

Reports and Commentaries

*DIGITAL STAGES: EXPLORING TECHNOLOGY IN PERFORMING ARTS FESTIVAL,
APRIL 2011, LONDON
Interview with festival organisers,
conducted by Vlad Strukov*

MARGARITA OSEPYAN – DIGITAL STAGES PROGRAMME DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER:

Margarita has been working in the cultural sector since 1998 in the capacity of production co-ordinator, performer and then, later, producer for a number of international theatre and film festivals and companies in Russia and the UK. In 2006 Margarita completed an MA degree in Digital Performance at the University of Hull and since then has worked for the Russian Film Festival (2008) and Russian Theatre Festival in London among other cultural ventures. In 2009, Margarita co-founded the independent events and production company **GLAZ** (<http://www.glaz.co.uk/>) that initiates, curates and produces multidisciplinary cultural events in London.

ALISSA TIMOSHKINA – DIGITAL STAGES PRODUCER: Alissa has been involved in the cultural sphere of the UK capital in a number of ways: as coordinator, curator and producer of various arts related events. Alissa has completed an MA degree in Film Studies at University of London, and since then has worked as programme director and producer of the Russian Film Festival and other cultural events dedicated to (Russian) cinema in London. In 2009, Alissa co-founded an independent events and production company **GLAZ** (<http://www.glaz.co.uk/>). She is also undertaking a PhD research in Film Studies.

VLAD STRUKOV is Assistant Professor in the Department of Russian, and the Centre for World Cinemas, at the University of Leeds, UK. His research on film, animation, new media and national identity has appeared in a number of publications.

Vlad: *Hello, Alissa and Margarita, it is a great pleasure for me to interview you today. To our readership I would like to say that Margarita Osepyan and Alissa Timoshkina are the two organisers of the recent London festival on digital performances (22- 27 April 2011) that we will talk about later on. But before that I wonder if you could say a little bit about the company that you represent.*

Alissa: Of course, thank you, Vlad, it is a pleasure to talk to you, too. Our company was started several years ago by me and my partner, Margarita. Because we are from Russia we called our company GLAZ, which, for those who do not know Russian, means 'eye'. That name was chosen to specifically reflect upon the nature of our activities, to signify our vision and relation to visual culture. Our company originated from the idea of the moving image, how it can be implemented and how it travels across different art forms, from cinema to performance. To this date we have organised and curated several festivals and events that are focused on cinema specifically. The aim of the company is to move towards interdisciplinary and multimedia projects; in that respect, *Digital Stages* is most emblematic of the very goal our company has.

Vlad: *Thanks, Alissa. I will turn to Margarita now. I wonder if you can talk about one of the projects that GLAZ has organised.*

Margarita: The biggest and the most successful project to date was Sergei Paradzhanov's festival that took place last year during a three-month period in London and Bristol. It consisted of a retrospective of his films, including unique films that had not been shown in the UK before. The BFI together with us managed to acquire the prints. It included a multimedia exhibition of the photographic works by the Georgian artist, as well as other events and talks, including a conference at the BFI with several experts on Paradzhanov who discussed his heritage and his influence on film, world cinema and the arts in general. We organised it together with Leila Alexander Garrett, in conjunction with the BFI who co-curated a Paradzhanov season, which apparently was their most successful and best-selling season in 2009-10. There is the London film festival, of course, but in terms of film seasons it was the most successful. We managed to bring Paradzhanov's work to the wider audience; this is because Paradzhanov was known to be really successful and we were very pleased with the outcome.

Vlad: *I understand that your company has a Russian name and one of the events you organised dealt with the film director who worked in the Soviet Union. I am curious about whether the mission of your company is to promote Russian culture in the west, or do you have any other visions for it?*

Alissa: I think it has more to do with the marriage of two cultures. We are inspired by London, a very vibrant and multi-cultural city. We wanted to draw on our own cultural heritage, to explore it and re-contextualise it, to explore it on the London scene and also to start building bridges between cultures and see London as their meeting point. Our plan was not to delve into an exploration of Russian culture and dedicate our work to that, specifically; rather, it was to build bridges between different art forms and cultural expressions.

Vlad: *I believe that the most recent event, the London Digital Stages festival you organised in April 2011, was a project in which you moved further away from the context of that part of the world where you happen to be from.*

Margarita: Yes, definitely, because the idea is to expand and to involve other cultures. We are moving towards the fusion of media and, in terms of the spectrum of media, we work with performance, film and will possibly work with architecture in the future. Art making is becoming a fusion, an expression through different media and their combinations.

Image 1. *Drylands* by Ludovic Des Cognets UK/Brasil



Source: Margarita Osepyan

Vlad: *The full title of the festival is Digital Stages: Exploring Technology in Performing Arts. How many forms of art did you manage to cover? It was a big festival and it involved different strands of art and media. Maybe we can start our conversation about the festival with this and how digital technologies helped you redefine and re-think our understanding of art.*

Alissa: We had two main forms, art and theatre.

Vlad: *And each of them is cross-medial by nature.*

Alissa: Yes, it is now possible to categorise them as they are cross-media art forms. We had participatory theatre, interactive installations and theatre pieces within the two main strands that we had.

Vlad: *Did you have any singing performances; were they part of the festival? For example, digital opera?*

Alissa: The theatrical performances we had involved physical theatre, dance and song under one umbrella; so, again, different genres were combined in one performance.

Margarita: We could not do digital opera because there are constraints, especially financial ones. It was quite difficult in this period of time. It may seem that if you use technology you do not need much to create a work of art. At the same time, it is quite demanding in terms of financing, so you cannot programme all the amazing pieces you want to show. It is too complicated. They look as if they are simple, whereas in fact they are very complex.

Vlad: *Did you do it together or did you have a team of people that you worked with?*

Alissa: We had a rather small team of people that came together to create this festival and it is possible to divide them into two groups. One was the creative core that came up with the title and devised the programme. And then obviously we had another set of people who helped us actually execute the programme that we had planned. So in the first group we had a co-curator who closely worked with Margarita to research and form the programme of *Digital Stages* (Kate Sicchio, who is a practitioner and lecturer in Dance at University of Lincoln). Also, as our consultant and conceptual advisor for this festival we had Sarah Rubidge who supported us not from the very beginning, but quite early on.

Vlad: *If we look at the structure of the festival I can see that, first of all, it involved not only performances but also workshops and, what I would call, academic presentations. The other thing about your festival which that makes it quite unusual is the fact that it happened in different places in London. So I wonder if we can talk about those two things in turn. What prompted your idea for of having all these performers coming to London from all over the world, but also doing academic presentations and workshops? What was the rationale for these events?*

Margarita: In the digital world, there are several conferences and festivals that explore digital culture, but they are usually either academics-based or practice-based, and most of them are actually dance and technology oriented. So the idea was to bring it all together, to explore the theory side and practice side across performing arts, to create a platform for the exchange of artistic and academic ideas and for debate and to take these arts to the masses, as many

people do not know that digital performance exists as such. We also feel that digital performance can attract audiences that are normally uninterested in performance, but are interested in technology, since we all use it in our everyday life. So this is something that we think can cause these people to enjoy the performance, because they can see that this is something modern and varied in technology.

Vlad: *And were the workshops attended by a general audience, specialists or artists who are based in London?*

Margarita: We devised a series of workshops that represented different technologies and what you could do with them, and they were basically aimed at a general public that would wish to see and try out these technologies, but also at artists who wished to explore how to work with technology and have never tried it, but have heard of it. Eventually, there were several people from different industries: dance, media, architecture, design. It was a really interesting crowd there.

Vlad: *I would not want to be one of those teachers or trainers because one would not know what kind of people you are actually working with... That must be challenging, but also exciting.*

Margarita: It was, perhaps, a challenge. But most of them are so experienced now; they have been giving these workshops for years.

Vlad: *What kinds of experts or trainers did you have?*

Margarita: We had Mark Coniglio who is a co-founder and artistic director of Troika Ranch, an American dance company pioneering in dance and technology. And he is also the creator of Isadora that Troika Ranch uses a lot; in fact, this software has been used by a number of dance companies in the past decade around the world. So Mark is at the centre of it all, and is a very charismatic teacher who draws you into that world immediately.

Vlad: *Did you have anyone else?*

Alissa: We had another workshop by a very established engineer in the arts called Frieder Weiss, from Germany. He is the creator of two software programmes called EyeCon and Calipso, which are also widely used in different forms of performance from dance to circus, opera to installation. Returning to your question about the kind of people who attended the workshop; they started the session by introducing themselves, telling each other about their backgrounds, and then Frieder moved on to speak about his own background and how he started to work with technology, gradually building to the present moment. So even if you have no idea about how to use this technological tool, he carefully guides you and fascinates with the possibilities that this technology might allow.

Image 2. Mark Coniglio in conversation with Sarah Rubidge.



Source: Margarita Osepyan

Vlad: *Brilliant. Shall we move to the other part of my question that had to do with location? The festival took place in a number of locations in East London. I understand that, to a large extent, it was based on funding and other kind of arrangements you were able to make. But strategically, how did you see this festival taking place in London? Why did you choose East London as an appropriate venue for this festival?*

Alissa: We felt that East London has the right energy, the right vibe that we felt comfortable working in. This is the place where we are based and this is the place we can relate to in our

individual and professional lives. On the other hand, we considered the idea that it is a rapidly developing area of London, creatively and socially, and so we felt that starting a young festival in the area that is also just developing and changing could be, potentially, a great integration.

Margarita: In addition, some of our performances required flexible spaces because they are not standard performances, being site-specific - and East London is really amazing in this regard ... ready for experimentation.

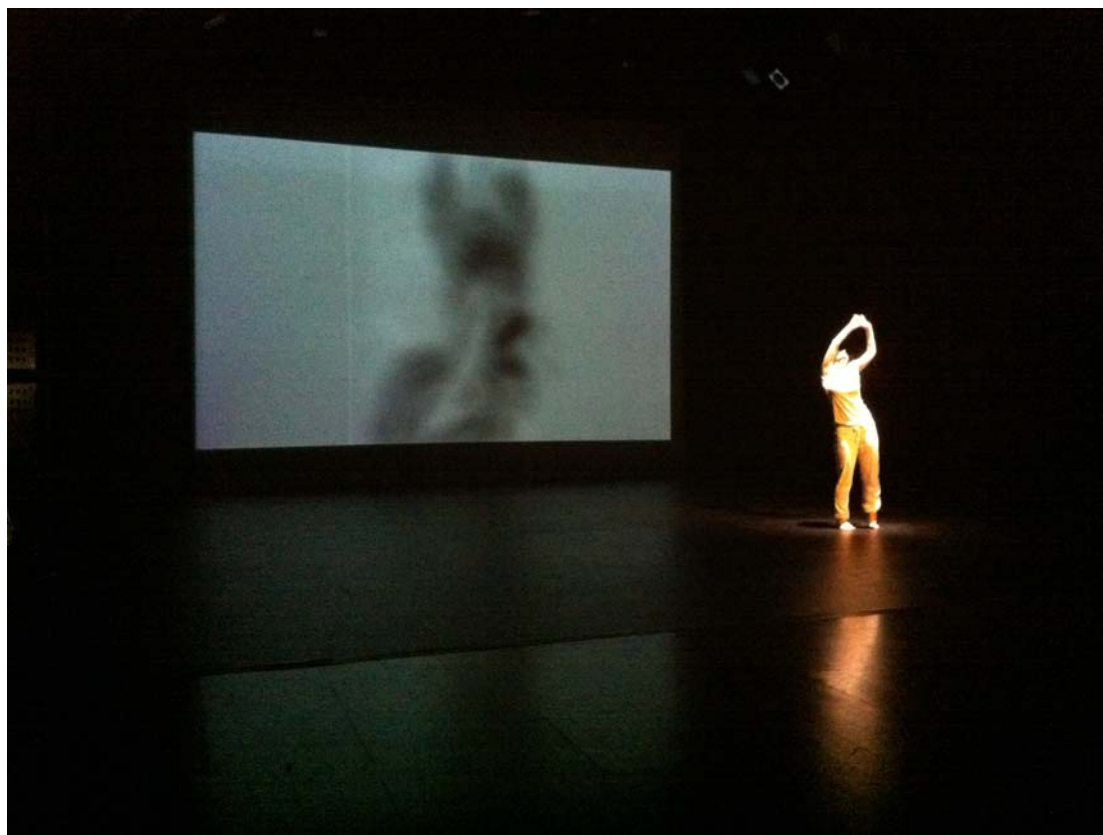
Vlad: *It really is amazing that the events took place in this part of London, although it is sometimes hard to reach. I wonder if we can talk about something that might sound traditional but is still really important to me and, I hope, to our readers. Could you try and highlight several key themes or key ideas that came out as a result of this festival? If any at all?*

Alissa: The aim of the festival was to present a showcase of both physical performance and intellectual implementations that this relationship between performance and technology can have. We had a series of different talks for wider audiences, who might not have necessarily have had any encounters with this relationship between arts and technology, presenting the possibilities of such interaction and other ways of looking at it. We had established academics and practitioners speaking about a number of issues. Sarah Rubidge, for example, spoke more specifically about visions and ideas of where technology and performing arts are headed. I think one of the main threads is that sometimes it is easy to treat the technological aspect of the performance as a gadget that creates a rather spectacular experience and enhances the already existing message. So some of the practitioners like Mark Coniglio were trying to say that we should engage with technology as with an equal and try to challenge our performance, allow the technology to intervene and transform our understanding of choreography or a musical score or any other tools that we are so used to working with. It was really interesting when Mark talked about Troika Ranch's most recent, absolutely stunning piece 'Loopdiver', where they took technology as the starting point for their choreography. It was the technology that dictated the ideas and how the dancers should perform, and this, apparently, has never been done before. If I were to present a highlight of intellectual concepts from this festival that would be it.

Vlad: *Excellent. Thank you, Alissa. And Margarita, what about you?*

Margarita: We conceptualised the programme in a way that it represents different strands of performing arts and technology and the complexity of the technologies that are used in performances, because some of the performances had quite complicated technological aspects and some of them were really basic, as in the use of pervasive media as a backdrop, for example. But I think it does not matter how you use technology, in what way and how complex it is, if it is integrated into the performance and it is there to emphasize something and it does it. It gets straight to the point without startling or being there just for the sake of it. Then it does not matter; the relationship between technology and performance disappears because it becomes a unity.

Image 3. Performance by Anna Abalikhina (Russian) and Troika Ranch (USA).



Source: Margarita Osepyan

Vlad: *I would like to ask you a specific question. Were there any performances that used networked media; for example, that were hooked on the internet, used mobile phones, twitter and were part of the performance or play or whatever they showed?*

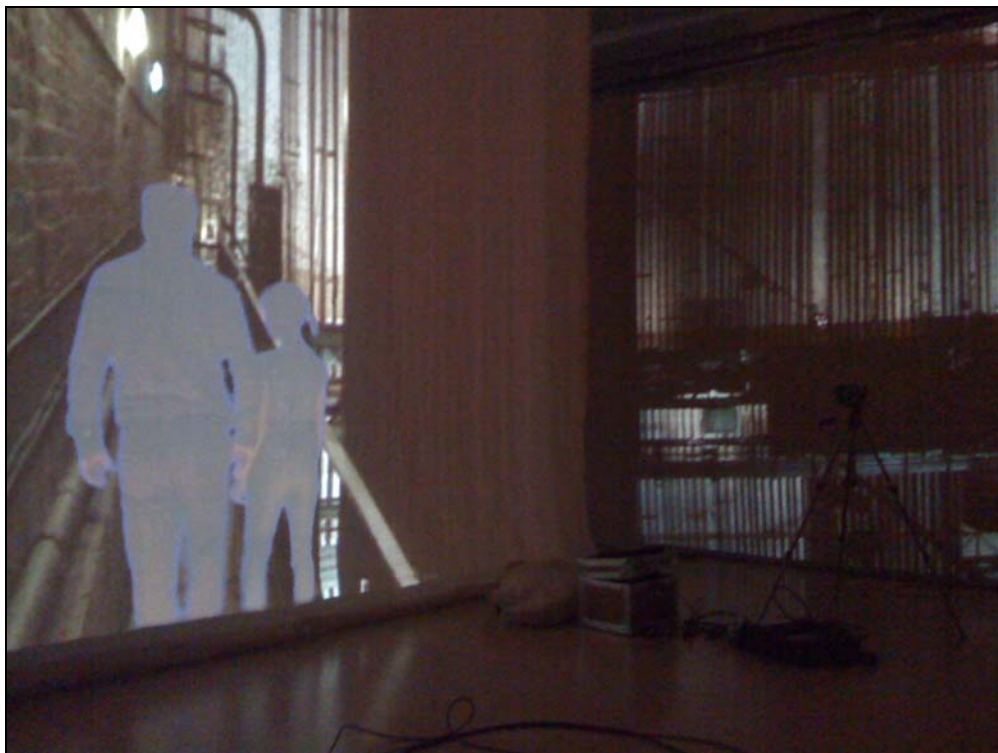
Margarita: We had a mobile workshop, which is a bit different. Hotel Medea, a performance done by UK-Brazilian theatre companies Zecora Ura and Para Active, used pervasive media and networking, but it was not interactive; not from the outset, at least. In the course of the performance they collected footage of the audiences (who then became performers as well as actors), which they fed into computers and on to TV screens and partly distributed via a Facebook page. But this is a delayed process, not an immediate, interactive networking element.

Vlad: *It was interesting to learn how this part of technology works in your festival. But I am also curious about whether the festival had any online presence? Whether it had, for example, streaming video? It sounds to me, judging by the way you describe your festival, as if digital technologies came to the theatre, they came to the dance hall, and they came to the opera house. And I wonder if any of those are going back to the realm of digital technologies, whether they are going online, whether they are changing the way technology works?*

Alissa: It is a very interesting point that you make. Unfortunately, the festival is not properly represented online. Obviously, we have a website (www.digitalstagesfestival.co.uk) with various types of media there, but there is nothing extraordinary about that. So this is something that we should bear in mind for the future to complete the circle of technology travelling and coming back to audiences, both through live performances and online presence.

Margarita: It was our intention, but due to various reasons we were unable to implement it.

Image 4. *The Good Actor* by Toby Coffey (UK)



Source: Margarita Osepyan

Vlad: *Am I right in thinking that in many ways the festival was historical? By which I mean that it did not look into the history of the use of digital technology, but was rather trying to see where these arts can go in the future? And what is the role of this?*

Margarita: It was both in a way.

Vlad: *Was it?*

Margarita: Yes, because we had some talks that actually depicted the history of theatre, in particular, and the use of technology, because these two things have been developing together for quite a long time. So yes, we tried to start with the question: why digital technology and performing arts? When did it start? What's happening? Why is it happening? Why to use it at all? And where is it going?

Vlad: *Margarita and Alissa, the theme of this issue of Digital Icons, is actually transmedial practices and I am wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on whether you found any such examples at the Digital Stages festival. You talked about the use of digital technologies in performing arts, conversions, but could you sense that art is moving beyond that and not looking only at established forms and the way they engage with technologies, but creating new phenomena that we can define as transmedial? Or something that does not fall into established categories of art? I understand that it was not necessarily the theme of your festival, but I am interested in your perception.*

Margarita: I think, in a way, Alissa started to speak about it, with regard to the Troika Ranch piece 'Loopdiver'; I think this could be probably be an example of transmediality. The dancers, throughout the performance, become the technology, because they act as technology. It is all about the loops through which machines and computers work. And when the piece was built, it stemmed from technology and not artists' point of view. So technology was dictating the rules, the mood.

Vlad: *It sounds robotic to me... an extension of the machine...*

Margarita: It becomes an extension of the machine, but at the same time you can see it is live, it is still human. It is this weird combination of both. Duality... technology and...

Vlad: *It is not transmedial, but more transhuman. Psychological, if you wish, working at the boundary between human and non-human. That sounds very exciting. I think I might do one of those pieces myself. OK, coming to the end of our interview, I wonder if you could let us know more about people's reactions, the kind of feedback you received. And how do you see all this going on in the future?*

Alissa: It would not be too modest to say that we had very positive feedback and we are very pleased with the reactions of both audiences and those who participated as performers or speakers. I think we have managed to build this sector for people who can meet and talk about this particular field of arts and technology and culture, in general, I guess. And it was the general audiences, people that are actively involved in producing this kind of event and our colleagues who were fascinated and maybe inspired, and who got in touch with us to see whether, perhaps, we could work together and establish collaborations with various dance companies, festivals and theatre companies that would want to either be part of *Digital Stages* or produce a third product together. So I think, in that sense, it is not just feedback from inspired general audiences but also an indication that we provided a creative and professional platform for starting something new. So that is very good.

Vlad: *And do you think that the festival will move on beyond the boundaries of London? Or is it really a London-based project? I am pushing this to see how much of it is really the atmosphere of London, and whether you can actually move to make it more transferable and transmedial by organising it in a different place?*

Alissa: Definitely the idea is to push boundaries and I think, for now, what we would want to expand on is the very idea of stage. Not use stage as an immediate performance stage for dance and theatre, but to expand and move out to spaces, rather than stages, and try to interact with social spaces and London environments that are more open to public. So we would want to introduce large scale architectural pieces into these practices and explore social spaces of London and continue to move out into the city more. So this would be the first step and, of course, as amazing as London is, it will be very exciting to try and see how these concepts can translate into other cultures; ideally, trying to see how truly international is this whole idea of 'digital'. I think it would be fantastic to see how far we can travel with our festival.

Vlad: *And can we look forward to another festival in the near future?*

Margarita: Yes, definitely. We are thinking of making it biannual so the next edition is planned for the spring of 2013, but in between, of course, we are not going to disappear. We are aiming to produce just smaller events in London or, perhaps, in other capitals in Europe (who knows, maybe in Berlin), which would keep the debate going and attract more interest and help develop this further. This is what we are going to work on next. And also for the next edition, probably, we will go beyond this and try to attract curatorial partners so that, for example, each strain of performing arts, dance, theatre, installation and live art is curated by our partners; for example, dance by Dance Digital, and then GLAZ curates galas and special programmes, concentrating more on workshops and educational aspects. These are our ideas, and we will see how we are going to give them shape eventually.

Vlad: *This sounds absolutely amazing. Especially considering it has been only a few days since you finished work on this festival, I am really grateful to you for coming over and speaking to me; I understand you are a little tired. I wish you good luck for the future and I hope you and your team will soon be reenergized so that we will have another festival. Thank you very much.*