

Marie Lascu  
1800 Besser  
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## Alexander Shiryayev: Home Movie Genius

In 1988, Russian documentarian Viktor Bocharov came upon some intriguing information while researching a program called *Apostles of Russian Ballet*.<sup>1</sup> Being a historian and a genuine fan of opera and dance, as well as film, what Bocharov unearthed has to have been incredibly exciting for him. While looking through the administrative files of the Russian Imperial Theatres, he found a request submitted by dancer and choreographer Alexander Shiryayev in 1904 asking for permission to film the primary dancers of the Marinsky Theatre, as well as funds for purchasing film stock.<sup>2</sup> This request was flatly denied, and Bocharov initially thought nothing more of this information. He then went on to read the memoir of choreographer Fedor Lopukhov in which Shiryayev's request is mentioned. However, Lopukhov went on to explain that despite being denied Shiryayev purchased a camera and began to film dance anyway.<sup>3</sup> Bocharov knew at least one of these films had to have stood the test of time. Thankfully, he was more than right. A regular treasure trove turned out to be stowed away in the home of a man named Daniil Saveliev.

Former dancer turned photographer Daniil Saveliev crossed paths with Alexander Shiryayev many times during his studies as a young dancer. He was one of many students to have the pleasure of viewing Shiryayev's work. Around 1964, he was contacted by Anna Bazhaeva, who was a sort of common law wife of Shiryayev's son, Andrei. She had been on the verge of discarding the material when it thankfully occurred to her to try passing it off to someone who

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<sup>1</sup> Beumers, B., Bocharov, V., Saveliev, D., Shiryayev, A. & Robinson, D., *Master of Movement*, (Gemona (UD) [i.e. Udine, Italy]: Le giornate del cinema muto, 2009) 55.

<sup>2</sup> Bocharov, Viktor, *A Belated Premiere*, DVD, (St. Petersburg: MIRIS, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Bocharov, 56.

may have an interest.<sup>4</sup> In a 2004 interview with Saveliev, he mentions here and there about keeping some material at the school he photographed for and some material at his home, including some nitrate in the pantry. The general environment of Leningrad appears to have aided greatly in the maintenance of Shiryaev's archive, according to Dr. Birgit Beumers, as Saveliev never took other measures apart from storing the material. These works survived wars and a revolution. It was meant to live on.

The history of ballet has always intrigued me and in researching Alexander Shiryaev my interests have been set ablaze. It is extremely difficult not to go off on a tangent, revealing the origins of ballet in the courts of Italy during the Renaissance, on through to France with the culmination of a ballet empire in Russia. Reeling myself back, it is worth explaining a little bit about Shiryaev, the man. Born in 1867, he was the son of Viktor Pugni, a solo flautist in the Imperial Theatre, and Ekaterina Shiryaeva, a ballerina in the *corps de ballet* also in the Imperial Theatre.<sup>5</sup> His grandfather was Italian composer Cesare Pugni, a man with amorous tendencies who made his way to St. Petersburg and became one of the Imperial Theatres' primary composers.<sup>6</sup> Both Pugni and Shiryaev's histories are intertwined with some of ballet's most significant history and most important personalities.

Shiryaev began studying ballet at the age of nine, and eventually impressed the leading choreographer of the time, Marius Petipa, with his unfailing and exact memory.<sup>7</sup> Shiryaev gravitated toward "character dance," a concept in ballet that is not unlike character acting in film: the smaller, often quirkier but no less interesting role the audience often responds to. Character

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<sup>4</sup> Saveliev, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, 16.

dance primarily incorporated elements of folk dance styles, but Shiryayev found the technique lacking and made the effort to study different folk dances closely throughout Russia and Eastern Europe in order to add more concise flavor. By the age of 24 he was teaching his own class on character dance, the first of its kind.<sup>8</sup> His ground breaking work on shaping character dance as a separate entity to primary classical would culminate with a co-authored book in 1938, *Foundations of Character Dance*. After being denied the genius idea of filming primary dancers of the Marinsky Theatre in 1904, Shiryayev and his wife Natalia Matveeva became the stars of his dance films, shot at their summer home in the Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Bureaucratic politics would lead Shiryayev to leave the theatre he had spent most of his life and career at, and he joined the troupe of the amazing Anna Pavlova from 1906-1910, touring much of Western Europe. He spent a year with her troupe in London in 1911, even teaching classes before heading back to Russia.<sup>10</sup> While Shiryayev eventually stopped performing, he never stopped teaching.<sup>11</sup> Most of the articles compiled in the *Master of Movement* book put out by Viktor Bocharov, David Robinson and Bergit Beumers reference accounts of Shiryayev's unfailing memory, patience, respect and generosity toward his pupils. The memoir he wrote in 1941 was never published due to the Siege of Leningrad by the Germans, but thankfully a copy survived. Shiryayev died April 25, 1941.

The content list of the archive is fairly extensive, consisting primarily of shorts. While all of Shiryayev's work can qualify simply as home movies, the items have been broken down into separate categories: Home Movie, Staged Comedies, Trick Films, Paper Films, Puppet

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<sup>8</sup> Robinson, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Beumers, Bergit, "A.V. Shiryayev: Between dance and animation," *KinoKultura*, 2009, <<http://avs.kinokultura.com/films.shtml>> (10 November 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Shiryayev, 119.

Animation, Dance Films, Later Films: Leningrad Choreographic Institute in the 1920s, and Commercial Films from Ernemann.<sup>12</sup> The original films were all on various nitrate stocks, in either 17.5mm gauge or 35mm gauge. A 17.5mm Ernemann Kino camera has survived with the archive. As for the 35mm camera, there is no concrete evidence to confirm, but it is believed Shiryaev also owned a British Biokam. This presumption is based on central perforations on some of the 35mm stock which corresponds to the Biokam.<sup>13</sup>

The Home Movie category consists of standard family vacation footage, with titles such as *Children Dancing Around Lone Man* and *Ukrainian Portraits*. Staged Comedies display Shiryaev's great sense of humor with titles such as *The Befuddled Film-Maker* in which Shiryaev dons a bald cap and portrays an elderly man trying to develop 35mm film, resulting in a lot of spilled chemicals. The Trick Films continue the show of good humor, but also display Shiryaev's desire to explore the potentials of film. He utilizes techniques which clearly lead him to his stop motion Puppet Animation films, the undisputed crown jewels of his cinematic artistry. His Dance Films are also noteworthy as they are the only existing (or currently known) moving image documentation of character dancing from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> To supplement this, his paper films are animated choreographic records.

The puppet films are the culmination of Shiryaev's film work, exhibiting not only his creative spirit and sense of humor, but also his incredible understanding of the intricacies of body movement. Shiryaev initially created puppets from paper-mâché, their joints supported by soft wire, making them easy to manipulate.<sup>15</sup> These first 20cm puppets were used so Shiryaev could

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<sup>12</sup> Bocharov, V., Robinson, D., Alexander Shiryaev 1867-1941, (Le giornate del cinema muto: 27th Pordenone Silent Film Festival, 2008) 39-42.

<sup>13</sup> Robinson, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Bocharov, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Shiryaev, 116.

work out choreography. The puppets he used in his films were constructed in the same manner, but it is believed that they were between 12 and 14 cm as the theatre display which Shiryaev purchased would not have accommodated the larger size.<sup>16</sup> The beauty of these films is the fluidity of the puppets' movements, particularly evident in a clip in which two Pierrots are passing a golden ball back and forth. It is a wonder how Shiryaev was able to make that ball flow so naturally. It is believed that Shiryaev gave these puppets away as gifts throughout his life. Those who were invited to view the films at Shiryaev's home remember that there was an actual path worn into the floor where he would move back and forth between his camera and the puppet stage.<sup>17</sup> Shiryaev made about twenty of these puppets.<sup>18</sup> Bocharov holds out hope that somebody somewhere has one puppet hidden away in a box of toys in an attic. Fingers crossed.

Bocharov acquired the archives from Saveliev in 1995.<sup>19</sup> In 2004 he released a documentary on Shiryaev titled *A Belated Premiere*, which contained a handful of the 35mm digitally transferred films, the only restored films at the time.<sup>20</sup> Bocharov explained in the same 2004 interview that he initially took the films to The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive located in Krasnogorsk, Russia near Moscow.<sup>21</sup> The Krasnogorsk film collection contains documentation of the entire history of Russian filmmaking.<sup>22</sup> According to Bocharov, the technicians "took the material and worked on it manually, fixing breakages, etc., and restored everything to a normal state."<sup>23</sup> These technicians also confirmed the time period between 1905-1909 as definite, based on film stock type and edge codes. Shiryaev never dated individual films,

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<sup>16</sup> Robinson, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Shiryaev, 116.

<sup>19</sup> KinoKultura.

<sup>20</sup> Bocharov, DVD.

<sup>21</sup> Bocharov, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Russian Archives Online, "The Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk - (RGAKFD)," [RussianArchives.com](http://www.russianarchives.com/archives/rgakfd/coll.html), 2010, <<http://www.russianarchives.com/archives/rgakfd/coll.html>> (5 December 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Bocharov, 57.

but this same short period has also been confirmed by identifying certain individuals in some of the films.

The paper films were filmed with “stop-frame techniques” in order to safely play the material.<sup>24</sup> According to the Kino Kultura website by Birgit Beumers, which has a dedicated page to Shiryaev, David Cleveland at the East Anglian Film Archive carried out restoration on the 17.5 mm positive prints.<sup>25</sup> Beumers elaborated through email that in 2002 Cleveland actually transferred the 17.5mm prints to 16mm “as optical print (not digitized).” There is also mention in the Bocharov interview that 17.5mm films were scanned, and then carefully digitally resized to avoid image loss, then printed onto 35mm safety film.<sup>26</sup> It is unclear in terms of quantity as to who worked on what. PresTech Laboratories states on their website that they received a silver medal for their restoration work on the Shiryaev collection from Giornate del Cinema Muto in 2008.<sup>27</sup> Inquiries sent to PresTech received no response.

Inquiries sent to Dr. Beumers, who has direct access to the collection and is manager of the archive, resulted in a reluctance to answer specific preservation questions. After some underhanded teeth pulling, she deigned to elaborate that PresTech’s work included transferring “the negatives through a dry scanner with a specially adapted gate for the perforation onto a hard disk and then made 35mm prints.” And she is able to state that in 2002, “35mm nitrate films were transferred optically in Russia and later digitally in London.” Beumers also confirms that PresTech simply made new prints of the existing 35mm prints, and that they “partly sponsored the project (charging not the full commercial fee).” But, “I am not at liberty to disclose details

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<sup>24</sup> Bocharov, 57.

<sup>25</sup> KinoKultura.

<sup>26</sup> Bocharov, 63.

<sup>27</sup> PresTech Laboratories, "Company," PresTech Film Laboratories, 2010, <<http://www.prestech.biz/company.html>> (24 November 2010).

and this information does not belong in the public domain.” At this point, it seems most of the films are on safety film and have digital access copies. Why the restoration and preservation information is a national secret (at least based on the information received from this one source) is unfathomable to me. C'est la vie.

Many of the films in the Shiryaev archive have been shown at Gosfilmofond Russia 2004, the Lincoln Centre New York 2004, Kinodance Festival, St Petersburg 2005, Pordenone, Giornate del Cinema Muto 2008, Leipzig DOK 2008, Bristol Encounters 2008, Suzdal Russian Animation Festival 2009, and Moscow’s 35mm Cinema 2009, Annecy International Animation Festival 2009.<sup>28</sup> More scholarly research needs to be done and I’m sure new books are in the works. Though Bocharov’s documentary *A Belated Premiere* was technically released, acquiring a copy is impossible without having purchased one at a screening, or managing to contact just the right person. The simple enjoyment that is derived from watching the puppet films makes it a shame that there is currently limited to no access to the material. The exact location of the archive was another secret I couldn’t crack, but Dr. Beumers was able to state that “the archive is properly stored in a vault and not accessible to the public.” The archive is undoubtedly in Russia, but whether stored in a museum, government building, or post-apocalyptic bunker is unclear.

When Bocharov first premiered Shiryaev’s work in his documentary, there was controversy among historians. As far as Russian film history is concerned, the first animated film is attributed to Vladislav Starevich’s *Beautiful Leukanida (The War of the Beetles)* screened 1912. The earliest date for Shiryaev’s animated films is closer to 1909. According to Bocharov in his 2004 interview, there are those who simply take issue with having to rewrite history, there are those who believe the dates of the films are false, even suggesting he found old nitrate film

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<sup>28</sup> KinoKultura.

and made the films himself, and there are those who see the discovery for the wonderful addition it is.<sup>29</sup> Not knowing a great deal about the history of animation, it will be interesting to see how competent animation historians place Shiryaev's content in the historical timeline already established. Those who choose to ignore this work as relevant should be dismissed. The importance and significance of so called "amateur" film can no longer be ignored by anyone. It seems incredibly ignorant to maintain that sort of view point, especially in an age where easy access provides that amateur work has the potential to influence others just as much as mainstream work.

Shiryaev's films never had a big public premiere, and there is no evidence that any of the lucky pupils who saw this work went on to be animators, but the simple fact that he was making these films at all is extremely noteworthy. And now that the public does have the opportunity to view these works, they will undoubtedly influence creative minds, and Shiryaev will be inextricably linked to the always evolving lineage of cinematic history. It is worth noting that the first Russian ballet film was screened in 1913, Yakov Protazanov's *A Musical Moment*.<sup>30</sup> Parisian ballet companies had already jumped on this train with positive results. The success of Protazanov's film prompted the directorate of the Imperial Theatre to declare that they would begin filming their dancers, nearly a decade after Shiryaev's request.<sup>31</sup> They realized photographs weren't the same as moving images after all! Alexander Viktorovich Shiryaev's contributions to ballet have never been in question, and now his previously undocumented contribution to cinema and animation can begin to unfold.

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<sup>29</sup> Bocharov, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Bocharov, DVD.

<sup>31</sup> Bocharov, DVD.

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