

# **Russian Relations: Radical Empathy as a Method for Researching the Migrant Dancer Anna Robenne in Russian Archives**

**ASTRID VON ROSEN, EUGENIA  
KLIMOVA, AND OLGA NIKOLAEVA**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the unlikely collaboration between a Swedish art and dance historian, a Russian amateur historian, and a Russian-Swedish doctoral student to seek out the early career of migrating dancer Anna Robenne (one of her names). The article looks into the activist ways in which the explorers interacted with Russian, Swedish, and Finnish archives in order to both reveal and make accessible cross-border materials and knowledge pertaining to Robenne. To explore the relationship between the Robenne materials, the archival institutions, and the group of collaborating historians, the authors draw on Caswell and Cifor's notion of "radical empathy". The article thus brings new archival theory into the performing arts domain and makes a dance contribution to the broader field of critical archival and heritage studies. To cross borders to account for Robenne's Russian legacy counters previous historiography's disinterest in following the careers of non-canonized migrating artists in the Nordic-Baltic region.

## **KEYWORDS**

Archival activism, radical empathy, Anna Robenne, Russian dance history, migration.

ISSN 2002-3898

© Astrid Von Rosen, Eugenia Klimova & Olga Nikolaeva and Nordic Theatre Studies  
PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE Open access: <https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/index>  
Published with support from Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities  
and Social Sciences (NOP-HS)  
DOI: 10.7146/nts.v32i2.124350

# Russian Relations: Radical Empathy as a Method for Researching the Migrant Dancer Anna Robenne in Russian Archives

## Introduction

In their article “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives” (2016), Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor emphasize the relational character of archival engagement and call for further tests of their radically ethical methodology.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to perform such a test within the realm of dance archives and archiving in a Nordic-Russian, cross-border context. More specifically the article looks into the following research question: In what ways can relational engagement, including frictions as well as affective and imaginary dimensions, help make previously downplayed or excluded migrant dance histories emerge? To answer the question, the article explores the unlikely collaboration between Astrid von Rosen, a Swedish art and dance historian, Eugenia Klimova, a Russian amateur (in her own words) historian, and Olga Nikolaeva, a Russian-Swedish art historian, to seek out the early Russian career of the migrant dancer Anna Robenne.

A polyvalent dancer working in both popular and high art contexts, Robenne left Russia in 1917 because of the revolution to work in Finland, Sweden, Norway, the USA, and beyond. She performed in cabarets, operettas, and at charity events, as well as staging her own choreographies. In every context, she used her Russian background to construct herself as a starring artist. However, the stories she told differed widely depending on the audience.<sup>2</sup> While Robenne’s European and American legacy has been relatively accessible from a Swedish and Anglo-Saxon perspective, her early Russian career has remained obscure. Thus, the empirical goal of this investigation is to provide reasonably substantial knowledge on Robenne’s early Russian career. For the reader interested in Robenne’s Anglo-Saxon and Swedish history, two open-access publications are available by von Rosen.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Caswell and Cifor 2016.

2 von Rosen 2017 and 2019.

3 von Rosen 2017 and 2019. The research on Robenne presented in this article builds on the results from the research project *Turning Points and Continuity: The Changing Roles of Performance in Society 1880–1925* (Swedish Research Council 2013–2016), led by Lena Hammergren and with von Rosen in the research group. See Mattsson 2017 and Hoogland 2019.

The self-organized and activist-oriented efforts of the three authors of this article to cross borders in various ways and account for Robenne's Russian legacy go against the grain of previous historiography which has been disinterested in the careers of non-canonized migrating artists, especially in countries such as Russia, Finland, Sweden or Norway, where English is not the first language.<sup>4</sup> The article looks into our collaborative and activist-oriented archival process to both reveal and make internationally accessible materials and knowledge pertaining to Robenne. In doing so we challenge dominant Anglo-Saxon historiographical narratives concerning early twentieth century European dance history that foreground the Russian Ballet and a few canonized dancers and choreographers.<sup>5</sup>

Looking into the Russian dance historiography, Natalia Roslavleva's *Era of The Russian Ballet* (1966) explores the long history of Russian ballet including its rise from a mere court entertainment to one of the most admired and complex forms of art.<sup>6</sup> Roslavleva explores the early years of ballet in Russia, following its development through the nineteenth century of the Russian Empire and later, after the October Revolution, into the Soviet Union until the 1960s when the volume was published. Providing useful insights into the ballet world's cultural politics, it delves into the relation between individuals and dance companies, theatres, and independent ballet schools. Possibly, due to the time this work was published, Roslavleva is rather careful in her discussion of the tumultuous period of the Russian Revolution, which is of most interest for this article, and she does not explore Robenne's legacy. On an overarching level, it must be emphasized that the amount of research done on Russian migrant dancers and their careers in the West during and after the Russian Revolution is still very scarce. This lack of research also demonstrates the need for cross-border collaborations, such as the Robenne project described in this article.

In the following, we first introduce the concept of radical empathy and describe how we employed it as a research method. We then account for the process of finding Robenne in Russian archives and discuss our findings in relation to already known sources. We conclude by discussing how radical empathy helped us understand Robenne's legacy in an increasingly digital archival context. Addressing future stakeholders, we make a few recommendations for how archival institutions could better represent the new knowledge on Robenne.

### **Radical Empathy as a Research Method**

In recent years, and in tandem with the increased amount of materials that are digitally accessible, the concept of the archive has undergone profound changes. Most notably the mainstream custodial and bureaucratic role of the archive has in some realms been replaced by an activist-oriented understanding

---

4 This critical historiographical stance is further exemplified in Laakkonen 2009 and Hammergren 2002. For a recent international overview of critical dance historiography, see Morris and Nicholas 2018.

5 It is outside the scope of Lynn Garafola's seminal *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* to touch upon Robenne and her legacy.

6 Roslavleva 1966.

that foregrounds participatory and creative roles.<sup>7</sup> This includes viewing records (any trace of activity) as co-creative and ever-evolving agents in research and memory work.<sup>8</sup> Underpinning these new tendencies, which strive to implement inclusive and democratic ways of handling records and understanding archives, are influences from postmodern theory, indigenous thinking, and research in social justice and human rights.<sup>9</sup> Caswell and Cifor's radical empathy approach to archival engagement forms part of this overarching and ongoing shift towards activist-oriented and participatory involvement with archives and stakeholders.

In the previously mentioned article, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives", Caswell and Cifor mobilize feminist scholarship to challenge universal rights-based models and open up for caring as an important component of envisaging and creating a more equitable society. "Our conception of empathy", they claim, "is radical in its openness and its call for a willingness to be affected, to be shaped by another's experience, without blurring the lines between the self and the other."<sup>10</sup> Inspired by a feminist ethics of care, radical empathy emphasizes the relation between various stakeholders such as dancers in archival records, scholars, and others who explore archives, archivists, and other unknown and imagined future stakeholders. What makes the ethics "radical" is the idea that despite differences, an empathically charged intersubjective space can emerge in which feelings, corporeality, and experiences interact to facilitate the making and sharing of knowledge and to propel change. From the outset, the process of researching Robenne has depended upon relational encounters and negotiations involving many people, rather than the efforts of a lone scholar.<sup>11</sup>

In 2015, during a research seminar where von Rosen was presenting her ongoing research on Robenne, a stunning moment of empathy occurred. Although von Rosen had tried to involve several Russian-speaking contacts in getting access to Russian information on Robenne, these attempts had all failed, and she was on the verge of giving up the project. Without hesitation, doctoral student Olga Nikolaeva offered to use a part of her limited research time to accompany von Rosen to Helsinki and explore the Russian records there. Due to difficulties with Nikolaeva's residence permit, the research trip could first take place in 2016. While Robenne – at this point – could not be found in the Russian records accessible in Helsinki, the journey led to several new research contacts and valuable findings in recently digitized Finnish-Swedish newspapers. One of the new contacts frankly told von Rosen and Nikolaeva that it would be very difficult – like finding a needle in a haystack – to locate Robenne in Russian archives. Moreover, Nikolaeva's letter to a Russian archive where she had personal connections was not answered. Admittedly, all this was disheartening.

In the midst of these difficulties, Eugenia Klimova had independently found

---

7 Flinn 2011; Sexton 2016; Gilliland, McKemmish and Lau 2017.

8 Cook 2001, 29.

9 Gilliland, McKemmish and Lau 2017.

10 Caswell and Cifor 2016, 31.

11 von Rosen 2019.

online information about an early Robenne article by von Rosen, and wrote an email, signed with only her forename, saying that she was interested in Robenne. This email came as a surprise to von Rosen and Nikolaeva who were not sure if “Eugenia” could be trusted with von Rosen’s research. Klimova had not, for example, provided information on her occupation or academic affiliation to substantiate her interest in the research on Robenne. When asked to clarify her interest, Klimova further explained that she was “doing personal research” for a friend’s father who left Russia during the revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Klimova’s personal engagement to explore the migrant history of a friend’s lost father was deeply touching and made it easier for von Rosen and Nikolaeva to empathize with her. It opened up a space where care was at the centre of the research process, Nikolaeva explained that perhaps she wished to help out with the Robenne research because of her own, at times, troublesome, experiences as a Russian migrant. For von Rosen, caring about Robenne was a way to redress the lack of knowledge within Swedish national theatre history about dancers working in Gothenburg. Herself a former dancer, she could empathize with Robenne’s efforts to have a career spanning various countries and contexts. After the initial email exchange, von Rosen encouraged Eugenia to continue the research herself, but it was not until 2018 that Klimova got in touch again letting von Rosen and Nikolaeva know that she had managed to find Robenne in Russian archives.<sup>13</sup> This was the start of an intense exchange leading to substantial findings and a plethora of new threads and questions.

### **Finding Robenne in Russian Archives**

The key to finding Robenne in Russian archives was to find out what name she used in her early years and how to spell it in Russian. From von Rosen’s previous research, Klimova already knew that Nathalie Robin and her family called Anna Robenne “Shura” and that this was short for Alexandra. For von Rosen, used to a Swedish and Western way of handling names, there was nothing strange about the two forenames, but from a Russian perspective it did not make sense. Connecting von Rosen’s previous findings to the Russian cultural context and naming practices, Nikolaeva explained the unusualness of a Russian person having a double name.<sup>14</sup> Nikolaeva also wondered whether Anna’s patronymic would follow her given name, so that she could have been Anna Alexandrovna (from Alexander, the male version of Alexandra), if her father was named Alexander. “It is used all the time in Russia, to make sure you speak with the person respectfully, but never abroad. It does not even appear in our international passports.”<sup>15</sup> Returning to Nathalie Robins’ correspondence, and combining it with the first archival finds, Klimova contended: “Shura (Шурa in Russian) is exactly the short name for Alexandra and it proves my findings that here in Russia she was named as Alexandra not Anna Robenne.”<sup>16</sup>

---

12 Klimova 27.4.2016.

13 Klimova 19.4.2018.

14 Nikolaeva 7.6.2018.

15 Nikolaeva 7.6.2018.

16 Klimova 8.6.2018.





FIGURE 1. Photographs of Alexandra Roben. Courtesy of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI).

In her initial searches in Russian archives, Klimova was helped by a digitally accessible photograph from the Theatrical Collections in Gothenburg (GSM). In the 1916 picture, showing Robenne in a delicate dance pose, she could see the old Russian spelling of “A. Roben” and could also determine that the picture was produced in Moscow.<sup>17</sup> The picture has a stamp from the Sakharov and Orlov photo studio (Сахаров М. и Орлов П.), which was responsible for making official photographs of the Moscow Imperial Theatre’s artists.<sup>18</sup> For Klimova, knowing

17 The photograph is accessible here: <http://62.88.129.39/carlotta/web/object/689480>.

18 The stamp was checked via a special Photo Guide. See Попов 2013.

the location of the photo studio made it logical to search for “Alexandra Roben” (Александра Робэнъ or Робенъ) in the Moscow archives. At the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI) she found four photographs of Alexandra Roben. When these were compared to images held at GSM, it could be established that Anna Robenne and Alexandra Roben (henceforth we will use either name, depending on context) are clearly the same person.

One photograph shows Anna/Alexandra from behind, nude from the waist up, in an artistic study, and another seems to be a more spontaneous portrait of a woman in bobbed hair. These photographs are from the archive of the famous Russian ballet scholar and theatre critic Victor Iving (1888–1952). While not dated, these pictures have a special stamp from another studio, Dore Moscou, located in Moscow between 1908 and 1918. The other two photographs, an artist portrait of Roben looking dramatic and beautiful in a tiara, and a study of her in a Spanish dance, are dated 1916, and were created at the same studio as the GSM photograph. Thus, the effort to search across borders established a connection between the records, strengthening the web of relations and giving Robenne/Roben a Russian history. These findings provided a basis of knowledge enabling Klimova’s explorations of Russian archives and digital collections to progress. Where, for example, did Roben perform, and how did she receive her dance training?

### **The Theatre of Miniatures – a Web of Relations**

Having read through all fifty-two issues of the *Theatre Newspaper*, Klimova could affirm that Roben was not mentioned in any of them, which is also a result, albeit a negative one. Perhaps the editor did not like the miniature theatre because he thought it offered entertainment of low value.<sup>19</sup> As has been demonstrated by Hammergren, such tensions between high art and popular entertainment are reflected not only in archival materials but also in the historical exclusion of artists working in many genres and popular contexts.<sup>20</sup> However, digitized materials such as the *Moscow Address Books* as well as periodicals, help refute the exclusion of polyvalent artists. In a Moscow Theatre list, “Roben” was presented as an “Artist of Mamonov’s Theatre of Miniatures (MTM).”<sup>21</sup> In an advertisement, MTM lists Roben and the other dancers by their surnames: Kachouba [Кашуба], Boni [Бони], D’Arto [Д’Арто], Yurieva [Юрьева], Elsa Krueger [Крюгер], Nina Kirsanova [Кирсанова], etc. These traces of past dance activity are important because they form part of a web of relations involving dancers, choreographers, and teachers, as well as theatre directors and ballet school leaders. Let us first take a closer look at the MTM, the theatre where Roben and the other dancers performed.

Opening in the autumn of 1911, MTM was one of the first and most prominent Russian cabaret and miniature theatres in Moscow. It was run by Maria Artsybusheva (Мария Арцыбушева), a forceful female entrepreneur and

---

19 *Театральная газета* 1917, 1–52.

20 Hammergren 2002.

21 *Вся Москва: адресная и справочная книга на 1915 г.*

pioneer within the realm of private ballet schools in Moscow.<sup>22</sup> Closely connected to MTM, Artsybusheva's private ballet studio (Частная балетная школа Марии Арцыбушевой) was a school for training young women. Moreover, Artsybusheva invited Imperial Theatre ballet masters and choreographers to MTM, such as N. Domashov, L. Zhukov, and K. Goleizovsky.<sup>23</sup> Knowing that Roben performed at MTM, we consider it very likely that she trained at Artsybusheva's ballet school. This would mean that she not only acquired high-quality dance training, but also worked with teachers and choreographers from the Imperial Russian Ballet. In the following, we take a closer look at the context of private ballet schools in Moscow, which included Roben's young co-performers mentioned above.

In 1908 Lydia Nelidova, a former dancer from the Bolshoi, opened a private ballet school in Moscow, and in 1914 the ballerina Vera Mosolova followed suit.<sup>24</sup> Nelidova and Mosolova's schools taught ballet at a very high and academically advanced level. In fact, the standard was so high that Serge Diaghilev and Bronislava Nijinska looked for talents in those schools. Thus, in 1915, when they were very young – almost the same age as Roben – Valentina Kachouba (b. 1898) and Vera Nemtchinova (b. 1899) were engaged by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes to take part in a 1916 tour to Norway, Sweden, England, France, Switzerland, and America. Kachouba and Nemtchinova did not return to Russia because of World War I and the Russian revolution. From Roben's perspective, we can see that her co-performer Kachouba left the MTM for an international career.

Lydia Boni, another of Roben's co-performers at the MTM, and a student from Nelidova's school, was also recruited to dance in Diaghilev's troupe.<sup>25</sup> Impressively, Boni was dancing with a superstar from the Imperial Theatre, Vatslav Nijinsky. However, due to his illness, the engagement was disrupted, and Boni managed to return to Moscow before the outbreak of World War I. An interesting detail is that Boni, Artsybusheva, and Nelidova were elected in 1917 to the first board of the Ballet Trade Union, which provided legal and material protection for privately trained and independent ballet dancers.<sup>26</sup> Roben, we believe, benefited from this context and, as becomes evident during her international career, she was a very capable dance entrepreneur.

Maria D'Arto (1892) and Maria Yurieva (1897) first studied at the Nelidova ballet school and then continued their ballet training with Mosolova. Both also danced at the MTM with Roben and were part of the private ballet studio. In 1915 D'Arto and Yurieva applied for admission to the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre Troupe, but the Commission decided not to accept them, rightly believing that by accepting dancers without academic education they would open themselves to a barrage of similar applications in the future. Formally, D'Arto was rejected because of her age; she was 23 years old. While the 18-year-old Yurieva performed brilliantly, she was

---

22 *Рампа и жизнь* 5:1917. See Hammergren 2002 for related examples of forceful female entrepreneurs in the dance world.

23 Тихвинская 2005.

24 *Театральная газета*, April 1917. Moreover, the importance of these private ballet schools is acknowledged in a Russian newspaper published in France in 1928. See *Возрождение* 1928.

25 Нижинская 1999.

26 5 лет *ВСЕРАБИСА*, 1924.



also rejected.<sup>27</sup> Despite the failure, both dancers continued their performances at private theatres with great success. Their ballet etude from the Nikolsky Theatre of Miniatures in 1916 was filmed as the *Feast of Pierette* (*Праздник Пьеретт*).<sup>28</sup> The film context is an important part of Roben's Russian legacy, and we will return to it later.

The last of Roben's co-performers from the MTM to be investigated here is the outstanding dancer Elsa Krueger, recognized as the "Queen of Tango". Krueger was also a student at Nelidova's ballet school. In 1913, the year of Krueger's debut at MTM, social dancing became *à la mode* in Russia, and the tango was extremely popular. In that last pre-war season, tango had become a lifestyle.<sup>29</sup> When dancing with her partner Vally, Krueger was so charming and sexually attractive that the MTM's artistic designer, the cartoonist Paul Mak (Pavel Ivanov, brother of Victor Iving) fell under her spell. This led to Mak's successful self-transformation from a designer into Elsa's tango partner. We will leave this passionate scene by noting that Roben/Robenne later successfully performed in staged versions of the tango, and that her life turned out to be no less dramatic than Krueger's. What remains to be seen is whether there is more to find out about Roben's repertoire.<sup>30</sup>

### Starring with Strukov

A recently begun Russian digitization project, [www.Project1917.ru](http://www.Project1917.ru), made it possible for Klimova to find another piece of the Anna/Alexandra puzzle.<sup>31</sup> On 26 August and 23 September 1917 a new programme began at the Struysky Theatre (another popular theatre of miniatures) containing dances performed by "the famous dancer Roben and her partner Strukov" (Борис Струков). At RGALI Klimova found "A dossier on Strukov Boris Alexandrovich", stating that in October 1913, Strukov was accepted as an extra artist at the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre.



FIGURE 2. Advertisement for the Petrovsky Theatre of Miniatures in *Ramp and Life* 1917. Roben is mentioned among other starring artists. The Russian State Library. Screenshot by Eugenia Klimova and Astrid von Rosen.

27 RGALI: fond 859, description 3, file 4214, Personal files of Yurieva and D'Arto.

28 Performers: M. Yurieva (1st pierrette), M. D'Arto (2nd pierrette), their partner in the role of Harlequin, as well as the supplier of the etude itself was Imperial dancer, Leonid Novikov, Anna Pavlova's pre-war partner in London. D'Arto stayed in Russia but Maria Yurieva escaped from the Russian Revolution to perform in Europe, and later settled in the USA.

29 Raisman M. D. Caricaturist Mac / RGALI. F. 28909. Op. 1. Ed. 55. P. 15

30 We have not been able to substantiate Anna Robenne's 1925 claim that she was part of the original Bat or Chauve-Souris cabarets. See von Rosen 2019, 221.

31 The purpose of the digitization project was to show life in Russia a hundred years ago through diaries, memoirs, letters, and advertisements.

Browsing digitized Moscow periodicals for 1914–1916 and 1918 on site at the State Library ([www.rsl.ru](http://www.rsl.ru)), she found an advertisement in the journal *Ramp and Life* (1917) mentioning Roben as one of many artists, and another advertisement, presenting her as a prima ballerina together with her partner Strukov.<sup>32</sup> Both advertisements were for the Petrovsky Theatre of Miniatures (PTM). When MTM was closed in February 1915 due to financial problems, its ballet troupe was distributed between other popular theatres. The majority of the artists were invited to PTM. Artsybusheva was also invited as ballet and dance choreographer.



Фотография. Робен и Струков в ролях



Фотография. Робен и Струков в "Испанском танце"

Фотография. Робен и Струков в ролях. "Вальс смерти"



Фотография. Робен и Струков в ролях. "Вакханалия"



Фотография. Робен и Струков в ролях

FIGURE 3. Roben and Strukov in photographs at the Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum. Screenshot by Eugenia Klimova.

<sup>32</sup> *Рампа и жизнь* 6, 21:1917.

A search in the archive of the Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, which continues to digitize its materials, resulted in the finding of photographs of Roben and Strukov taken in 1916 at the Sakharov and Orlov photo studio mentioned above. By exploring these photographs, we can get a fairly good idea of the repertoire performed by the dance couple: The photo of *Waltz of Death* demonstrates the couple's ability to combine artistic feeling with highly skilled ballet technique, in the tradition of Fokin. The ones from *Reverie Antique* show the couple in a dance inspired by the contemporary craze for the ancient world. Importantly, the previously mentioned photograph from GTM belongs to the *Reverie Antique* series. In the photographs of the *Spanish Dance*, Roben and Strukov tap into the popular practice of staging folk dances from different parts of the world. In the *Bacchanalia* photograph the dancers bring joy and young love to the stage.

We note that the individual pictures in the photographic series of Roben and Strukov, made in a Moscow photo studio in 1916, are distributed among three different archives: Bakhrushin, RGALI, and GTM in Sweden. Thus, our exploration connects sources previously scattered across borders, and makes dance history matter in new and contextualized ways. We can also establish that Roben and Strukov had a stable partnership from 1916, starting in the Moscow theatre of miniatures context, a melting pot for artistic creativity. The archival materials reveal that they promoted themselves as an appreciated dance couple, and performed in art and entertainment establishments in Moscow. In the autumn of 1917, the couple performed successfully at Chat Noir and other venues in Helsinki. From December 1918, they were equally successful at the Fenix Cabaret, Stockholm, and continued with this cabaret show in Oslo in 1919. During this period, they travelled back and forth to Helsinki, making return appearances at cabaret venues and other establishments in the city.<sup>33</sup>

### Expanded Relations: Love Stories and Film Stars

When browsing the Russian internet, Klimova found a love poem by the famous Russian singer Alexander Vertinsky (Александр Вертинский) dedicated to “the dancer A. Roben” (танцовщице А. Робен).<sup>34</sup> As the MTM was his first place of work in 1913–1914, we believe he could have met Roben there.

---

<sup>33</sup> von Rosen 2019, 228–231. While it is beyond the scope of this article to conduct further research on Strukov, the following can be mentioned: In *L'émigration russe en France*, Strukov is described as an artist at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, and is said to have directed the ballet school at the theatre in 1917 and 1918. We are happy to include the following information we received from the anonymous reviewer of our article: “According to Finnish dance historian Tiina Suhonen Stroukoff (in Finnish Strukov) worked in Helsinki in Helsingin tanssiopisto (Helsinki Dance Institute) where he taught character dances. He also performed with other Russian emigré dancers. Suhonen wrote that he lived in Finland 1919–1920 after which he left for France. This information is available in Finnish only: Suhonen Tiina. “Ensimmäinen Joutsenlampi ja venäläinen traditio”. In *Idäntutkimus* 3/2016. According to Anne Makkonen's dissertation, Strukov had a school of his own in Helsinki in 1917–1918. According to Suhonen some Russian sources claim that in 1917–1918 Strukov was leading the ballet school in St. Petersburg.”

<sup>34</sup> Bard webpage.



Further searches revealed that the Russian internet also holds memories about a twenty-year-old student from a good, Muscovite artistic family, Yuriy Sablin (1897–1937), and his unhappy love for Shura (Alexandra) Roben. She “was a fashionista: a skirt as wide as a Tsar Bell, boots that are almost up to the nose, and so on (...) Yuriy was dying because of her.” But Shura spurned his love, which supposedly led to his becoming an active Bolshevik and member of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries.<sup>35</sup> According to the memoirs, he even tried to start a war with Finland; this was ostensibly to protect the Finnish Revolution, but the real reason was that Roben had escaped there.<sup>36</sup> Even if Sablin’s narrative may be a fantasy, his words help substantiate our contention that during her early Russian years Anna Robenne was known as Shura (Alexandra) Roben.

Another part of Robenne/Roben’s web of relations is the silent film career she talks about in American sources. Klimova found that Roben performed in at least seven silent movies, which suggests that more might surface as the digitization of Russian materials proceeds.<sup>37</sup> The first movie in which Roben performed was the farce *Mother-In-law in the Harem* (*Тёща в гареме*, 1915)<sup>38</sup>, followed by the sensational crime drama *Tragedy of Modern Youth* (*Трагедия современной молодежи*, 1915).<sup>39</sup> She then featured in the banal drama *Execution of a Woman* (*Казнь женщины*, 1917) with an improbable and ridiculous ending.<sup>40</sup> The next film was *Who is to Blame?* (*Кто виноват?*, 1917), a psychological drama about a writer who is confined by his family and deprived of the opportunity to work creatively without the appropriate creative environment and support of loved ones.<sup>41</sup> *Leah Lifshitz* (*Daughter of the Persecuted People*; *Ляя Лифшиц*, 1917), was a drama about the history of the Jewish people, with Roben in the title role.<sup>42</sup> In *Paradise without Adam* (*Рай без Адама*, 1917) the first in the series of the film adaptation of the best-selling novel by V. I. Kryzhanovskaya, Roben starred in a leading role.<sup>43</sup>

---

35 Yuriy Sablin webpage.

36 Амфитеатров-Кадашев 1996.

37 Вишневский 1945.

38 The roles are differently described in the sources, and it will require further exploration to account for them.

39 Alternative translation: *Children of our Century*, by A. Drankov, reproducing episodes of the Kiev trial of seventeen-year-olds. Actors: Sokolskaya, A. Roben, Osipov, I. Orlov, Grodsky, B. Porten, Dobryakov, A. Drankov, ARNS, Borisenko. *Kino* webpage.

40 By D. Kharitonov, with actors from the Imperial theatres: V. A. Polonsky (Prince Turganov, a chemist), Ms. A. A. Roben (Nina, his wife), and S. S. Shatov (Dr. Lavrov). Of course, we are not convinced that Roben was from the Imperial theatres. *Kino* webpage.

41 By D. Kharitonov. Actors: V. Polonsky (Kazimir Yasinsky, writer), M. Goricheva (Agata, his wife), A. Roben (Gabrielle, dancer), I. Khudoleev. *Kino* webpage.

42 Drama by A. Drankov. Actors: A. Roben (Leah Lifshitz). *Kino* webpage.

43 Director Viktor Turzhansky, by “N. Kozlovsky, S. Yuriev and K”. Actors: A. Roben, Dmitry Zeland, Ivan Gorsky, N. Vasilkovsky. *Kino* webpage.





FIGURE 4. Poster for *Cheated Eve* (1918) with Roben in a leading role. Public domain.

In *Cheated Eve* (*Обманутая Ева*, 1918), the last movie we found, Roben also had a leading role. For this film, a sequel to *Paradise without Adam*, we found the poster featured “Roben” as the first of the starring performers.<sup>44</sup> Painted in a modernist style, the poster shows a naked woman who seems to be hiding or protecting herself from a threat. While noting that the woman resembles Roben, we cannot be sure if she is actually the person portrayed on the poster. This

<sup>44</sup> Director Viktor Turzhansky, by “N. Kozlovsky, S. Yuriev and K”. Actors: A. Roben, Ivan Gorsky, Dmitry Zeland. *Kino* webpage.

film was based on the best-seller published in 1917, a women's novel about love, fate, betrayal, and friendship. According to information from the Tretyakov Gallery, many of the posters came from the "Paris heritage" of the famous Russian painters M. F. Larionov and N. S. Goncharova, and were bequeathed to the museum in 1989 by M. F. Larionov's widow, A. K. Larionova-Tomilina. The Russian relations explored in this article do indeed sprawl across many borders.

### **Conclusion: Relational Recommendations**

The purpose of this article was to test the usefulness of Caswell and Cifor's concept of radical empathy as a research tool for exploring dance and migration across geographical and other borders. We contend that by understanding ourselves as caregivers forming part of a web of relations, including migrating Russian dancer Alexandra Roben, alias Anna Robenne, and her many Russian connections, we became aware of the importance of acknowledging affective dimensions and mutual responsibilities in archival work.

Thus, mobilizing radical empathy, the ability to care for relationships even if difficulties arise, our research team managed to access previously hidden or forgotten records pertaining to the legacy of Roben. By overcoming language obstacles, negotiating differences in life situations, and caring about an artist deemed uninteresting in relation to canonized Russian performers, we have demonstrated the power of an empathic and activist-oriented approach to performing arts, migration history, and archives.

For us, the increased digitization of records and Klimova's efforts were key components in producing what became substantial empirical results. Not only did we manage to find Roben in Russian archives, we also could provide a substantial context for her work in the years between 1915 and 1917. As a very young and extremely beautiful teenage dancer, starring in the theatre of miniatures context, Roben did in fact have proper ballet training, outside the Imperial Theatre realm, perhaps, but closely connected to it. We could also prove that Roben, as stated in American sources, starred in silent movies and was the object of passionate declarations of love from famous men. Taken together, all these findings make her quite astonishing international dance and art career in Scandinavia, the USA, and Europe more understandable as well as critically relevant within the realm of dance historiography.

Together with details of Roben's Russian life and work that emerged during Klimova's explorations, Nikolaeva and von Rosen discussed strategies for making the new knowledge about Robenne / Roben accessible in Sweden. We suggest that a short and to-the-point text in Swedish, English, and Russian, published as open access in GTM's database, would be a feasible solution. Given that the GTM archive holds a large collection of Robenne materials, it seems reasonable to start by updating this collection with the new research results. We believe that our cross-border collaboration will continue, and we look forward to further exploring the legacy of Roben/Robenne and her network within and beyond Russia.

### **Acknowledgements**

*We thank the anonymous reviewer for insightful suggestions.*

## AUTHORS

Astrid von Rosen is Associate professor in Art History and Visual Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and a former dancer. Her research interests include activist approaches to scenography and dance archives in our digital age. She is principal investigator of the major independent performing arts historiography project *Expansion and Diversity* (Swedish Research Council 2019 –21).

Eugenia Klimova holds a Master's Degree in Computer Science and Engineering from the Russian People's Friendship University. She has worked as Digital Marketing Manager for a Swiss company, taking part in investigating the history of its Russian affiliates before the Revolution. She is an amateur (her own choice of word) historian and is interested in the cultural legacy of the Russian expatriate community.

Olga Nikolaeva has a PhD in Art History and Visual Studies, graduated from the Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg. She holds an MA in Visual Culture from Lund University and a Specialist Degree in Art History from the Russian State University for the Humanities. Her main interests are audiovisual presentation and scenography of live music performances. She is now working on her postdoctoral project with focus on scenography of trauma in works of women practitioners in contemporary Russian theatre.

## REFERENCES

*Bard* webpage, [http://www.bard.ru.com/php/print\\_txt.php?id=72.018](http://www.bard.ru.com/php/print_txt.php?id=72.018) (18.1.2020).

Caswell, Michelle and Marika Cifor. 2016. "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives." *Archivaria* 81 (Spring), 23–43.

Cook, Terry. 2001. "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives." *Archivaria* 51, 14–35.

*L'émigration russe en France 1919–2000*. Moscow: Marina Tsvetaeva's House-Museum, Nauka, 2010.

Flinn, Andrew. 2011. "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7:2, 1–21.

Garafola, Lynn. 1989. *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*. New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilliland, Anne, Sue McKemmish and Andrew Lau (eds.). 2017. *Research in the Archival Multiverse*. Clayton Victoria: Monash University Publishing.

Hammergren, Lena. 2002. *Ballerinor och barfotadansöser: Svensk och internationell danskultur runt 1900*. Stockholm: Carlsson.

Hoogland, Rikard (ed.). 2019. *I avantgardets skugga: Brytpunkter och kontinuitet i svensk teater kring 1900*. Göteborg: LIR skrifter, [https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/59808\\_\(17.1.2020\)](https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/59808_(17.1.2020)).

Kino webpage, <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/acter/w/empire/300366/works/> (17.1.2020).

Klimova, Eugenia. 2016. Email interview 27.4.2016. Interviewed by Astrid von Rosen. The private archive of Astrid von Rosen.

Klimova, Eugenia. 2018a. Email to Astrid von Rosen 19.4.2018. The private archive of Astrid von Rosen.

Klimova, Eugenia. 2018b. Email to Astrid von Rosen 8.6.2018. The private archive of Astrid von Rosen.

Laakkonen, Johanna. 2009. *Canon and Beyond: Edward Fazer and the Imperial Russian Ballet 1908–1910*. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.

Mattsson, Erik. 2017 (ed.). *Nordic Theatre Studies* Special issue from the research project Turning Points and Continuity: The Changing Roles of Performance in Society 1880–1925, 29:1, <https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/issue/view/7154> (16.11.2020).

Morris, Geraldine and Lorraine Nicholas (eds.). 2018. *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*. London: Routledge.

Nikolaeva, Olga. 2018. Email to Astrid von Rosen 7.6.2018. The private archive of Astrid von Rosen.

Roslavleva, Natalia. 1966. *Era of The Russian Ballet*. London: Victor Gollancz LTD.

Sexton, Anna. 2016. *Archival activism and mental health: being participatory, sharing control and building legitimacy*. Doctoral Thesis. University College London, <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1474368/> (7.2.2020).

von Rosen, Astrid. 2017. "Activating dance records: Conceptualizing research into the Swedish, Nordic and global archives pertaining to the Russian dancer Anna Robenne." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 29:1, 117–137, <https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/article/view/103312/152355>.

von Rosen, Astrid. 2019. "Radikal empati i dansarkivet: Omsorg om den ryska dansaren Anna Robenne". In Rikard Hoogland (ed.). *I avantgardets skugga: Brytpunkter och kontinuitet i svensk teater kring 1900*. Göteborg: LIR skrifter, 203–42, <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/59808>.

Yuriy Sablin webpage, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuriy\\_Sablin](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuriy_Sablin); [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Саблин,\\_Юрий\\_Владимирович](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Саблин,_Юрий_Владимирович) (accessed 2020-01-17).

5 лет ВСЕРАБИСА. Исторический очерк 1919–1924. Москва: Вестник Работников Искусств, 1924.

Амфитеатров-Кадашев, В. 1966. *Страницы из дневника, Минувшее*. Вып. 20. Москва: СПб.



Вишневский, Вениамин Евгеньевич 1945. Художественные фильмы дореволюционной России. Москва: Госкиноиздат.

*Возрождение*, том 4, выпуск 1150, 26 июля 1928 — Ревю и Танецъ [статья], автор А. Бундигов.

*Вся Москва: адресная и справочная книга на 1915 г.*, <https://dlib.rsl.ru/viewer/01003108166#?page=446> (22.1.2020).

Нижинская, Б. 1999. Ранние воспоминания. Т. 1–2. Москва: Артист. Режиссёр. Театр.

Попов, А. П. 2013. Российские фотографы (1839–1930): словарь-справочник. Коломна.

*Рампа и жизнь*. Москва: В. Н. Ильнарская, 1917.

*Театральная газета*. Москва: Э. М. Бескин, 1917, #1–52.

Тихвинская, Л. И. 2005. Повседневная жизнь театральной богемы серебряного века: Кабаре и театр миниатюр в России: 1908–1917. Москва: Молодая гвардия.