

Reviewing Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre: An Innovative Curatorial Approach Combining Visual and Audio Elements

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Abstract. This article offers a retrospective on the operational model and aesthetic dimensions of steampunk sculptures at the Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre, located in Glasgow. The theatre employs an amalgamation of exhibitions and performances, meticulously choreographed by artist Eduard Bersudsky and his team, who coordinate each mechanical sculpture's movements. Accompanied by ambient sounds and national music, as well as the dynamic interconnected performances of the sculptures themselves, the audience would be immersed in an artistic appreciation experience, allowing for deeper engagement with the relatively obscure art form of steampunk. This approach, addressing the issue of audiences perhaps being unable to fully appreciate art due to limited viewing time, transcends the traditional exhibition's lack of a clear timeline or sequence. Furthermore, the article revisits how Eduard Bersudsky incorporates Russian cultural elements, history, and technology into his steampunk mechanical sculptures, which reflect the artist's contemplation on war and authority, as well as his exploration of the relationship between technology and humanity.

1 Where Steampunk Meets Music

Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre, located in Glasgow, is a collaboration between Russian artists Eduard Bersudsky (sculptor-mechanic), Tatyana Jakovskaya (theatre director), and Sergey Jakovsky (lighting and sound designer). The theatre features two shows, *Promenade* and *Wheels of Life*, both of which have a mechanical sculpture show accompanied by music as their centrepiece. It should be noted that all photographs of Bersudsky's sculptures in this review are my own, taken with the permission of the theatre.

Steampunk installations can be thought of as whimsical mechanical sculptures harkening back to the era of the First Industrial Revolution. These artworks are crafted by contemporary artists using traditional materials and techniques, while drawing inspiration from the fantastical world of Victorian imagination [1]. The steampunk mechanical sculpture movement resonates with the spirit of the Victorian Arts and Crafts movement, which at its core valued "the maker and the process of making, and the objects made," yet avoiding an anti-technological stance [2]. Steampunk restores a close relationship between art and technology, weaving together narrative, nostalgia, and technology to envision an alternate Victorian world and thereby bearing the hallmarks of an art form with utopian dimensions. Bersudsky's steampunk mechanical installations brilliantly embody this spirit, featuring bells, bicycles, rollers, steam engines, and other classic Victorian elements that transport viewers to the period, as the machines fire up and the gears begin to turn. In the midst

of the noise from the steam engine and the movement of the rollers, the viewer can discern a beauty of 'order' in the machinery. Every gear and every wire are interlocked in such a way that the design of the machine appears concise and transparent. Bells play an essential role in each of Bersudsky's steampunk installations, much like the train bells of the steam era that would ring to mark a train's arrival and departure. In Bersudsky's mechanical works, the bells sway in a steady rhythm, guiding the audience in the direction of the music and the clashing of gears.

Bersudsky's mechanical works stand out from the typical Victorian steampunk genre due to his unique background, having been born in Russia and lived through the Soviet era and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. His work incorporates metaphors for the Soviet Union as well as national and communist songs from the Soviet era. Bersudsky favours the term 'kinetic sculptures' to describe his works, as each sculpture is capable of movement in tandem with music, akin to an opera singer who sings and dances. In *Great Idea* (1990), a part of the *Wheels of Life* show, the central component of the sculpture was a locomotive (see **Figure 1**). A little old man, Karl Marx, the father of communist ideology, turned the gears underneath to keep the entire contraption in motion. The performance was accompanied by the sound of steel and cogs colliding, like the parts of a steam train coming to the station and ready to embark on a journey. The soundtrack was then derived from a popular song popularised by the Young Pioneers, a children's communist organisation founded during the Russian Civil War [3]:

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“Oh, our locomotive, fly ahead!
 Next station is Communism!
 There is no other way forward for us!
 We have the rifles in our hands!”

The locomotive seemed to surge forward to the stirring tune until the song came to a close. As the background music shifted to a low vocal chorus and the lights dimmed to a sombre red, it was as if I was watching a microcosm of Soviet history. The ideals of communism, so noble in theory, had been corrupted and twisted by the powerful, leading to the downfall of the entire system. Karl Marx stopped turning the gears, the locomotive came to a halt, and the Soviet Union met its end.

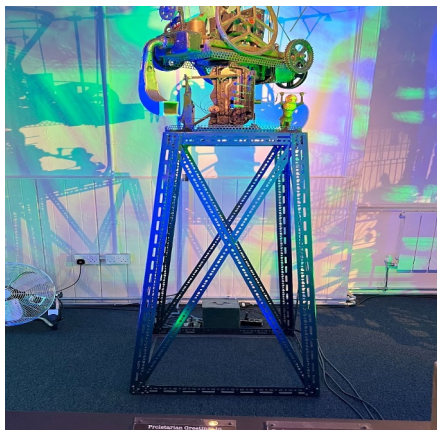


Figure 1. *Great Idea* (1990)

Russian folk songs and symbols are prevalent throughout several pieces in the *Promenade* show, including *Self Portrait with Monkey* (2002), *Aurora* (1997), *Orient Express* (2002, see **Figure 2**), *Forget-Me-Not* (1996, see **Figure 3**) and others. These works serve as expressions of Bersudsky's grief at the devastating impact of the Russian Civil War and his contemplation of the suffering wrought by seven decades of Soviet dictatorship. The mournful strains of Slavic folk music reflect its themes of war and death, cold and survival, love and parting. The songs favour minor keys that heighten the sense of blues. The soundtrack to the sculpture *Self Portrait with Monkey* features a traditional Russian barrel organ piece that portrays a lover lamenting the loss of his beloved and his homeland; the recording is by Boris Axelrod (1928–2004), an artist and philosopher who was expelled from the Soviet Union by the KGB in the 1970s [4]. This work is a tribute to the courageous individuals who were persecuted by the KGB. *Orient Express* (2002) is an express train driven by a skeletal gazelle, an embodiment of Death itself, and emits the thunderous roar of a steam locomotive. It serves as a haunting reminder of Russia's devastating revolution and Civil War (1917-1923), during which opposing armies traversed the country, engaged in endless battles and mercilessly killed each other [4].

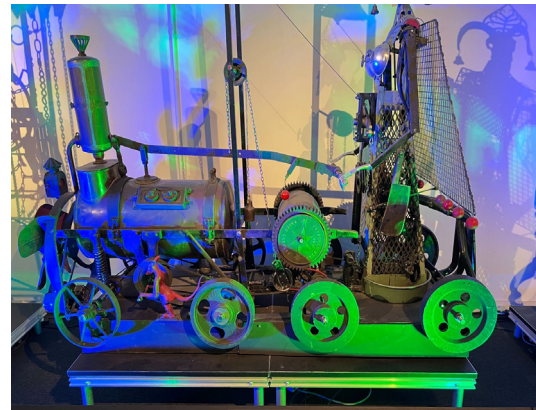


Figure 2. *Orient Express* (2002)

Bersudsky presents another reflection on the Civil War with *Aurora* (1997), whose main body bears a striking resemblance to a ship. This artistic interpretation of the Revolutionary Battleship retains the Soviet-style steel construction, imbued with a ruggedness that contrasts with the sophistication of its European-American counterparts. The battleship is accompanied by a passionate Bolshevik war march, recalling the founding of the Soviet Union in 1917. However, the irony of human bones and mechanical rats at the helm represents a stark reminder that the 70-year communist experiment exacted a steep price, with over 60 million people losing their lives. I suspect that Bersudsky's feelings towards Russia were mixed; on one hand, he was disillusioned with Soviet rule, but on the other hand, he loved and missed his homeland. *Forget-Me-Not* (1996), created for Bersudsky's friend Maggy Lenert Stead, features a four-wheeled vehicle like a bicycle as its centrepiece, complemented by delightfully idyllic music. Bersudsky remarked that “Maggy loves our native Russia in spite of her knowledge about its dark and dangerous side” [4].



Figure 3. *Forget-Me-Not* (1996)

2 The Historical Expression

Steampunk art, whether manifested as installations, sculptures, or literary works, is intrinsically steeped in historical context, through which it reimagines past era technologies and features, such as steam locomotives, phonographs, and the like. Artists infuse their works with elements of fiction, imagination, and history, which interact with one another to present a dreamlike and microscopic depiction of history to the audience or

reader. As Rose pointed out, fiction is a fundamental component of historical understanding, and the narrative and depiction of steampunk may be flamboyant, but it also celebrates the imaginative engagement of the past [5]. Steampunk, in a respectful and whimsical manner, connects the past and present, developing a form of imagination towards the past and constantly prompting people to revise and reflect on their understanding of both [5]. As discussed earlier, Bersudsky's steampunk sculptures blend unique ethnic elements and historical context of Russia. Using kinetic sculptures, he tells the story of the Russian Civil War and the Soviet authoritarian era and its collapse to the audience. For example, Bersudsky abstracts and symbolises historical texts, representing ordinary people who relinquished their freedom and democracy for the Soviet official's so-called highest ideals of communism with constantly rotating gears and mechanical components. He uses a lone locomotive and music from the war to describe the brutality of the Russian Civil War. The incidents of Soviet persecution of intellectuals and artists are narrated by a surreal sculpture characterized a neck entwined with iron chains (*Self Portrait with Monkey*). He deconstructs the image of Karl Marx, the founder of communism, and turns him into a white-bearded old man operating a mechanical device. Through a carefully prepared combination of visual and auditory presentation, along with the team's well-prepared explanatory text, Bersudsky achieves a representation of history from an artistic perspective. The narrative of these artworks constitutes the artist's reflection and exploration of communism, authoritarianism, and war, as a first-hand witness to the history of the Soviet Union and Russia. Though more than three decades have elapsed since the Soviet Union's dissolution and a century since the Russian Civil War's conclusion, these events remain within relatively close proximity from a historical vantage point. In today's world, where democracy, freedom, and human rights have become universal values, the spectre of authoritarianism and war continues to cast its shadow over numerous nations. Artistic works that delve into the past, connecting it to present realities, serve to alert viewers to the potential recurrence of circumstances akin to those experienced in the Soviet Union and civil wars, and to caution against regimes that, under the guise of grand narratives, readily sacrifice ordinary individuals to realize the ambitions of politicians.

3 Reflections on Humanity

Steampunk is not solely about nostalgia. Rather, it embodies the idea that we can create a better future by repurposing elements of the past [1]. Through the reconstruction of early human industrial revolution technology, the artists meld classic elements with innovation in contemplation of the intricate dynamic between humanity, time and nature. The show *Promenade* features a work called *Master and Margarita* (2000), a pavilion-bedecked topped with the towering, wide-mouthed skulls of steppe antelopes, watched over

by pairs of straw-hat-wearing guards below. In the heart of this machine lies a bell-ringing witch, surrounded by a fusion of Western sorcery comprising witches, elves, and crosses. As the apparatus revolves, the blaring of a saxophone harmonises with the resounding clank of steel. This work blends elements of raw nature and Western religions to present a fusion of dignified ceremonies, including veneration for deities and nature.

In *La Strada* (1995), as depicted in **Figure 4**, Bersudsky showcases circus puppets, animals, and magicians leading a four-wheel-drive train that is decorated with a rotating clock. The Victorians saw clocks as a way of linking human time with machines, and with the advent of steam engine travel, individuals had to adapt their schedules to the rhythms of machines in a process known as "time training", resulting in the neglect of human needs for health, eating, and sleeping [6, 7]. In *La Strada*, I noticed all the characters were manipulated by wires, while the clock served as a symbol of both eternal time and the crystal of human technology. In the introduction of the work, there is a passage that reads, "Who pulls the strings? Who is being pulled? [...] A road without end" [4]. As people witness mankind's entry into the industrial age, it raises the question: are we controlling technology, or is technology controlling us?



Figure 4. *La Strada* (1995)

The concluding part of *The Wheel of Life* (see **Figure 5**) features *The Tower of Babel* (1986-88), *The Castle or 1937* (1983), *The Clock of Life* (1980), *The Boat* (1985), *Organ Grinder* (1975 & 1981), *The Hunchback* (1982), and *The Circles of Clowns* (1983) forming a stage, like a symphony that links each work with the others. The spectator is immersed in a sensory experience composed of a harmonious blend of mechanical, natural, and musical sounds, as well as the spectacle of humanity's doomed efforts to exert control and mutual comprehension in the Tower of Babel, the unending cycle of life where time alone remains eternal, and the exploration of the stars under the watchful gaze of angels. Bersudsky utilises mechanical art to explore grand themes such as the awe-inspiring nature of time, humanity's curiosity about the unknown, and the manipulation and control of society. Art, with its ability to enlighten and provoke thought, offers a limitless exploration of aesthetics, extending beyond the bounds of steampunk.



Figure 5. The final performance

4 Is the Show or Exhibition a Success? Evaluating Its Methods of Publicity and Engagement

The evaluation of artistic success should take into account both objective and subjective criteria. When evaluating artistry, as mentioned above, Bersudsky and his team skilfully blend Victorian symbols such as locomotives, steam trains, rollers, and sewing machines with Russian motifs and raw natural elements to create a stunning steampunk feast. The artwork not only reflects on authoritarianism, war, and the intricate interplay between human, technique and nature, but also attains a sublime level of artistic expression that challenges the audience to think and reflect. Furthermore, Bersudsky's work has garnered widespread acclaimed and recognition, including the Creative Scotland Award 2005, and for over thirty years the Sharmanka Theatre has been showcased in museums and galleries across the UK, Europe, and Asia, cementing its place as a beloved fixture in Glasgow's cultural programme [8].

Involvement in digital media-based public art is a crucial aspect of audience engagement; “creative expression” within this medium strikes a deeper chord with the broader public [9]. Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre, with a history spanning over four decades, has evidently not fallen behind in adopting contemporary art promotion methods. The venue actively utilises new media to make creative videos showcasing dynamic mechanical sculpture performances and produces episodes introducing the museum and its sculpture art. It maintains an official website and several social media accounts, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to captivate a wider audience of new media users. Additionally, these official accounts provide recorded performances in part, as well as offer comprehensive information on performance pricing and the location. This has significantly contributed to fostering public engagement with art and introducing a niche genre like steampunk to a wider audience. The theatre's target audience is therefore not just mechanical and steampunk fans, but all of society.

It is noteworthy that another utopian aspect of steampunk is the democratisation of technological expertise—as Von Slatt points out, the Victorian era was the final period in which high school graduates were

provided with enough scientific knowledge to comprehend the technology of their era [10]. This is why the beauty of ‘order’ is so palpable when watching Sharmanka's performance. While the knowledge of physics used in steampunk may not be as multidisciplinary and deep as modern science, it remains accessible to the common person. However, steampunk art can present a challenge on an artistic level. It is akin to an abstract painting that does not readily convey the creator's intended message to the viewer. Audiences may not have much room for thought when faced with incomprehensible artwork particularly pieces characterized by stream-of-consciousness or abstract themes. Following a steampunk exhibition, the audience may only recognize the creator's remarkable technical prowess and experience a sense of nostalgia.

Bersudsky's steampunk works faced a similar challenge. Regarding the complexities and intricacies of appreciating steampunk art, particularly Bersudsky's sculptures which meld historical and ethnic elements, audiences may find themselves puzzled over the intended theme or narrative. Nevertheless, since 1987, Bersudsky and his team have ingeniously fostered audience engagement by employing innovative methods that encourage active participation in the art. The theatre presents a unique form of exhibition that blends show, lighting, and music to create an immersive audio-visual experience for the viewers. This as well highlights an important facet of public participation in art: rather than expecting the audience to fully interpret the artwork like the artist or professional art critics, the emphasis should be placed on the art's ability to stimulate proactive and more deeper thinking. In the world of Sharmanka Theatre, each show is comprised of two distinct parts, the first being an indoor tour where the audience watches the machines perform, much like a concert where the machines take turns showcasing their individual pieces; the second half is a combination of Bersudsky's works on a stage, providing the audience with an operatic experience. For traditional exhibitions, Crabbe argues that as opposed to activities like reading a novel or watching an opera, art exhibitions lack a particular timeline or sequence, making it difficult to fully appreciate the complex details and significance of the artwork within a brief visit [11]. However, the Sharmanka Theatre provides a clear timeline and sequences similar to those in an opera, using an audio-visual combination that effectively immerses the audience in a short period of time. This approach promotes interactivity in art and encourages greater public engagement, though the audience's comprehension of the work may be limited if they lack an extensive understanding of Russian history and mechanical art. Regardless, during the performance, I observed children dancing to the mechanical movements and the background music, and witnessed the delight on people's faces as they watched, indicating a successful and amazing show.

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