanuk – Haustova 2013:157-162). The result was a multimedia information system, which offers structured information on fortresses of the North-West, created for scientists and for ordinary users. In addition to information about the fortresses, the portal presents virtual reconstructions of fortresses for a certain historical period.



Fig. 6 Portal. Virtual reconstruction of Korela Fortress. 2012-2014. ITMO University, Saint Petersburg.

The Virtual Museum dedicated to Vera Komissarzhevskaya

The result of this project is a web-portal of the theatrical and virtual museum dedicated to the work of the great Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya, developed in the framework of a joint project of the ITMO University with the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, coordinator Donatella Gavrilovich. The content for development was provided by the Saint-Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music and ‘A.A. Bakhrushin’ State Central Theatre Museum in Moscow.



Fig. 7 Portal. Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. ITMO University & University of Rome “Tor Vergata”. 2016.

The virtual museum has been created by the students of the Department of Computer Graphic Technologies (Master’s Program “Multimedia technologies for the Arts

of Theatre, Cinema and Television”) of the ITMO University under the guidance of Artem Smolin with the collaboration of Anna Spiridonova, Senior Lecturer (specialist in the field of Museum work). The concept of the virtual museum is to represent the milestone of life, creativity and social activities of this great and talented actress in an emotional and minimalistic structure.

The development of this theatre-virtual museum was based on the technical recommendations for the creation of virtual museums, developed by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, as well as on its own unique methodology developed specifically for this interdisciplinary project.

The Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya: technical aspects

Based on the analysis of the collected materials, the structure of the portal was compiled as follows:

1. *Biography*: a description of events that occurred to Vera Komissarzhevskaya presented in chronological order, backed up with multimedia materials (photos, texts, audios). Based on the historical events and on the documents collected for the virtual museum project, it was decided to divide the timeline of Vera Komissarzhevskaya’s life into seven key periods (Fig. 8).

2. *Social Environment*: an interactive graph displaying the people who had relations with the actress (Fig. 9).

3. *Map of tours*: an interactive map allowing the virtual visitors to click and open links to the places where the actress lived and acted (Fig. 10).

4. *Gallery*: links to the photos of the actress (Fig. 11).

5. *In memoria*: materials produced in memory of the actress and gathered after her death (Fig. 12).

Bibliography: books, publications, diploma

papers, dedicated to the personality of the actress.

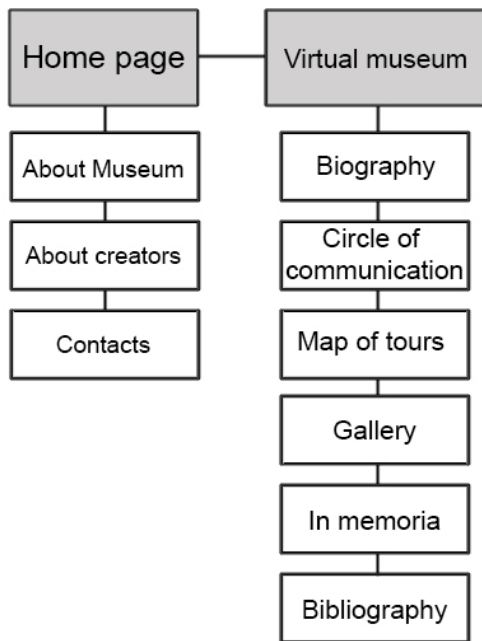


Fig. 13 Structure of the Vera Komissarzhevskaya Virtual Museum. ITMO University & University of Rome “Tor Vergata”. 2016.

Adobe Photoshop CS was used to create the concept of the museum sections. To directly write the program code for web pages, we used the WebStorm 10.0.2 software package with JavaScript support and the Denwer program for debugging a site on a local PC running Windows 8.1, 10.0.

When using this software, the site of the theatre-virtual museum should be correctly displayed in all modern browsers and OS (Windows, Linux and Mac OS). In the process of creating the portal, we conducted usability testing in the laboratory “Usability and Interface Design” of the ITMO University. The main task is to find out how certain solutions in the concept have the proper influence and contribute to the maintenance of the emotional atmosphere of the resource. For this purpose, we conducted a usability testing of the site and the subsequent questioning of 15 respondents who are members of the target audience (students of the theatrical schools or students in theatre related specialties, fans of Komissarzhevskaya, fans of the theatre). The respondents were divided into three groups of five for each of the three tests. In the first part of

the experiment, each group was shown a test version of the resource. In the second part of the experiment, the groups were shown the final resource.

During the experiment, the following tests were carried out with a questionnaire:

- a test with disabling of non-standard fonts;
- a test with disabling the initial screen savers of the section ‘Biography’;
- a test replacing the text information in the ‘Biography’ section.

Conclusion

The virtual museum dedicated to the life and work of Vera Komissarzhevskaya is an international project, which is the result of close cooperation of three countries: Russia (ITMO University), Italy (University of Rome “Tor Vergata”) and France (Université de Lorraine).

This resource is very important for the International culture and it represents a significant step forward in the field of the Digital Cultural Heritage. For this reason, we would like to create an English version of it.

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Website

Virtual museum of Russian primitive:

<http://www.museum.ru/museum/primitiv/defengl.htm>
online (last accessed 01/03/2017).

Valentino Garavani Virtual Museum:

<http://www.valentinogaravanimuseum.com>
online (last accessed 01/03/2017).

Multimedia Information System "Ancient Fortresses of the North-West of Russia": <http://nwfortress.ifmo.ru>
online (last accessed 01/03/2017).

Virtual Museum of Vera Fyodorovna Komissarzhevskaya:

<http://verakomina.ifmo.ru> online (last accessed 01/03/2017).

Notes

1 For further information about the life and activity of the Russian actress, see: Gavrilovich 2015; Komissarzhevskaya

1964; Markov 1950; Nosova 1964; Rybakova 1971, 1994.

2 Yulia Rybakova discovered 700 letters by Vera Komissarzhevskaya. She edited and published 275 of these. Cfr. Komissarzhevskaya 1964: 29-178.

3 *Foremost Russian Actress*, «The New York Times», February 2, 1908.

4 *Not politics, only drama Komisarzhovsky*, «The New York Times», March 1, 1908.

5 *Ibidem*

6 I organized in Venice, at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, an exhibition and an international conference in collaboration with the University of Venice "Cà Foscari". The proceedings of the conference have been published in the first Special issue of our journal, available on line at: <http://www.youblisher.com/p/1424216-Vera-Komissarzhevskaya-meets-Eleonora-Duse-The-Joan-of-Arc-of-the-Russian-scene-and-the-Divina-of-Italian-theatre/>

7 For further information see: <http://www.museum.ru/museum/primitiv/defengl.htm>

8 For further information see: <http://nwfortress.ifmo.ru>

Биография

1893 – 1896



С. А. Менкиной-Кузнецов

Благодаря поддержке друга семьи актера И. П. Киселевского, Вера Федоровна была приглашена в драматический театр в Новочеркасске, которым руководил видный актер и антрепренер Н. Н. Синельников. Там она впервые вышла на сцену 19 сентября 1893 года как профессиональная актриса в роли Альмы («Честь» Г. Зудермана). Не прошло и трех месяцев, как Комиссаржевская удостоилась не только похвал, которыми были полны отзывы о ней в печати – ей обещали великое будущее: «В. Ф. Комиссаржевская – ingenue comique, в ней все есть для того, чтобы стать очень большою артисткой, милотвидная наружность, красивый звучный голос, выразительные глаза и, главное, огонек молодости, тот святой огонек, которым артистка увлекает зрителей» (Гранитов). Комиссаржевской в роли Бетси (комедия Л. Н. Толстого «Плоды просвещения») была посвящена большая аналитическая статья в газете «Донская речь»: «Игру г-жи Комиссаржевской нельзя назвать искусством – это сама жизнь: если артистка плачет, то ее слезы смывают грим с лица; если артистка волнуется, то в ее словах слышатся подступившие к





Fig. 8 Section Biography. Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 2016.

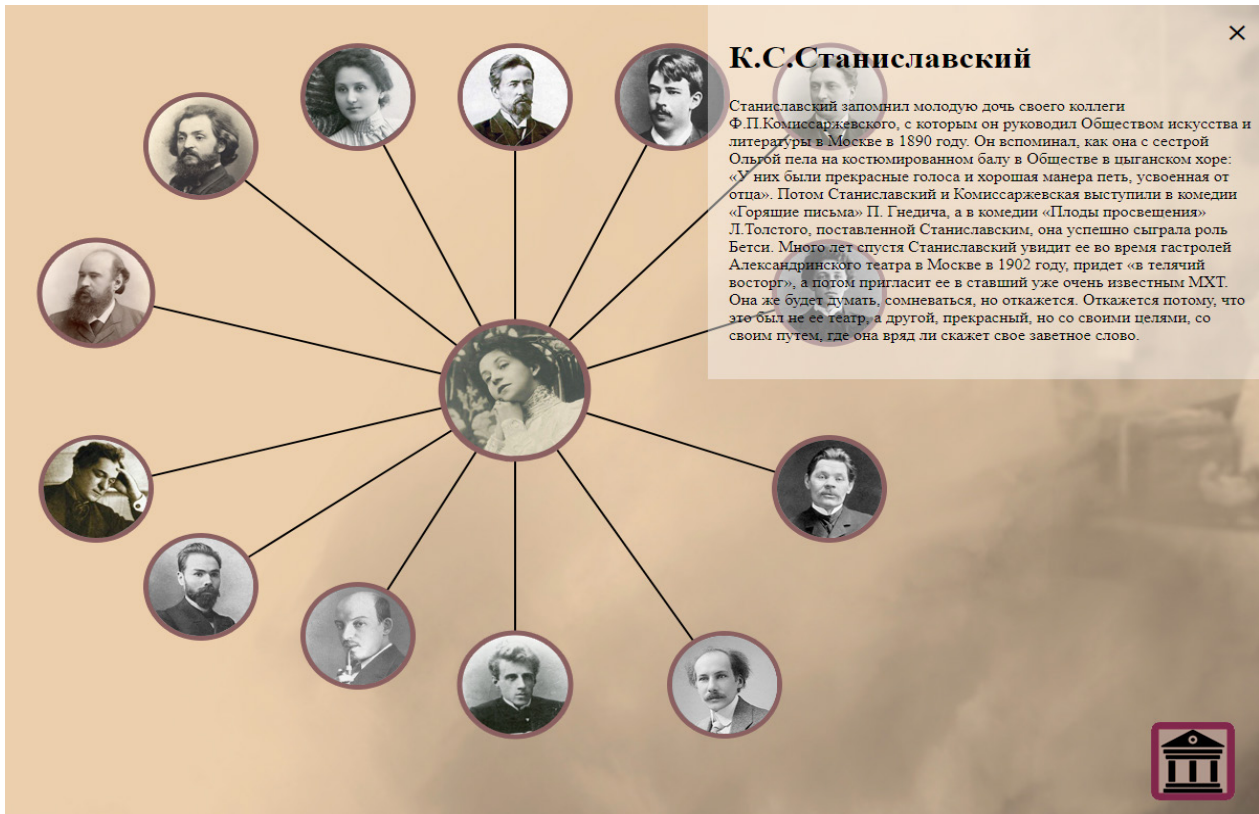


Fig. 9 Section Social Environment. Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 2016.

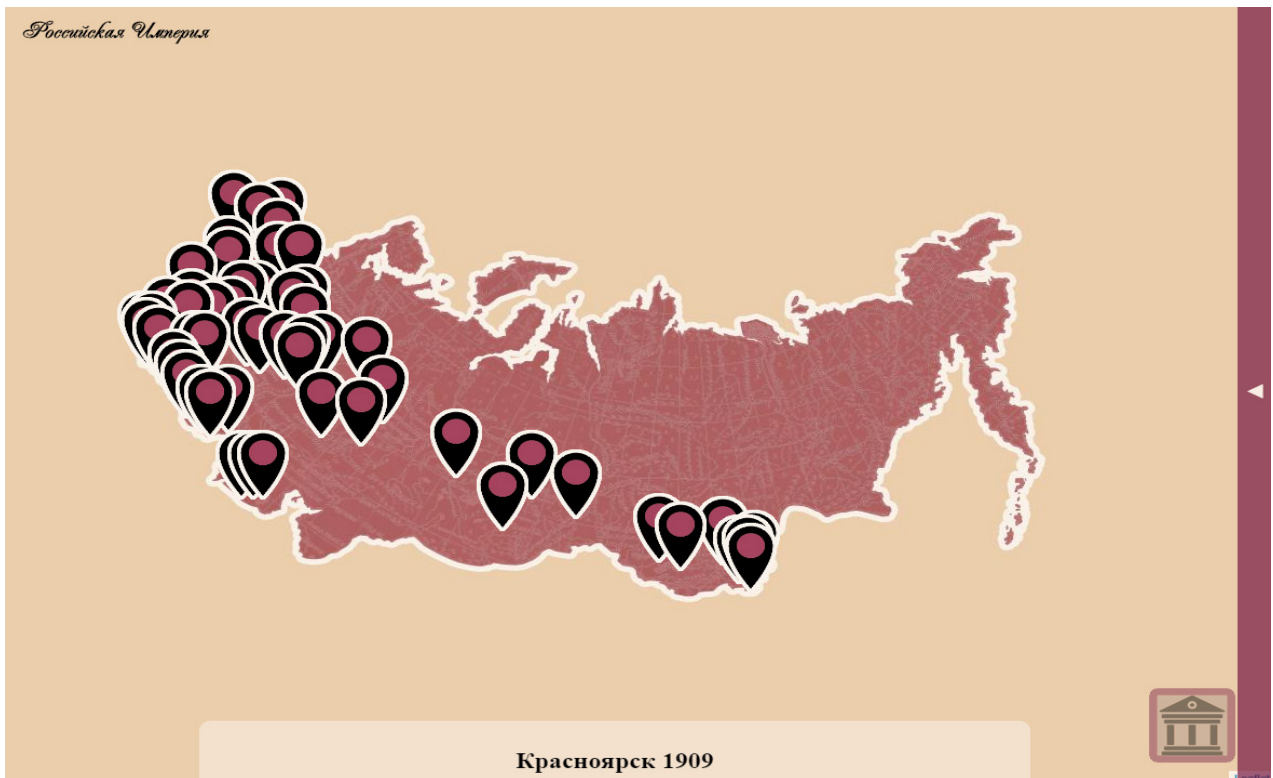


Fig. 10 Section Map of the actress tours. Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 2016.



Fig. 11 Section Gallery. Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 2016.

Fig. 12 Section *In memoria*. Virtual Museum of Vera Komissarzhevskaya. 2016.