

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Directed Culture: The Spectator and Dialogues of Power in Early Soviet Theater

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/22f2k41k>

Author

Allen, Howard Douglas

Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Directed Culture:
The Spectator and Dialogues of Power in Early Soviet Theater

By

Howard Douglas Allen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Victoria E. Bonnell, Chair
Professor Ann Swidler
Professor Yuri Slezkine

Fall 2013

Abstract

Directed Culture: The Spectator and Dialogues of Power in Early Soviet Theater

by

Howard Douglas Allen

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Victoria E. Bonnell, Chair

The theater played an essential role in the making of the Soviet system. Its sociological interest not only lies in how it reflected contemporary society and politics: the theater was an integral part of society and politics. As a preeminent institution in the social and cultural life of Moscow, the theater was central to transforming public consciousness from the time of 1905 Revolution. The analysis of a selected set of theatrical premieres from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to the end of Cultural Revolution in 1932 examines the values, beliefs, and attitudes that defined Soviet culture and the revolutionary ethos. The stage contributed to creating, reproducing, and transforming the institutions of Soviet power by bearing on contemporary experience.

The power of the dramatic theater issued from artistic conventions, the emotional impact of theatrical productions, and the extensive intertextuality between theatrical performances, the press, propaganda, politics, and social life. Reception studies of the theatrical premieres address the complex issue of the spectator's experience of meaning—and his role in the construction of meaning. The evolving historical context and the changing institutional foundations of theater altered the interpretive contexts of performance. The discussion of interpretive communities and audience tastes draws on reviews in the contemporary press and the data from theater surveys conducted during the 1920s.

The theaters continually sought to align their aesthetics with the demands of the regime and the preferences of theatergoing publics. In addition, ideology served as a form of currency in the polemics among theater directors and theater critics who were engaged in the contest for dominance in the theater world. The theater spectator became a central ideological figure invoked by warring interpretive communities in these ongoing dialogues of power. The theater became politicized under Soviet rule; under Stalin it became a deformed expression of mass politics.

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	iii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>Note on Transliteration</i>	vi
INTRODUCTON: ENTERTAINING IDEAS The Spectator and Dialogues of Power Directed Culture: The Bolshevization of Theater The Experience of Meaning	1
1. THE THEATER AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION The Politics of Theater in Late Tsarist Russia The Conventions of Naturalism The Moscow Art Theater as a Cultural Institution	18
2. THE MOSCOW ART THEATER IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA The Moscow Art Theater in the Aftermath of 1917 The Theatrical Production of <i>The Lower Depths</i> A Case Study of Reception A Special Spectator	42
3. THE EXPERIENCE OF REVOLUTIONARY THEATER <i>The Dawn</i> as Revolutionary Theater The Experience of the Spectator The Public Criticism of <i>The Dawn</i>	77
4. THE BOLSHEVIK PARTY, PROLETKULT AND THE DIRECTED AUDIENCE Proletkult as a Sociocultural Movement <i>Are You Listening, Moscow?</i> An Analysis of the Production and Its Reception The Critical Division	124
5. THEATER DURING THE ERA OF THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY The Tastes of the Theatergoing Public <i>The Soufflé</i> at The Theater of the Revolution Interpretive Communities and the Meanings of <i>The Soufflé</i>	159
6. THE PROLETARIAN PLAYWRIGHTS AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION The New Administration of the Theater The Political Context of <i>Bread</i> The Dominance of RAPP During the Cultural Revolution	206
CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF THEATER	238

Illustrations

In the Introduction:	
Figure 1. Konstantin Stanislavsky	3
Figure 2. Vsevolod Meyerhold in Red Army cap	7
Figure 1.1 Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko	22
Figure 1.2 Tsarina Irina in <i>Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich</i>	23
Figure 1.3 Lobby of the Moscow Art Theater	25
Figure 1.4 The Moscow Art Theater Auditorium	26
Figure 2.1 <i>The Lower Depths</i> , Opening Scene	49
Figure 2.2 Kvashnya, the Dumpling Peddler	49
Figure 2.3 Nastya, the Prostitute	50
Figure 2.4 Bubnov, the Cap Maker	50
Figure 2.5 Satin	52
Figure 2.6 Luka	52
Figure 2.7 Luka's Entrance	53
Figure 2.8 The Baron	53
Figure 2.9 "Is There A God?"	56
Figure 2.10 The Actor Recites	57
Figure 2.11 Satin's Speech	60
Figure 2.12 "The Actor Has Hung Himself"	63
Figure 2.13 The Moscow Art Theater on Tour, 1922	71
Figure 3.1 Krupskaya and Lenin	78
Figure 3.2 Anatoly Lunacharsky	78
Figure 3.3 Hérénien	81
Figure 3.4 <i>The Dawn</i> , Plan for Staging	84
Figure 3.5 Model of the Set, Finale	90
Figure 3.6 Constructivist Set for <i>Tarelkin's Death</i>	91
Figure 3.7 In the Cemetery, Scene Four	95
Figure 3.8 The Audience at the Meyerhold Theater	98
Figure 3.9 An Audience Survey Questionnaire from the 1920s	102
Figure 3.10 On People's Square, Scene Seven	109
Figure 3.11 Aleksandr Apsit "Internatsional," 1918	112
Figure 3.12 <i>The Dawn</i> , Finale	113
Figure 3.13 Meyerhold Wearing a Fez	117
Figure 4.1 Sergei Tretyakov	136
Figure 4.2 <i>D.E.</i> at the Meyerhold Theater	137
Figure 4.3 Pantomime Scene, Act Four	139
Figure 4.4 Portrait of Lenin Unveiled	140
Figure 4.5 Sergei Eisenstein	142
Figure 4.6 Theater Program for the Performance	142

Figure 5.1 Map of Moscow’s Working Class Districts	163
Figure 5.2 Map of the Downtown Area	165
Figure 5.3 <i>The Forest</i> at the Meyerhold Theater	166
Figure 5.4 <i>The Raid</i> at the MGSPS Theater	168
Figure 5.5 Boris Romashov	176
Figure 5.6 Tverskaya Street	177
Figure 5.7 Drawing of Anna Babanova as Rita Kern	179
Figure 5.8 <i>The Soufflé</i> , Finale	183
Figure 5.9 The Assembly at the Bank	184
Figure 5.10 Drawing by D. Moor. “The Girl Sang in the Choir”	191
Figure 6.1 Anka in <i>The Poem About the Axe</i>	213
Figure 6.2 A Scene from <i>Tempo</i>	214
Figure 6.3 Vladimir Kirshon	216
Figure 6.4 A Scene from <i>Bread</i>	218
Figure 6.5 The Finale, Mikhailov and Kvasov	221
Figure 6.6 Drawing of Mikhailov, the Bolshevik Leader	224
Figure 6.7 <i>Lyubov Yarovaya</i>	226
Figure 6.8 Scene from <i>The Man with the Briefcase</i>	227
Figure 6.8 Raevsky and Kvasov	232
Figure 6.10 Drawing of “The Battle on the Theatrical Front”	235
In the Conclusion:	
1. <i>Egor Bulychev and Others</i>	244
2. <i>Dostigaev and Others</i>	244
3. Maxim Gorky	244
4. <i>Anna Karenina</i>	245
5. Count Vronsky	246
6. The Stalin Constitution	247
Table 1. Moscow Dramatic Theaters, 1925	165

Acknowledgements

Many people and institutions have supported this project. I wish to thank Victoria Bonnell whose graduate seminars inspired me to undertake the study of theater art and Soviet culture. To borrow a term from Stanislavsky, Ann Swidler encouraged me to develop the sociological “through-lines” of the dissertation. They provided guidance, critical readings, and generous advice. Mel Gordon’s encyclopedic knowledge of Soviet theater was a tremendous resource. He provided me with video footage of theater productions from the era. Yuri Slezkine also read the manuscript and provided critical advice. I wish to express my deep gratitude to all of them.

Various institutions funded the archival research in Russia, the collection of source materials, and the writing of the dissertation. I wish to thank the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC), the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR), the National Science Foundation (NSF), the University of California-St. Petersburg Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences Faculty Exchange Program, and the Graduate Division, the Institute of International Studies, and the Berkeley-Stanford Program at the University of California at Berkeley.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, and the Central State Archive of Moscow; the Museum of the Moscow Art Theater and the Bakhrushin State Museum; the Lunacharsky Theater Library; the Russian National Library; the Library of Congress; the Chicago Public Library; and the libraries of the University of California at Berkeley and Northwestern University.

Finally, I wish to thank the many others who have contributed in various ways to the dissertation.

It is dedicated to the memory of my parents and brother.

Note on Transliteration and Dates

In the text, titles of plays, organizations, and journals have been given in English translation, with the original Russian in parentheses or in the notes. Also, I have rendered names and places in their familiar, anglicized forms, such as Nadezhda Krupskaya and Kronstadt. In the notes and the bibliography, the Library of Congress system of transliteration has been used. In February 1918, Russia adopted the new style (Gregorian) calendar used in Western Europe and the United States. The old style (Julian) calendar was thirteen days behind the new style calendar at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. Hence, the October Revolution, which occurred on the twenty-fifth of the month in 1917, was celebrated on the seventh of November beginning in 1918.

Introduction: Entertaining Ideas

An audience without a history is not an audience.

Herbert Blau, *The Audience*

Members of the Moscow Art Theater troupe huddled backstage on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution on October 25, 1917 listening apprehensively to the buzz in the auditorium. *The Cherry Orchard*, Anton Chekhov's play about the demise of a gentry estate was about to begin. As Konstantin Stanislavsky, the renowned director who also played the role of Gaev recounted in his memoir:

When the curtain rose, our hearts were pounding in anticipation of a disturbance of some kind. But Chekhov's lyricism, the beauty of the Russian verse in depicting the dying Russian estate—what seemed to be so untimely given the events we were then living through—nonetheless achieved its effect, even in this setting. It was one of the most successful performances ever from the point of view of the spectators' attention. It seemed they wanted to rest a bit in an atmosphere of poetry, to bid farewell to the old life which demanded purifying sacrifices. The performance ended with the very strongest ovation, and the spectators left the theater in silence and, who knows, maybe among them were those who were preparing to battle for the new life. The shooting soon started, and taking cover, we made it home with difficulty after the show.¹

Here Stanislavsky poignantly describes an evening when momentous political events overshadowed the stage and threatened to spark a rude clash between the public and the performers—yet this did not occur. The history of the Art Theater attested to the considerable power of concurrent public events to influence the response of audiences. His remarks explain why the performance received a fervent reception: it enraptured the audience who sat immersed in the world onstage, temporarily oblivious to the one outside, which—Stanislavsky suggests—heightened the connection between the audience and the actors. Even after the shooting started and the revolutionaries looted the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, the Moscow Art Theater weathered the storm unscathed, revered as a cultural institution by the people.

The Moscow Art Theater revolutionized the world of theater when it opened at the end of the nineteenth century by approaching theater in an entirely new manner. This meant the creation of a modern aesthetic cleansed of the traditional aesthetics of the imperial theaters and the commercial ones. In contrast to the artifices of those theaters, the Moscow Art Theater represented a return to basics and the power of “authentic” art. Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko,

¹ Konstantin Stanislavskii, *Moia zhin' v iskusstve*, vol. 1, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1954), 374. A “farewell to the old life” and “preparing for the new life” gloss Gaev's lines at the conclusion of the play.

the co-founders of the theatrical endeavor, advanced “truth” and “beauty” as their core values.

Their vision of theater not only demanded a new type of actor to replace his histrionic predecessor, but also consolidated creative authority in the role of the theater director who coordinated all aspects of mounting the production and overseeing the lengthy rehearsal process. The repertoire, acting, and stage direction created a distinctly new theatrical experience. For example, the series of nostalgic and melancholic Chekhov productions drew the audience into intimate contact with the seemingly undiluted experience of Russian life, which Stanislavsky filled with minute details and pauses. They explored human relationships and especially self-delusion. Audiences were stunned and enchanted by the Art Theater’s premier theatrical productions, which quickly cemented its reputation as the House of Chekhov and brought international renown.

They also possessed a strong sense of moral and social duty characteristic of the intelligentsia, that is, the educated and politically progressive segments of Moscow society such as artists, intellectuals and professionals who cultivated critical views of the tsarist regime in nineteenth century Russia. The founders were dedicated to a vision of theater art that elevated social consciousness and cultivated the public’s tastes. Their productions of plays by Maxim Gorky in the years leading up to the 1905 Revolution were seminal in this regard. They depicted the lives of the destitute and lost living in squalor in a Russia transformed by rapid industrialization and urbanization.

Although presented here in very broad strokes, in this fashion the Art Theater made an entry onto the public stage in Moscow, transformed the very nature of theatrical experience, and developed a steadfast public for its theater art. In effecting this revolution in the Moscow theater world, it changed the very terms in which theater was subsequently discussed and judged.

The public is the central figure in the chapter entitled “Revolution” in Stanislavsky’s memoir *My Life in Art*. He distinguished between the two revolutions in 1917, the February Revolution, which brought the tsar’s abdication and formation of the Provisional Government, and the October Revolution, marking the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power, only in terms of changes in the Theater’s audiences. Whereas the audience was “mixed” with the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated following the February Revolution, the October Revolution brought a public that was “completely new” to the theater.²

In his words, this new public was “uncorrupted, trusting, and unsophisticated.” Like the “simple Russian spectator” of prerevolutionary days, the spectator who arrived in the theater after October 1917 loved drama because he could “weep a little, philosophize a bit about life, hear some words of wisdom.” Since the stage now served “millions,” the revolution greatly expanded the theater’s fundamental “mission” of bringing universal truth and the beauty of art to the

² Ibid., 372. He specifically mentions the following: janitors, clerks from different government departments, street sweepers, chauffeurs, railway conductors, workers, maids, and military men.

people, increasing theater's significance for Russia's future.³ In addition to making the case for theater's expanded role in Soviet Russia, Stanislavsky provides eyewitness evidence of the sea change in the social composition of the Art Theater audience and invokes an image of the spectator akin to the pure, innocent peasant depicted in the works of Leo Tolstoy and many other pre-revolutionary authors.



Figure 1. Konstantin Stanislavsky.

The sense of debt felt by Russia's privileged intelligentsia towards the peasantry expressed itself in publicist tracts and political actions during the second half of the nineteenth century. The intelligentsia traditionally framed its aims as bringing "light" to the "dark" world of the masses. Accordingly, in viewing his work as a "mission," Stanislavsky was drawing on the tradition of the intelligentsia's deeply felt warrant to bring cultural enlightenment to the people. His image of the spectator as innocent *tabula rasa* may have revealed more about him than the audience, betraying his distaste for commercial theater culture and fear that it would corrupt the tastes the new public.⁴

³ Ibid., 376.

⁴ An understanding of the semiotics of Russian culture is useful. For instance, in his discussion of the education of the "popular masses" at the time of the 1917 Revolutions, Stanislavsky introduces two traditional terms of aesthetic judgment, vulgarity (*poshlust'*) and petty-bourgeois prettiness (*meshchanskaia krasivost'*), to describe the "dark side" of the theater. He explains that the mission of theater is to provide the masses with art and beauty (the "light side," that is, *svetlaia*, the term also used to describe the "enlightened public" of the Moscow Art Theater at the turn of the century). Therefore, he employs two binaries, art:vulgarity and beauty:prettiness to set forth the Theater's mission. Konstantin Stanislavskii, "Ob esteticheskom vospitanii narodnykh mass," in *Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavskii ob iskusstve teatra: izbrannoe*, ed. Iu. S. Kalashnikov (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1982), 24. The manuscript (No. 1113/3) dates from 1917. Incidentally, the first play that the Moscow Art Theater staged by Maxim Gorky was *Meshchane*, which is usually translated into English as *Philistines*. Actually, the Russian term for a "philistine" is *obyvatel'*. *Meshchane* refers to the petty bourgeoisie as a social class, and hence its philistine views. The play premiered in 1902.

G. Romm, a theater critic and observer of the new spectator, published the following account in the theatrical press:

There is a drama onstage. It's a very rich and profoundly dramatic moment: the Final Act of the *Death of the Hope*.⁵ Bos's clerk is slowly reading a list of those who perished on *The Hope*—the victims of criminal negligence—but the spectators are laughing; laughing in various ways; loudly, joking out loud, [or] quietly—without a sound—smiling.⁶

He proceeds to assume the spectator's point of view in order to explain to his reader this unexpected laughter:

This person has come to the theater from the countryside, has never seen theater before. What is this theater for him? First and foremost it's show, clowning, vivid merry-making that it's okay to laugh at. For him, what is an actor? Also a trickster, who first and foremost puts on airs and when this trickster with a thin little glued-on beard waves a knife at another trickster with a moustache and clean jacket, really, isn't it worthy of a smile?

Unfamiliarity with conventions, whether for the spectator, reader, viewer or social actor means that he or she does not understand the basic rules and formulas. Romm's references to clowning and vivid merry-making had a clear connection to the fairground and popular entertainment. He implies that the audience expected to be entertained and to laugh. What could have proved so comical in this "profoundly moving" Final Act?

There are hysterics from the townspeople and outrage from Bos's daughter. Further investigation reveals that during the scene that Romm refers to, Simon, the assistant to the ship's carpenter confronts Bos, the ship owner. Simon is drunk, staggers, and slurs: "Don't come so close to me—never come so close to a man with

⁵ *The Good Hope* was translated into Russian as *The Death of the Hope*. The entry in the first *Repertoire Index* prepared by the Artistic Department of the Political Education Directorate (*Glavpolitprosvet*) for the play by the Dutch playwright, Herman Heijermans provided this synopsis:

It revolves around the life of fishermen on the North Sea coast and their severe battle with the elements. Moreover, a clear picture is painted of the exploitation of the fishermen by the ship owner who is not ashamed of sending an obviously unfit ship to sea, the destruction of which will bring the owner a large payment from the insurance company.

[*Repertuarnyi ukazatel'* (Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1925), 75].

From the 1919/20 season through the 1926/27 season, it was performed 244 times and seen by 112,681 spectators making it one of the ten most popular dramas in the first decade of Soviet rule. [A. I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Filippov, and A. Rodionov, *Teatry Moskvy, 1917-1927* (Moscow: GAKhN, 1928), 166].

⁶ G. Romm, "Novyi zritel'," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, nos. 199-200 (July 26-27, 1919): 1.

a knife.”⁷ Perhaps Simon’s “drunkenness” and slurred advice about knives struck was funny.

In any case, it appears that the audience’s horizon of expectations, that is, the background of theatrical genres, forms, and themes did not derive from the experience of the dramatic theater.⁸ Certainly, the playwright did not intend this to be the reaction; the director did not anticipate it; it came as a surprise to the actors. Romm counseled patience. Actors should not be disparaged by such reactions. In short order, he assured his readers, the new public would get accustomed to the theater and its conventions.

THE SPECTATOR AND DIALOGUES OF POWER

The place of theater in the public life of Moscow was unparalleled from the establishment of the Imperial Theater Administration in the early nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, the population of the city numbered over one million and theatergoers had a growing menu of offerings from which to choose. The Imperial Directorate’s monopoly on theater was eliminated in 1881. However, most commercial dramatic theaters failed.

The Korsh and the Nezlobin succeeded because their repertoires included Russian and foreign classics, melodramas, comedies, and farces to suit a range of tastes and budgets. No longer an elite cultural form, dramatic theater extended its reach to working-class audiences, primarily through the performances of the state-sanctioned People’s Theaters in the last decades of the century. Beginning around the time of the 1905 Revolution, the avant-garde experiments of symbolists and futurists reshaped the stage, but only appealed to a small segment of the theater-going public.

On the city’s periphery stood the fairgrounds. In addition, circus shows, pleasure gardens, music halls, vaudeville, and variety shows multiplied and exemplified the growing commercial culture of the times that catered to the tastes of the increasingly diverse urban social strata. At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, the stodgy, state-subsidized Bolshoi Opera and Maly Dramatic theaters stood on Theatrical Square not far from the Kremlin at the city’s center. The nobility and rich merchants constituted the core members of their audiences.

Certainly, most Russians had never seen theater of any type. The population was eight-five percent peasant and rapid urbanization only began after the abolition of serfdom 1861. In 1917, literacy and education became important goals of the new regime. Spreading propaganda through print presupposed a literate audience. However, small troupes that performed satirical skits proved to be useful instruments for bringing Bolshevik propaganda to the fronts during the Civil War. Theater naturally became the primary source of artistic culture in an

⁷ Herman Heijermans, “The Good Hope: A Drama of the Sea in Four Acts,” tr. Harriet Gampert Higgins, *The Drama: A Quarterly Review of Dramatic Literature*, no. 8 (November 1912), 97.

⁸ On the “horizon of expectations,” see Hans Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” *New Literary History*, no. 2 (1970): 32-33.

overwhelmingly illiterate society. Dramatic theater brought culture to the people, as Stanislavsky put it.

The Bolsheviks were a revolutionary political party preoccupied with military victory during the Civil War and, afterwards, with the economy and building the Party apparatus. However, communism represented a radical project to remake society and the individual by subsuming individuals in collectives dedicated to creating a socialist society. Theater was accorded a major role. Even before the October Revolution, the theoretical foundations of what emerged as the theatrical “left” were already in place.

Pavel Kerzhentsev, the author of *The Creative Theater*, maintained that theater for the people was motivated by philanthropic sentiment. It had no potential to liberate the proletariat. Only a theater created by the people through its own experience of socialism had such potential. In a truly proletarian theater, proletarians themselves must perform. Kerzhentsev played a key role in the establishment of Proletkult.⁹ The founding congress took place in early 1918. The organization had a powerful supporter in Anatoly Lunacharsky.

The number of Proletkult groups organized on the basis of hundreds of branches in cities and towns rapidly grew into the thousands during the Civil War years. Most of the members were workers. As members of the social class in whose name the Revolution was made, they were inspired by self-confidence and the desire to participate, create and engage in self-display. As the bemused writer Viktor Shklovsky marveled, “No one knows what to do with drama circles. They are propagating like protozoa. Not the lack of fuel, nor the lack of food, nor the Entente—no, nothing can stop their growth.”¹⁰ In this connection, it should be noted that the Greek root of the word drama does not relate to literature: it means to do or to act; drama presupposes collaboration.

In 1920, Lunacharsky appointed the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, a luminary of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde, to head the theater department of Narkompros. We might recall that *l'avant-garde* was originally coined as a military term. A former pupil of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold now donned a military greatcoat and Bolshevik army cap. Perhaps being briefly retained by White troops during the Civil War in the Crimea where he was recuperating from an illness helped radicalize him.

⁹ Proletkult was the acronym for the Proletarian Cultural Organizations.

¹⁰ Quoted in Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 125.



Figure 2. Vsevolod Meyerhold in Red Army cap.

In 1920, he launched “Theatrical October” against the established theaters in Moscow. He spoke in the name of the “new spectator”: he held up the audience as a co-creator of the theatrical production. The theatrical left that represented the new “revolutionary theaters” envisioned the radical transformation of the theater public. Any crowd at a theater is an “audience,” but a public is constructed through appeals made in its name. In contrast to the “passive” spectator of the traditional theater, the “new spectator” was an active, revolutionized one according to the theatrical left.

By 1926, when Stanislavsky’s *My Life in Art* was first published in Russia, the new spectator remained at the center of polemics in the press. There was vehement discord among theater directors, critics, and other leading cultural authorities concerning his tastes, his demands of theater, and his true needs.¹¹ The parties to the debate characterized the spectator differently, but invoking the spectator was not only a universal strategy employed by those involved in the power contest that initially arose between the “left” and the “right.” The “spectator” was a trope for the people. The Bolsheviks constantly invoked the people to legitimize their leadership and policies.

Consequently, invoking the spectator also represented a universalizing strategy for the theaters: claiming to represent the people, the proletariat, and so forth advanced the interests, both symbolic and material, of those involved. The spectator became the key figure in the power contest among the theaters because he was an uncontested source of legitimacy. He served to justify aesthetics and claims for special recognition and support from the regime. The malleable figure of the spectator became a fixture in the dialogues of power among theaters, theater critics, dramatic theoreticians, and ideologues of theater.

The new players in the old game of theater criticism greatly contributed to polarizing the field by overtly applying ideological criteria to theaters and theatrical productions. In this way, they advanced their own interests in gaining authority. It might seem that this characterization is overly cynical and imputes excessive strategizing to the actors involved, who should rather be seen as going about their

¹¹ Except in specific cases where the spectator is identified as female, I will refer to the spectator as “him” for simplicity because the “gender” of the Russian abstract noun is masculine. Also, contemporary statistical studies suggest that men predominated in the audience, although this varied significantly by theater and, possibly, by theatrical production.

business. Nevertheless, critics and ideologues are not bereft of calculation: carrying on polemics and shutting up opponents is their job. Many of the intellectuals and artists of the era were highly disputatious; the Marxist polemicists were irrepressibly ferocious.

The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 was a transformative moment in Russian history and an unprecedented event in world history. The political takeover in October and the victory of the revolutionary “Reds” in the Civil War established the power of the Bolshevik regime. It was inspired by the Marxist ideology of class war between the “proletariat” and the “bourgeoisie” led by the avant-garde political party of the Bolsheviks. According to this myth of creation, the Bolshevik Party would eliminate class divisions, ultimately transforming Russia into a communist society. Both the ideology and the political events had profound ramifications for the Moscow theater world.

After the Revolution, Moscow with the Kremlin at its center became the seat of Bolshevik power. Both politically and culturally, Petersburg/Petrograd became the “second city.” As before, the theaters staged productions seeking consecration by the critics and the academies. However, the nature of cultural authority changed because many intellectuals left Russia after October 1917. Those that remained were subject to hounding, arrest, exile, or execution. The new authorities limited and eliminated liberalism in politics and culture.

The political victory of the “left” empowered the proponents of “revolutionary” theater. Ideology became a potent resource for the “left” as it navigated the new social and political terrain—and prosecuted a campaign against the established dramatic theaters in Moscow for dominance. Yet, as before the Revolution, all the theaters, new and old, developed their artistic visions and aesthetics with the public in mind.

The Bolsheviks eliminated the market mechanism for the major dramatic theater; municipalities taxed the remaining theatrical enterprises. Still, popularity measured in terms of ticket sales or attendance figures—public recognition—remained a central concern because as theaters and as key cultural institutions under Soviet rule, they served the public. This meant that they provided a mix of entertainment, cultural elevation, and political enlightenment. Each theater determined the nature of the mix and its character. As a direct result of the October Revolution, the dramatic theaters located in central Moscow, which are the subject of this study, paradoxically represented elite cultural institutions with popular audiences.

The revolutionary movement in theater was predicated on class divisions in Soviet society. The Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power, but many who lived and worked in the tsarist bureaucracy remained in Moscow. Authors, artists and playwrights as well as intellectuals, teachers and engineers from the pre-revolutionary period became members of the Soviet-era intelligentsia. Initially, the theatrical left sought to close the pre-revolutionary theaters ostensibly to eliminate their pernicious influence on the new spectator.

According to the script that he wrote, the accomplished actor and brilliant stage director, Meyerhold intuitively knew that his strident public performances as the new head of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros, would easily transfer

the division between the “left” and “right” in Soviet political discourse to the Moscow theater world and precipitate a split. The enduring division between the “left” and “right” theaters in the popular imagination represented the product of the revolutionary movement’s original will to power and its incessant “struggle” against the “right” in the interest of “the proletariat.”

The following analysis charts the figuration of the spectator as a central component of the contest for dominance that resulted in successive splits within the Moscow theater world, altering the dynamics of the game. Indeed, by redefining theater art, the “left” sought to market itself in political terms. All of the theaters negotiated the changing political environment with their works of theater art and varying degrees of ideological work. This study looks at the process by which the various theaters shaped their public reputations, defined their aims, and built their authority. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic violence” is central to this analysis. As he explains: “In the symbolic domain, takeovers by force appear as *takeovers of form*—and it is only when this is realized that one can turn linguistic analysis into an instrument of political critique, and rhetoric into a science of symbolic powers.”¹² By examining speeches, debates, and discussions, the symbolic expressions of the power contest become evident.

DIRECTED CULTURE: THE BOLSHEVIZATION OF THEATER

Theater played an essential role in the making of the Soviet system. It is sociologically interesting because it not only reflected society and politics; it was an integral part of society and politics. As a preeminent institution in the social and cultural life of Moscow, the theater was central to transforming public consciousness and belief in a new sociopolitical order beginning with the 1905 Revolution. It was embedded in society and politics—and the social and the political were inscribed in the theater.

The tsarist autocracy imposed an extensive mediatory apparatus between the stage and the spectator. Censors read scripts, banning them or editing them as they saw fit. Officials attended shows to ensure that they were performed exactly as stipulated. The Bolsheviks retained this basic institutional framework and added an array of new organizations and practices.

The Bolshevik Party was a revolutionary one that came to power without a plan for the direction of culture. Hence, the growing cultural apparatus of the new regime necessarily appointed people who conceived “culture” to be an instrument of politics associated with agitation and propaganda. Ultimately, this influenced cultural policies and led to the micro-management of the life of the theater in the late 1920s—a decade after the Bolshevik seizure of power.

This study situates the theater within the cumulative process of the regime’s Bolshevization of institutions, policies, and practices. Since the regime viewed the theater as a major institution of a gradual ongoing cultural revolution, Narkompros and other agencies sought to shape its development by various means. For example,

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, tr. Gino Raymond and Matthew Aronson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 213.

the combination of ticket prices and distribution mechanisms determined which segments of public received a limited commodity: the theatrical performance. Demand far outstripped supply. Initially, tickets were generally free and distributed to students, soldiers, sailors, and peasants: the proletariat. This state of affairs completely changed with the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921.

The rules that governed the production of theater art evolved during the 1920s. These regulations primarily affected repertoire, but also involved genre and staging. The Central Repertory Committee (Glavrepertkom) was a key institution of Bolshevik control over the theater. It controlled what the public might see and could not see. In 1917, no “Soviet” plays yet existed; therefore Narkompros favored Russian and Western classics. Consequently, the repertoires of the academic theaters initially changed little. These theaters added contemporary plays later not only to placate the authorities, but also to appeal to the paying public during the era of the New Economic Policy in the 1920s. In contrast, the theatrical left initially reworked the classics to revolutionize them. Proletkult also used collective acting for the same purpose.

The latter half the 1920s witnessed the rapid development of institutions of political control within the theaters. By time of the Cultural Revolution at the end of the decade, ideological control over artistic production became draconian. The number of banned plays far exceeded the number permitted. The question of repertoire amounted to what must be staged in the interest of “socialist construction” during the First Five-Year Plan.

In the 1920s, Lunacharsky set the tone of cultural politics, which tolerated artistic experimentation and valued talent, within policed limits. In one of his “Parisian Letters” from 1913, published in the Russian journal *Theater and Art*, the journalist and critic Anatolii Lunacharsky sketched the theatrical life of France’s cultural capital. Beginning at the bottom, he dismissed the endless “revues” and other commercial entertainments as trash. He especially bemoaned the state of affairs at the celebrated Comédie Française where the circle of “has-beens” would not let in young talent. Despite its huge state subsidy it no longer served as a school of venerable stage traditions. This bastion of theater culture had sunk to the level of competing with the boulevard theaters to satisfy “the badly debased tastes of the average Parisian petit bourgeois.”¹³

Lunacharsky singled out the educational work of André Antoine, director of the Odéon at the time. Antoine figured as a forerunner to Stanislavsky by removing the footlights separating the stage and audience, lowering the house lights during the performance, and creating stage sets as environments for the actors when he directed the Théâtre Libre between 1887 and 1894.¹⁴ With obvious admiration, Lunacharsky described in careful detail the huge success of two matinee series that always filled the colossal hall:

¹³ *Ocherki istorii russkoi teatral'noi kritiki konets XIX-nachalo XX veka*, ed. A. Ia. Al'tshuller (Moscow, 1979), 286.

¹⁴ Frederick Brown, *Theater and Revolution: The Culture of the French Stage* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 288-90.

Lectures by Antoine often precede shows at the Odéon. Thus, when they first staged Diderot's comedy *Is He Good? Is He Bad?*¹⁵ Antoine told the public about oeuvre of the great encyclopediste, which has basically forgotten by contemporary Frenchmen, about his theatrical theory, about his dramaturgy.¹⁶

Much like Antoine after his appointment to the prestigious Odéon, Lunacharsky would serve as a spokesperson for the classics and best works of contemporary theater in his role as Commissar of Enlightenment in Soviet Russia, often giving speeches on the occasion of theatrical premieres.¹⁷ Organizing group attendance at theaters and providing instruction became the responsibility of cultural workers employed by unions. Lunacharsky became the director of the Maly Theater where he favored staging historical melodramas, including his own, which like Diderot's, were lackluster. He largely shaped policy towards the theater in the crucial years following the October Revolution and throughout the 1920s.

Not only was theater the most popular medium in Soviet Russia, theatrical premieres at the central theaters of Moscow were major public events. Lunacharsky and Lenin's wife Krupskaya regularly attended them. All the leading critics would cover premieres in the press, sometimes publishing more than once on occasions when the production sparked especially fierce debates and polemics. These reviews were published in the many journals devoted to theater, including the "mass journals" designed for working "masses, and in the newspapers—even *Pravda*, the daily newspaper of the Communist Party with its huge circulation.

Walter Benjamin, the literary critic and philosopher, witnessed the vitality of theater culture in Soviet Russia. He arrived in Moscow on December 6, 1926 for a two-month stay. Asja Lacis, the Latvian theater director who had worked with Brecht in Berlin, met Benjamin in Capri. She detailed Benjamin's reaction to the debate that following the premiere of Meyerhold's innovative reworking of Gogol's classic play:

Thousands collected in the huge hall to discuss Meyerhold's staging of *The Inspector General*. They followed the controversy with every fiber, interrupting, applauding, shouting, whistling. The Russian speakers

¹⁵ *Ést-il bon? Ést-il méchant?*

¹⁶ *Ocherki istorii russkoi teatral'noi kritiki konets XIX-nachalo XX veka*, 287.

¹⁷ The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment was known by its acronym Narkompros (*Narodnyi kommissariat prosveshcheniia*). Lunacharsky was appointed to the top post on October 26, 1917, the day after the Revolution. The work of "cultural enlightenment" involved first and foremost the literacy campaign and the educational system, but Lunacharsky had a special fondness for the theater. A prolific writer and prolix speaker, he relished the opportunity to introduce new theatrical works to the public, highlighting their historical and political significance.

fascinated Benjamin; he thought they were born tribunes. Among others, Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, and Bely spoke. One wouldn't find this in Berlin.¹⁸

The most popular theatrical productions were seen by many tens of thousands of spectators, in some cases hundreds of thousand—a large percentage of the entire Moscow population. Such productions could remain in the repertoire of a theater for a couple of seasons, sometimes many more.

The view of dramatic theater adopted here is Durkheimian: the fundamental political nature of theater actually lies in its function as public institution. Live performance is by definition a charged social event. It makes society conscious of itself as society. It heightens the felt sense of belonging to the group. The word theater derives from the Greek “theatron” (θεατρον), a place where the entire polity assembled to watch.¹⁹ To be sure, the nature of theater varies from society to society, but the main stages of Moscow functioned in this way.

At the turn of the century, the Moscow Art Theater sought and succeeded in building audiences that focused attentively on the stage; they could respond as a unified whole. Meyerhold's first experiment in Soviet theater was inspired by the Wagnerian idea of using ritual to forge collective experience. In its own way, each theater attempted to engage the public and transform society.

The question of how the social and the political were inscribed in the theater is undoubtedly complex. Are these meanings a function of the playwright's text, the acting, or the director's staging? Why raise such an intractable issue? It must be addressed because playwrights, actors, and directors invariably have the audience in mind and necessarily consider the social and political resonance of their work to some extent. This was especially true of dramatic theater in revolutionary Russia.

THE EXPERIENCE OF MEANING

The meaning of a play is usually construed as the plot, but performance is fashioned out of myriad signs and stories whose reach extends far beyond the theater. As Durkheim declares in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*: “Social life in all its aspects and in every period of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism.... Collective sentiments can just as well become incarnate in persons or formulae: some formulae are flags, while there are persons, either real or mythical, who are symbols.”²⁰ The performances of stage actors disclose the capacity of living symbols, that is, embodied signifiers, to crystallize attitudes and beliefs—and to charge them with emotion. Theater both drew upon and added to the repertoire of public symbols and the public discourse that brought meaning to Soviet Russia's

¹⁸ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. by Gary Smith, tr. by Richard Sieburth (Harvard University Press, 1986), 145.

¹⁹ Karen Hermassi, *Polity and Theatre in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 18.

²⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, tr. Joseph Swain (New York: Free Press, 1912), 264.

transformation from revolutionary chaos to a highly ordered society. The theater actually forged Soviet history and the socialist future.

In his paradigmatic essay on the semiotic analysis of art, Clifford Geertz argues that the analysis of art must be grounded in the sensibilities and the collective life of the people who experience it.²¹ Similarly, Michael Baxandall's studies of fifteenth-century painting in Italy and limewood sculpture in Renaissance Germany propose that diverse social orders and practices produced the sensibilities that art of those periods evoked.²²

The audience's background skills and understandings constitute an integral part of the medium in which artists work. Both Geertz and Baxandall argue that art and society are inextricably and reciprocally linked: the production of the former is unimaginable without the social relations and practices that the latter subtly and symbolically embodies. The latter is also literally unimaginable without the symbols and imagery that the former provides. It is the public that inscribes the social and the political in the theater.

In the theater, the bidirectional moment truly becomes apparent. Theater art is performative: it is a coproduction of the stage actors and the social actors in the auditorium. It is a communal affair. The audience is a participant in the creation of the performance. The stage actors adjust to the audience. The audience's interpretive practices constitute the context for the theater's creation of aesthetic pleasure. Consequently, understanding theatrical conventions and the creation of the fictional world on stage must be complemented with an inquiry into the contemporary interpretive community. Together they comprise the experience of meaning.

In performance, theater is a more or less non-stop clustering of signs and lines that always work within context to suggest meaning. The context is the key. The inner context is the fictional world onstage. The outer context is the audience: during the performance it constitutes context for the "performance text" onstage. The spectator's immediate experience of the performance is mediated by his understanding of its conventions. For the purposes of this analysis, each theatrical production is described in terms of general theatrical conventions as well as the specific ones invoked, or developed on stage.

For example, the avant-garde theaters of the "theatrical left" entered the mainstream drawing upon the formula of melodrama, a beloved and enduring genre of the Russian stage. In melodrama, the allegiance between the audience and the characters is set from the start. The audience roots for the victim and shudders during the scenes when it seems that all is lost. But the audience knows that the villain cannot prevail. The outcome is predetermined. Therefore, the artistic challenge is to make the formula thrilling. There is also a sociopolitical dimension to melodrama because it confirms the simple belief in a moral order. The conventions

²¹ Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1983).

²² Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) and *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

of the theatrical left married bold formal innovations with formulaic plots and political messages.

In order to provide a fuller picture of the theatrical productions, including the conventions employed, photographs of scenes complement the descriptions of the plots, the characters, and the staging. The excerpts of dialogues are taken from the original scripts in Russian. The speeches and the writings of the directors, the memoirs of actors, and the comments of ordinary spectators have contributed to these composite sketches.

Reviews in the press, surveys of theater audiences, and the reactions of spectators to specific plays are central to my analysis of the public reception of theatrical premieres. The reviews published by theater specialists, theater theorists, theater critics, and the occasional theater reviewers known as worker-correspondents provide a rich source of firsthand material about the theatrical productions and how theater audiences responded to the performances. The press represented a key institutional context where the theaters and their theatrical productions acquired outsized meaning.

Since dramatic theater is a discursive art form as well as an audiovisual experience, the works of reader-response theorists, which seek to understand the relationship between the text and the reader, provide many fruitful concepts for the study of the stage. As Stanley Fish defines them:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.²³

By sharing ways of reading texts, interpretive communities constitute them. He concludes that it is not due to any intrinsic stability of the text, but instead “a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible” that provides the grounds for critical debates. Fish’s notion is essentially sociological in nature: shared interpretive strategies account for group consensus.

Therefore, identifying these communities is paramount in order to understand how audiences constituted different theatrical productions through constructing their meanings. Certainly, the comments of a spectator or the authoritative review of a theater critic are interpretations. Yet, it must also be recognized that the “spectator” and “interpretive communities” are themselves interpretations.

The “spectator” was an ideological fiction of theaters competing for dominance in the 1920s. A “neutral” sociological description of the spectator or an interpretive community is a fiction of a different order. That is, the sociological

²³ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

analysis of the interpretations of art works by critics and spectators also represents a construction of meaning—an interpretation that necessarily depends upon objectifying the contemporary interpreters and explaining their interpretations on the grounds of their social and historical experience, or membership in an interpretive community that shared interpretive strategies.

The theater reviewer also embodies the “implied” spectator, a member of the audience who is actively engaged in interpreting the specific theatrical production. In order to make sense of it, she must share the conventions used by the theater or she will be unable to recognize its intended meaning. Yet she must grasp the intended meaning in order to appreciate the specific conventions employed in the performance.²⁴ The implied spectator is a fiction of critical interpretation, whether construed to be the (implied) spectator’s experience of the performance, the theater critic’s view of the spectator required by the theatrical production, or the director’s intentions. The spectator described in terms of social class, gender, age, education, occupation, and party membership is also grounded in actuality, but nonetheless represents a fiction—of survey research.²⁵

This does not diminish the value of analysis: it bolsters it. Analysis and discussion open up to debate the interpretation of art works, historical narratives, and scientific research. Such debate still existed in Soviet Russia during the 1920s, but the culture of Stalinism extirpated it: public discussions became the simulacra of critical exchanges.

Jauss’s theory of reception extends the idea of the audience’s involvement in constructing meaning. He argues that the audience’s “horizon of expectations” determines its active participation: “this frame of reference for each work develops in the *historical moment* of its appearance from a previous understanding of the genre, from the forms and themes of already familiar, and from the contrast between poetic and practical language.”²⁶ For example, the distance between the audience’s horizon of expectations and the horizon of expectations embodied by a theatrical premiere, for example *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen, could produce shock in the auditorium. Or, it could account for the strange laughter of the audience present at *The Death of the Hope*.

While Jauss’s notion of the public and its expectations introduces the diachronic dimension into matter of reception, it is not clear that he entertains the possibility of different publics existing at any given time. The example of *The Death of the Hope* points up this problem. If cultural authorities constitute publics, then social revolutions reconstitute interpretive communities. My approach to reception combines Fish’s idea of interpretive communities with Jauss’s diachronic approach to the public.

In this way, contemporary readings of theatrical productions can be seen in a fuller social and political light because theater has different meanings for various publics owing to their historically shaped experiences. For example, in Chapter 2, I

²⁴ On the implied reader, see Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 203.

²⁵ See the discussion of survey research and social categories in chapter 5.

²⁶ My italics. Quoted in Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, 168.

trace the reception history of Gorky's *The Lower Depths* to illustrate how the public's response to the theatrical production changed over time. It is an ideal case because the sets, staging, and actors remained the same: the public and its history changed. Chapter 5 contrasts the readings of *The Souffle* by different publics in 1925.

Reception aesthetics also encompasses the "extraliterary" horizon of expectations. Jauss asserted that:

The horizon of expectations of literature is differentiated from the horizon of expectations of historical life by the fact that it not only preserves real experiences, but also anticipates unrealized possibilities, widens the limited range of social behavior by new wishes, demands, and goals, and thereby opens avenues for future experience.²⁷

Another title for the present study could be the revolutionary experiment in theater art because it describes the full expression of faith in the theater's capacity to transform society. Indeed, belief in the power of theater explains why the Soviet regime—and the autocracy before it—stringently circumscribed it.

Victoria Bonnell's study of the iconography in Soviet political posters as visual scripts "designed to conjure up new modes of thinking and conduct" is germane to the study of theater.²⁸ She relates the visual syntax of images of the worker, women, and enemies found in Soviet posters—the iconography—to the binaries of Russian culture, which the Bolsheviks inherited and reworked. These binaries operated at the deep level of Soviet era culture, structuring drama, literature, journalism, and official propaganda, such as poster art.

Since the theatrical left and the proletarian playwrights consciously worked within the Bolshevik idiom, it informed their works directly. Since binary oppositions structured plays, stage productions, theatrical reviews, as well as the thinking and the reactions of audiences, my analysis highlights them. Coincidentally, while Karl Marx was writing *The Communist Manifesto*, the young Russian dramatist Aleksandr Ostrovsky was writing *The Bankrupt*, exposing fraudulent business practices. While Karl Marx was writing *Das Kapital*, Ostrovsky was writing tragedies about the struggle between oppressors and the oppressed. Both the plays and political economy took long views of society and socioeconomic relationships. Both plotted dramas that structured the foundations of Soviet-era culture.

In connection with the popular reception of art, Evgeny Dobrenko's *The Making of the State Reader*, a study of the "statization" of the reader in Soviet Russia must be mentioned. Dobrenko presents a wealth of material to argue that state institutions shaped the reader and the reception of Socialist Realism.²⁹ His study

²⁷ Ibid., 169.

²⁸ Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press, 1997).

²⁹ Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Literature*, tr. Jesse Savage (Stanford University Press, 1997). The term for "statitization" is *ogosudarstvlenie*.

provides a context for my own work because it emphasizes the importance of institutions in shaping reading practices, but it does not address the problem of the dynamics of authority.

Since his study concerns the institution of reading in the 1930s, Dobrenko argues that Authority with a capital “a”—an ideological superaddressee—controlled the interaction between literature and the reader.³⁰ In contrast, the present study also focuses on changes in theatrical conventions and the diversity of interpretive communities that governed the interaction.

In order to examine the interplay between the stage and its publics, I discuss one major production in detail in each chapter. The selection of the theatrical productions has been guided by the following criteria. First, a major production means that it was produced at one of the dramatic theaters in downtown Moscow.³¹ Second, the production generated plenty of coverage in the press through which the question of reception can be addressed. Most importantly, the selections evidence the distinctly different aesthetics and politics of the theaters in the early Soviet period. The foundation of the Moscow Art Theater in 1898 and the premiere of *Anna Karenina* in 1937 bookend the narrative, but the analysis of theatrical productions covers the years from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 through the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1932.

To summarize, this is a study of “directed culture” in several senses. In its primary sense, the theatrical works produced by stage directors for live audiences defined directed culture. Second, it represented the combative theater culture in Moscow, in which theaters and critics directed new ideologies toward the public and against opponents. Third, the theater is situated within the context of the state and Party institutions that directly shaped its development. Finally, the broad direction of history, politics, and culture in Soviet Russia constituted the themes of dramatic plays and, ultimately, the spectator’s capacity to interpret theatrical productions.

I use the term “public” to refer to audiences and the critics—and to describe the reception of a theatrical production. This term also distinguishes between audiences in general (“the public”) and the particular audience at an actual theatrical performance. As intended by the author or speaker, the Russian word *publika* is rendered as “the public.” Like “the spectator,” the term was also deployed rhetorically. The Russian *publika* should not be confused with the Habermasian notion of the public. Its cousin *obshchestvennost*, or community, was highly charged politically, especially at the end of the 1920s when it transformed into the menacing phrase *sovetskaia obshchestvennost*, or “the Soviet community.”

³⁰ On the superaddressee, see Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 135-36.

³¹ I discuss the work of four of the nine central theaters in detail, as well as the MGSPS Theater. I mention the others in passing. With the exception of the Maly Theater, these other central theaters had limited audiences.

ONE

The Theater as a Cultural Institution

Shortly after the Art Theater reopened in late November 1917 following its protest strike in solidarity with other theaters against the revolutionary regime, V.A. Nelidov, the former manager of the Maly Imperial Theater in Moscow, witnessed the following scene:

There is a seated couple. “He” and “she.” He’s wearing a buttoned collar shirt with a vest. She has a scarf tied around her head. They are holding a bag of treats. Both of them are holding the bag and—without taking their eyes off the stage—dig into the bag and gobble it all down. Once, *Uncle Vanya* was being performed at the Art Theater. So much happens during the first act that K.S. Stanislavsky came out before the start of the second and firmly and sharply addressed the public to implore “respect for the work of the actor.”¹

For this gentleman, and many of his contemporaries, the ranks of spectators who arrived in the theaters of Moscow after the Bolshevik Revolution looked and acted comically out of place. Others, like Stanislavsky, extolled the childlike wonder and refreshing spontaneity that they unabashedly displayed in the auditorium. In this sketch we recognize a couple of humble origins watching the performance with rapt attention while eating treats as though at the fairgrounds.

Stanislavsky was extremely punctilious and consequently deeply beleaguered after the revolution when the untutored spectator overwhelmed his theater, but the strict policies concerning seating no one after the rise of the curtain (until intermission) and holding applause until the curtain were still enforced. He always insisted upon propriety and discipline whether it concerned his troupe or the public.

After all, at the turn of the century, through his diligent efforts, he had trained the public to comport itself respectfully before, during, and after performances at his theater. Applause was reserved until after the curtain so as not to disturb the audience’s focus on the performance. Even social intercourse during intermissions was cautiously restrained; loud talk was considered grossly ill mannered. The very décor of the hall was muted. In this hushed atmosphere, the tacit formalities of the occasion and proper conduct represented the fundamentals of the audience’s role in the Art Theater’s creative enterprise. Accordingly, in 1917, the problem of the public for Stanislavsky was most pressingly a matter of etiquette and instruction.²

¹ V. A. Nelidov, *Teatral’naia Moskva* (Berlin-Riga, [1931]), 429.

² On etiquette and the audience’s appropriation of art, see Paul Dimaggio, “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America,” *Media, Culture and Society* 4: 33-50 and “Culture Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Classification and Framing of American Art, Part II,” *Media, Culture and Society* 4: 303-322.

This amusing portrayal represents members of the “new public” who are unaware of what constitutes acceptable conduct at the theater: they are unfamiliar with the conventions. One senses a grave issue for the Moscow Art Theater: it required an audience that both behaved properly and appreciated the nature of its art and artists. This was extremely important for a theater whose unique theatrical experience derived from the charged feedback that the actors received from the carefully attuned audience. Would the new public of the revolutionary period learn the conventions of dramatic theater as practiced at the Moscow Art Theater “in short order” as Romm asserted in the earlier vignette?

In Howard Becker’s *Art Worlds*, conventions refer to theater etiquette as well as musical scales. They smoothly coordinate production and ease decision-making. The strength of this sociological insight is how it simplifies the analysis of the making of art into processes of following or breaking conventions. The highly organized process of producing dramatic productions is unimaginable without conventions.

Yet, Becker does not devote particular attention to the role of conventions in constructing meaning. These are the conventions that artists employ in their works and by which audiences interpret their meanings. Audiences acquire them through prior experience of the formulas, such as watching melodramas or listening to folktales. For example, dramatic productions draw on stock characters, blocking figures, and conventions of plot, to name a few: this represents a rich repertoire of elemental structures upon which playwrights and theater directors build their work. The challenge for the director is working with the script and theatrical formulas to shape a production as a satisfying vehicle of meaning to which the audience can respond.

The basic rules of etiquette can be inculcated through instruction. But learning the conventions of theater in the sense of being able to attune to the complexes of signs composing a performance an altogether different matter. Individuals interpret artworks in a host of ways and derive meaning and pleasure: in the case of non-representational art such as music or dance meaning appears to be intangible and feelings and emotions central, but these forms are also rife with conventions.

Conventions of all sorts hold sway in different styles of art, including a drama with situations not far removed from “real life” such as that depicted in *The Death of the Hope*, which the playwright wrote employing specific conventions (suspense, the contrast of the “good people” of the land and “corrupt people” of the town, etc.) in anticipation of the audience’s response. When discussing the meanings of art, specifying conventions and distinguishing how artists follow or break them is useful.

For example, it aids in analyzing the interaction between actors and audiences during performances. The primary structures of traditions and conventions inform scripts, ideas for staging, and the approaches to acting employed in producing actual theatrical presentations. As a result, they suggest creative routes and impose constraints. This accounts for the level of detail in the analysis of the individual productions.

The demands of genre also provide special opportunities for shaping the *mise en scène*. Drawing on conventions and subverting the conventions with which the audience is familiar allows for potentially rich communication between the stage and the spectators. As a rule, a comedy of manners not only satirizes contemporary manners and affectations—it can do so in a quite exacting way, invariably through witty dialogue. Hence, observing social norms is at the center of the action in this dramatic form.

This has implications for social life and cultural analysis. At face value, it can be a treasure trove for exploring contemporary attitudes, values, beliefs as well as deviance from social norms because the form presupposes a level of familiarity with them in order for it to succeed. However, by changing how the audience regards certain kinds of behavior, the performance might have real social consequences by changing people's perceptions of them.³

From its opening in 1898, the Moscow Art Theater developed its trademark style of naturalism firmly rooted in milieu and character, targeting the educated, progressive public whom it cultivated as an audience.⁴ The new theater provided a unique experience that derived from its formidable innovations in staging original plays by singular voices such as Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky during its first seasons, rapidly cementing its reputation. Stanislavsky's acting system provided actors with the tools to recreate the impact of real life for the audience. Decades later, actors in the new media of film and television would adopt his acting methods, and realistic representation became so established in the media that what might prove to be another set of period conventions still appears "natural" and perhaps immutable.⁵

Since the familiarity of these conventions makes them invisible to a degree, reviewing them will help fathom the revolutionary departure that the naturalistic play and its staging represented for the audience at the turn of the last century. As a leading contemporary theater critic put it, at the time many thought that Anton Chekhov had carried out a revolution: "he stood Russian drama on its head and broke all the laws by disregarding all the rules."⁶ Although Efros disagreed, viewing

³ See Ann Swidler, "Cultural Power and Social Movements" *Cultural Sociology* ed. Lyn Spilman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 311-323. See also Pierre Bourdieu, "Description and Prescription: The Conditions of Possibility and the Limits of Political Effectiveness," chapter 5 in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John Thompson, tr. Gino Raymond and Matthew Aronson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁴ Style is an elusive term. Here it refers to the rhythms, tones, and textures that condition the experience of a given theatrical production as a work of public art. For Susan Sontag, "style" is synonymous with the artwork. See Susan Sontag, "On Style," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966).

⁵ "Naturalism" was a movement in literature whose theoretical foundations for theater were initially defined by Emile Zola in the 1870s. His program for the drama included the realistic representation of everyday life with a full range of concrete detail (however symbolic in significance) and rejected the idea that art should be confined to showing the heroic, uplifting, and inspiring. In the theater, naturalism emphasized the environment, not merely as the setting for the action, but as an element of it. For a concise discussion and contrast of these two critical terms, see Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 60-62.

⁶ Nikolai Efros, *Na dne: p'esa Maksima Gor'kogo v postanovke Moskovskogo khudozhestvennogo teatra* (Moscow-Petersburg: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923), 34. The literal meaning of Efros's text is that Chekhov broke all the laws and disobeyed the "commandments" of theater, which implies that his work was heterodox.

it as an “evolution,” it surely marked an aesthetic revolution in the dramatic literature and their production onstage.⁷ The case of naturalism in the theater is interesting not merely as an historical case study of a revolution in art: it also addresses the matter of how new styles change the interplay between artists and audiences, which is the primary nexus of the experience of artworks. Art in its multifarious forms evokes sensibilities, however crystalline or inchoate in meaning. This interplay nestled within the broader frame of the politically charged and collectively sustained dialogue about theater and its public role.

THE POLITICS OF THEATER IN LATE TSARIST RUSSIA

Konstantin Stanislavsky (né Alekseev) was the son of a wealthy industrialist; both of his parents were patrons of the arts. He belonged to the new Russian upper crust, the *haute bourgeoisie* of financiers, entrepreneurs, and industrialists who engineered Russia’s rapid industrialization in the decades following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, one of Alexander II’s Great Reforms, which created a massive labor pool.⁸ Peasants left the countryside for work in towns and cities and also filled their slums. The desperate poverty of the denizens of Maxim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* depicted the urban underclass that arose in Russia in this very period.

Stanislavsky’s celebrated marathon meeting with the playwright, acting instructor, and critic Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Slavianskii Bazar Restaurant in 1897 led to the founding of the Moscow Art Theater, which would be dedicated to the highest ideals of theater art as they conceived them: the building of a modern dramatic repertoire, civic engagement, and the cultivation of the public. Several artistic principles outlined their new practices: the equitable distribution of roles to each actor in company to replace the star system; the natural tenor of the acting to which the ensemble approach lent itself; and the use of a detailed *mise en scène* that faithfully realized the playwright’s work onstage.

⁷ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, tr. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 109-12 for a discussion of the ethical conditions of the aesthetic. Chekhov disliked the moral and political position-takings in Gorky’s works. Bourdieu’s discussion of drama and theater in Paris, specifically the key role that Naturalists and Symbolists played in the structuring of the “autonomous sub-field” of art has direct relevance for understanding the transformations in the cultural life of turn-of-the-century Moscow. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 46-61.

⁸ *Krupnaia byrzhaziia* is the Russian term for the *haute bourgeoisie*.

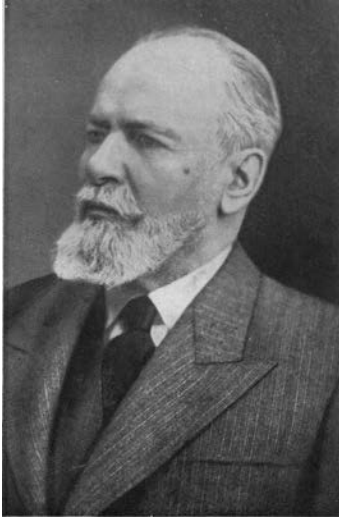


Figure 1.1 Vladimir Nemirovich-Dancheko

In short, it upended the system at the Maly Theater, the premiere dramatic theater in Moscow. This groundbreaking approach to theater was apparent in its first, sparkling production of Alexei Tolstoy's *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich* with its costumes and properties that painstakingly reproduced the originals from the sixteenth century (See Figure 1.2). Rather than have the entire cast facing the audience when Tsar Fëdor addressed the assembly of boyars, the *mise en scène* introduced an entirely original approach: many of the boyars sat with their backs to the audience.⁹

⁹ For a description of the staging and the productions of the theater's "historical-genre plays" such as this one, see Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 215-20. For detail about the theater's innovations in costuming, see *Ibid*, 198-203. See also Nikolai Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr 1898-1923* (Moscow and Petersburg: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924), 146-52.



Figure 1.2 Tsarina Irina in *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich*. The costumes, properties, and sets were based historical materials including relics of the period in museums. This was the premiere production at the Moscow Art Theater in 1898. Source: Nikolai Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*.

The Art Theater’s founding principles still resonate with present-day notions of art and authenticity, but they also can be viewed as a cultural strategy based on “bad faith” that appropriated of the aesthetic values of “truth” and “beauty” to consecrate the new Theater’s own practices and delegitimize those of the theatrical establishment. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, “These priestly strategies are all based on bad faith, in the Sartrean sense of the term: lying to oneself, that ‘sacred lie’ by which the priest decides the value of things by declaring that things are good absolutely when they are good for him: the priest, says Nietzsche, is the one who ‘calls his own will God.’”¹⁰

Even something as mundane as etiquette contributed to this process of sacralizing its artistic aims and magnifying its mystique in the public eye. Through training the public to act properly—to conduct itself with due respect and fully attend to the performance—the Moscow Art Theater constructed its own public with a unique collective identity and in so doing asserted, exercised, and increased its power as a cultural institution. When the Theater first opened, being a “polite” spectator as defined by Stanislavsky was no more second nature to the nobility, wealthy merchants, or members of the intelligentsia than to the new spectator of working-class or peasant background depicted in his *faux pas* above.

As Stanislavsky described this process, another aspect of creating the aesthetic experience in the Theater witnessed a gradual shift in relations of authority within the theater: “The actors had stopped giving in to the audience, had ceased taking bows when called out on stage. No longer feeling he was the

¹⁰ See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 210.

sovereign master in the theater, the spectator submitted to *our* rule, after some delay.”¹¹ The audience began to assume the role provided for it by the Moscow Art Theater, which signaled its recognition of an order imposed by the Theater—and legitimized in the name of Art.

This disciplinary regime extended to the actors themselves, both onstage and off stage. On the eve of the theater’s opening, two actors quarreled at a rehearsal “and used language which cannot be tolerated in the theater, especially when fulfilling their responsibilities,” Stanislavsky recounts.¹² In the tradition of the *narodnyi sud*, or People’s Court, the directors decided that the entire company would judge the incident. Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko asked the members of the new company if they wanted to immediately “eliminate the possibility of such demoralizing incidents and punish the guilty in an exemplary fashion.”¹³ They expelled a member of the troupe, which necessitated recasting and re-rehearsing all of the plays. A similar less serious incident resulted in a large fine for the offender and public shaming by the whole collective.¹⁴

By the start of the 1902 season, the Moscow Art Theater moved to its permanent home in Kamergerskii Lane. The industrialist and philanthropist Savva Mamontov financed the building of the 1100 seat house. This size aimed to maximize profits from the base of subscribers while maintaining the intimate atmosphere. As Stanislavsky asserted: “You cannot shout about things that are said in a whisper.”¹⁵

In keeping with the theater’s aims, they avoided gilt and color in the lobby, the rooms for spectators, and the auditorium, as in the garish imperial and

¹¹ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 204. My italics.

¹² Ibid, 194-95.

¹³ Ibid, 195. The actors of the Moscow Art Theater assumed the role of a jury in the show trial (*pokazatel'nyi sud*) organized by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko in order to establish the code of conduct for the new theater. This was a “small penal mechanism” in Foucault’s sense: disciplines that establish “infra-penalty” with micro-penalties governing time, activity, behavior, speech, etc. Hence, this “show trial” was not just a small-scale court, it also defined the punishable as the whole domain of what was “non-conforming.” See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 177-184.

¹⁴ Ibid. The public shaming or *publichnyi vygovor* consisted of each of the actors repeating the dressing-down in turn, which both increased the intensity of shaming for the guilty party and also served as a memorable object lesson about maintaining discipline for all involved. See also Oleg Kharkhordin’s discussion of mutual surveillance in *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 110-117. At the Moscow Art Theater, the veteran troupe members routinely used the “Director’s Notebook” and the “Performance Notebook” to record lapses in discipline.

¹⁵ Konstantin Stanislavskii, “Ob esteticheskom vospitanii narodnykh mass,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, *Stat'i, rechi, otkliki, zametki, vospominaniia 1917-1938* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1959), 28.

commercial theaters, and reserved it for the costumes, sets, and staging.¹⁶ Instead, the funds were allocated to dressing rooms for the actors and the latest innovations for the stage, which included electric lighting, traps, and a revolving stage. The aesthetics of the venue from its façade to the lobby reflected the restrained and tasteful character of the intelligentsia habitus.¹⁷ The theater building as the physical embodiment of this new cultural institution also contributed to mediating the public's experience of performances.



Figure 1.2 The lower lobby with its simple geometric design. The only ornamentation is the iconic seagull that defines the border along the ceiling. *Source: Efros: Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr.*

¹⁶ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 256-57.

¹⁷ This is Bourdieu's concept for the internalized habits, styles, and skills associated with a social class position. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), especially chapters 3 and 4 for an extended analysis of the dominant modes of appropriating works of art and the importance of "cultural capital."



Figure 1.3 View of the auditorium showing the main floor, mezzanine and balcony. The light fixtures suspended from the balcony provide the only ornamentation in the entire hall (a simple art nouveau style). Source: Efros: *Moskovskii khudozhestvennii teatr*, 14.

Prior to the foundation of the Moscow Art Theater, the Maly Theater and its imperious devotees represented the pinnacle of dramatic theater and the highbrow audience in Moscow society. Its venerated acting troupe anchored its unassailable repertoire of traditional Russian classics. This theater proudly stood for the star system, a theater for actors, since it was associated with the oldest theatrical school in Moscow, tracing its lineage to the eighteenth-century acting company at Moscow University, and remarkable actors such as Mikhail Shchepkin (in *Woe from Wit* and *The Inspector General* during the 1830s) and Maria Ermolova (in classics by Lessing, Racine, and Shakespeare beginning in the 1870s). From the perspective of the adepts and adherents of its art and principles, Stanislavsky the stage director embodied an autocrat encroaching on the actor's natural prerogatives and artistic talents. In their view, his theater *of* actors, quite young and inexperienced ones at that, constituted a threat to dramatic theater as an artistic institution.¹⁸

For their part, the nobility, state officials, officers, and rich merchants who constituted the traditional public of the Maly Theater and whose devotion to it was steadfast, regarded Stanislavsky as an impertinent rogue and a merchant in the temple. A satirical feuilleton written in dramatic form that circulated in Moscow at the time captured these sentiments well. The first lines spoken by "Stanislavsky"

¹⁸ For an incisive discussion of theater art at the Maly Theater within the context of the "crisis of theater" in Moscow at the turn of the century, see Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr 1898-1923*, 11-22.

cast him as a capricious type who hastened to realize a whim once it had taken hold of him, regardless of the cost.¹⁹ This is the conclusion of his first monologue:

For me the laws of art are dead,
So I devised my own instead.
The implacable foe of tradition, the scourge of actors, the stage's ruin,
Without constraint, without impediment, in the true sense, I'm a
gentleman.²⁰

"Stanislavsky" is viewed as an impudent rascal and menace who has the temerity to challenge tradition; his designs threaten the actor and stage alike with disaster. Here, the ironic use of the term "gentleman" characterizes him as a nouveau riche, a parvenu, and a petty tyrant parading as a patron of the arts.

Stanislavsky acknowledged that his directorial approach was indeed autocratic: he eagerly adopted the approach from Ludwig Chronegk of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's troupe that toured Moscow because he recognized its necessity for realizing the aesthetic aims of his new theater. The Meiningen troupe still employed the old "stagey" acting methods, but the formal aspects of staging—the striking period authenticity, the awesome crowd scenes, and the amazing discipline of the productions—truly impressed Stanislavsky and moved Moscow audiences.²¹

As Stanislavsky saw it, directors in Russia like himself were in a position similar to Chronegk: the goal was to mount major productions but one had to work with actors who lacked training. As Stanislavsky posed the problem, "The production plan was always broad and deep in its meaning, but how could it be realized with such actors? The production's center of gravity had to be transferred to its staging. The necessity of creating for all [involved] established the dictatorship of the director."²²

Stanislavsky assumed the role of instructing and directing the actors in his troupe in the interest of evoking the deeper meanings of play onstage. According to him, this was the source of his self-possession and sang-froid that gave birth to an entire generation of dictatorial directors in Russia. Hence, the foundation of the new theater was synonymous with the creation of a new position within the theater:

¹⁹ V.P. Preobrazhenskii, *Znai nashikh*, Teatral'nyi muzei Alekseia Bakkhrushina, no. 1007. Preobrazhenskii was a noted theatrical critic who joined ranks in opposition to the Moscow Art Theater. The pamphlet and excerpts are cited in Nikolai Efros, *Ibid*, 136 and fn. 63, 435.

²⁰ *Ibid*. My versification.

²¹ See "Meiningentsy," in Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 132-135. Also see Nikolai Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*, 147-158 for an extended discussion of "Meinengenism" in the first theatrical productions of the Moscow Art Theater.

²² Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 133. Stanislavsky used the phrase "directorial despotism" (*rezhisserskii despotizm*). The *régisiseur* best renders the meaning of the position of the modern director who exercises complete control over the production.

the actor-director who worked in rehearsals to perfect the *mise en scène* and the performances of the actors in accord with his vision.

The “enlightened society” of the politically progressive intelligentsia and increasingly radicalized university students as well as moderate and conservative segments of educated society forged a strong connection with the Moscow Art Theater at the turn of the century.²³ From the perspective of the theatergoer whom the Moscow Art Theater cultivated, the Maly Theater became as obsolete in artistic terms as the regime in political terms. In fact, the Moscow Art Theater crowd interpreted its premiere production of the weak tsar in Alexei Tolstoy’s *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich* as an oblique commentary on the reigning Tsar Nicholas II. The authorities considered prohibiting the production but relented.

Rumors about the theater’s upcoming productions of the long-forbidden works of the modern repertoire quickly created an aura of excitement and rebelliousness around the theater. The new repertoire interested this new audience most, but the theater’s formal innovations also spoke to the public’s oppositional and revolutionary mood.²⁴ At this historical juncture, the intelligentsia and especially youth gravitated toward the new theater. As its repertoire and reputation grew, it attracted additional segments of Russian society into the ranks of its loyal patrons, most significantly, the provincial intelligentsia. As Sergei Volkonsky discerned, “The Art Theater completely lacked the neutral character of a public place, which distinguishes all the other theaters.”²⁵ A similar dynamic would unfold two decades later when the new revolutionary theaters became a beacon for the Soviet-era audience, especially youth: the formal experimentation was radical, the mood rambunctious, and they challenged the primacy of Moscow Art Theater on aesthetic and sociopolitical grounds.

The Moscow Art Theater became a celebrated symbol of artistic excellence as the Maly’s star faded, but as a prominent public institution in tsarist Russia it navigated cultural politics with caution. Stanislavsky called Gorky the “the most important founder and creator of the theater’s sociopolitical line.”²⁶ The section in his memoir devoted to Gorky’s first play, *Philistines*, parses the meaning of this phrase. He writes that the general unrest of the times saw “many plays come to the stage that reflected the sociopolitical mood, the dissatisfaction, the protest, the

²³ Efros refers to the audience as a whole as “the enlightened community” (*svetloe obshchestvo*) and also identifies the “educated proletariat” (*intelligentnyi proletariat*) to designate what he claimed was the social group in the theater’s public whose thinking and aspirations defined its *température morale*. When it still bore the name the “Moscow Accessible Art Theater,” forty-six percent of its seats were priced under a ruble, and twelve percent of those (140 seats) cost less than half a ruble. See Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*, 99-101 and 137-38. His source was “Khudozhestvennyi-obshchedostupnyi teatr. Otchet o deiatel’nosti za pervyi god,” Moscow, 1889, 59.

²⁴ Ibid., 138.

²⁵ Sergei Volkonskii, *Khudozhestvennye otkliki* (Peterburg, 1912), 70. Quoted in Ibid, 138, fn. 67, 436.

²⁶ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn’ v iskusstve*, 262.

dream of a hero who boldly tells the truth.”²⁷

From the time of the Decembrist Revolt in 1825, the principled actions of the few who courageously spoke truth to power and paid the price with their lives, prison, or exile inspired the intelligentsia, Russian literature, and a venerable tradition in the publicist press that interpreted and judged art in terms of its moral and political value. The moderate and progressive segments of the intelligentsia exuberantly applauded such positive heroes onstage but conducted their lives with due circumspection in the public arena. Stanislavsky explained that the productions constituting the theater’s “sociopolitical line” were in fact plays of “intuition and feeling” for him: the “sociopolitical” aspect of plays was the value and excitement added by the contemporary audience. This argument nevertheless conceded that the electric current in the auditorium depended upon the participation of both the artists and the audience who together completed the circuit of charging a production with political significance.

During the period of its collaboration with Gorky, the theater was no longer considered “moderate,” but “progressive” by virtue of its repertoire which became increasingly “political” with plays by Ibsen, Hauptmann, and others who put society’s mores and ills in the limelight.²⁸ Gorky was under police surveillance and restricted from residing in Moscow. He had just been stripped of his title of honorary member of the Academy of Sciences.²⁹ After his involvement in the 1905 Revolution, he emigrated from Russia to Capri.

In 1902, the authorities were intensely concerned about the rumors of a public demonstration: several major opposition parties had already formed as a result of the social changes and problems that rapid industrialization had brought to Russia. The censor made many changes to the script of Gorky’s play *Philistines*, including replacing the words “the merchant Romanov’s wife” with the words “the merchant Ivanov’s wife” because it could be construed as an allusion to the royal house.³⁰ Tsar Nicholas II exercised his authority by “divine right” as had all Romanovs since the dynasty’s founding in 1613.

²⁷ Ibid., 261.

²⁸ Between 1898 and 1905 the repertoire consisted of seven productions (eight plays) of foreign classics; sixteen productions (twenty plays) of Russian classics; eighteen productions (twenty plays) of new foreign dramaturgy; and nineteen productions (twenty plays) of new Russian dramaturgy. The new foreign plays consisted of nine by Ibsen, four by Maeterlinck, three each by Hauptmann and Knut Hamsun, and one by E. Mariott. See Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*, 267. With the exception of *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen’s other plays—*Wild Duck*, *Rosmerholm*, and *Peer Gynt*—“the public had difficulty with them, they did not spark its excitement and enthusiasm.” (Ibid, 279). Efros seems to be suggesting that the public had a low tolerance for difficult and darker plays.

²⁹ Iurii Sobolev, “M. Gor’kii v Khudozhestvennom teatre: k 50-letiiu M. Gor’kogo,” *Vestnik teatra*, no. 16 (March 28-30): 4.

³⁰ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 263.

The Moscow Art Theater obtained permission to stage it but only for season subscribers. As in the second half of the nineteenth century, the policy was based on the assumption that controversial plays staged for “respectable” audiences might prove incendiary when performed before “popular” audiences. However, the authorities feared that the presence of young people—the students from the university and institutes without tickets whom theater admitted for free—might present a threat to order.³¹ Nemirovich-Danchenko personally guaranteed “complete order” at the general rehearsal and even met with students appealing to them not to create a disturbance during the performance.³² The whole of officialdom was present, grand dukes and ministers, the entire censorship committee, representatives of the police and other government departments with their wives and families. Special units guarded the theater and mounted police patrolled the square. As Stanislavsky put it, “It seemed more like preparations for battle than a general rehearsal.”³³

Moreover, the Chief of Police placed his officers in the role of ticket collectors for the performance.³⁴ Nemirovich-Danchenko countermanded this order and insisted that he would not permit such control within his own theater when the police chief called him to the phone. The following day he met with General Kleigels and expressed his surprise about the ticket collectors. He explained how the sight of police uniforms upset the public.³⁵ “So full-dress uniform upsets the public?” the general responded, “Fine, there will not be any.”³⁶ The same officers were on duty for the performance the following night, but now attired in full evening dress. In the event, the precautions proved to be an overreaction by a reactionary and skittish regime.

In comparison, the political context when Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* premiered in St. Petersburg during the tour of the Moscow Art Theater three years later conditioned the audience to subvert the meaning of the play to some extent: it discovered “political” meanings and responded with stormy applause at every turn.³⁷ Stanislavsky again described how his approach, both as an actor and director took the line “intuition and feeling” in a fascinating passage in his memoir.

³¹ Ibid., 264. The term for them was *zaichiki* or “rabbits.” This tradition carried over into the Soviet period with students allowed to enter for free or buy cheap standing-room only “entry tickets” (*vkhodnye billet*) for thirty kopeeks: a third of a ruble, the equivalent of a couple of loaves of bread. Based on a conversation with Ekaterina Arkadeevna Shingareva, Archivist of the Moscow Art Theater Museum.

³² Sobolev, “M. Gor’kii v khudozhestvennom teatre,” *Vestnik teatr*, no. 16: 4.

³³ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn’ v iskusstve*, 264. The institution of the public dress rehearsal for officialdom also remained in place during the Soviet period but the scrutiny of every aspect of theatrical productions increased at every level.

³⁴ The Chief of Police, or *gradonachal’nik* of St. Petersburg.

³⁵ Sobolev: 5. Also see Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn’ v iskusstve*, 264 for a similar version.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ In Russia, the play is known by the name of its hero, *Doktor Shtokman*.

It describes the bits and pieces that he took from real life, including a gesture that Gorky made, which he unconsciously worked into the character that he created.³⁸

He explains how the play became sociopolitical one because there was a demand for one, for a revolutionary hero, despite the fact that “the hero despised the mob and praised the individuality of particular people who wanted to give direction to life.”³⁹ As it happened, the Moscow Art Theater gave a performance of the play on tour in St. Petersburg the day of the massacre on Kazan Square (January 2, 1905), an event known as “Bloody Sunday” which contributed to consolidating the opposition to the regime of Nicholas II.

Stanislavsky recalled that the audience was mainly composed of members of the intelligentsia, with many professors and scientists, and almost all of those sitting on the main floor were gray-haired. Here is an extended excerpt from his memoirs, which provides a sense of high-wire act he performed onstage that night and the unexpected response that it elicited:

The audience was extremely keyed up by the sad events of the day and reacted to the slightest reference to freedom in Stockman’s speech. Applause would explode here and there during scenes, even in the most unlikely place. It was a political performance. The atmosphere in the hall was such that we expected the performance to be stopped, and arrests at any minute. The censors who sat in on all the performances of *Stockman* and ensured that I, who played the main role, delivered it according to the authorized version, and seized on any word that had not been approved by the censor, were doubly attentive that night. I had to be especially careful. When the script for a role has been lined out and restored again several times it is easy to get confused and say too much. In the last act when Stockman is putting his home back in order after the crowd has ransacked it, he finds the black coat he had worn at the public meeting the previous day. Seeing a tear in the coat he says to his wife:

“Never put on a new suit when you are going to fight for freedom and truth.”

Those present in the theater involuntarily connected this sentence with the massacre that took place on Kazan Square that day where many a new suit must have been torn in the name of freedom and truth. This line provoked such a din of applause that we had to stop the performance. Some jumped out of their seats and rushed towards the footlights, holding their hands to me. That day I learned through personal experience the influence that real, genuine theater can exert on the crowd.⁴⁰

In effect, the trajectory of social change and political opposition in Russia and the specific backdrop of the performance that day turned it into a powerful collective representation that consolidated the sense of political community within

³⁸ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 258-59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

the St. Petersburg intelligentsia. Given the agitated public mood, the audience discovered sociopolitical meanings in the play, which called forth what Stanislavsky described as “ecstasy” in the crowd.⁴¹ Several years of social unrest, and the protest march that had ended in tragedy, had turned the performance of *An Enemy of the People* into a cathartic event for the public. In this case, the interaction between the house and the stage was intense and driven by the audience who collectively transformed the significance of the play.

NATURALISM AND THE CONVENTIONS OF THE NEW THEATER

Maxim Gorky (né Peshkov) was the autodidact darling of Russia’s urban artistic intelligentsia. He was attracted to the Theater because its members were known as a bunch of “rowdy sectarians” at the time.⁴² In addition, he hoped to use theater a public forum. Although self-conscious about his fame, discomfited by his humble background, and embarrassed by his lack of formal education, he wrote tales about the common folk in an inimitable vernacular that others could only try to affect. He introduced his readers to an entirely new stratum of Russian society that he knew firsthand with stories infused with a romantic, rebellious spirit.

The Theater was eager to work with him because of his talent and celebrity, and because of the public’s interest in groups “at the bottom” of the social ladder.⁴³ Gorky grew up in the element of the people and the lives that he excelled at depicting, which never before had been seen on the stage. In part, this accounts for the huge impact that *The Lower Depths* had on the contemporary audience. It was a spectacular success when it premiered in Moscow in 1902 and remained in the Theater’s repertoire through successive revolutions: the first in 1905 and the two revolutions of 1917.

It transported the “enlightened” audience into an ill-lit basement where the play opens: the lower depths of society came alive before their very eyes. The milieu astounded spectators. This is how one spectator present at the premiere on December 18, 1902 recorded his first impressions:

Out of the half darkness of this dismal cesspit people as dismal and deformed began to come out. At first it seemed there were two or three of them... more, more, more and the entire dosshouse comes alive. It seems they are coming out of the poison-saturated walls, like harmful vapors, like bad dreams.”⁴⁴

Naturalist aesthetics transformed the dramatic stage by making the milieu its foundation.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*, 285.

⁴³ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 262.

⁴⁴ Unnamed author. *Russkoe slovo*, December 20, 1902. Quoted in Nikolai Efros, *Na dne: p'esa Maksima Gor'kogo v postanovke Moskovskogo khudozhestvennogo teatra*, 76.

There is no doubt that bringing a variety of real objects onto the stage vastly increased the illusion of reality.⁴⁵ The myriad detail of sets, costumes, and props imported the visual spectacle of everyday life into the dramatic theater. Naturalism closed the aesthetic distance between the audience and the stage.⁴⁶ The Moscow Art Theater built its reputation on *bytizobrazhenie*: all of its productions between 1898 and 1904 presented neither strict verisimilitude nor atmosphere alone, but the depiction—the realistic representation—of the intimate, vital links between the characters and their milieu, that defining dimension of the naturalistic play.⁴⁷

With this in mind, the troupe made an excursion to the infamous Khitrov Market district in Moscow and acquainted itself with the real-life counterparts of their characters at the Nizhni-Novgorod dosshouse portrayed by Gorky. A large robbery had taken place on the night of the visit so the place was swarming with police. Stanislavsky asserted: “The religion of the down-and-out is freedom; his element is danger, robbery, adventure, theft, murder. All of this together created the romantic atmosphere and particular kind of wild beauty that we were searching for at the time.”⁴⁸ In the section of Stanislavsky’s memoir devoted to *The Lower Depths*, the refrain is “freedom whatever the cost” which he found to be spiritual essence of the play and the cause for which “people descend to the lower depths of life without seeing that there they will become slaves.”⁴⁹

At the market, the troupe observed the endless dosshouses, “human vessels overfilled with alcohol,” as well as the “university” of the “down-and-out intelligentsia”: literate people who were busy copying out scripts for actors and theaters.⁵⁰ The excursion was both inspirational and invaluable for Stanislavsky because, as a result, his recollections of the visit rather than his imagination guided his sketches of scenes and the making of the *mise en scène* for *The Lower Depths*.

⁴⁵ In the late 1880s at André Antoine’s Parisian Théâtre Libre, real sides of beef hung onstage for an exacting realization of *The Butcher*. See Frederick Brown, *The Theatre and Revolution: The Culture of the French Stage* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 176-78.

⁴⁶ It closed the distance; it did not eliminate it. Naturalistic theater is illusionistic: the interplay between real action onstage and what it represents is carefully crafted so that the latter collapses into the former. The “virtual reality” presented onstage is perceived as actuality. As Bernard Beckerman put it, in illusionistic theater, the “scheme” (the presentation on stage) and the “image” (what the spectator “sees”) appear to be congruent. See Bernard Beckerman, *Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience and Act*, ed. Gloria Brim Beckerman and William Coco (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), chapter 7.

⁴⁷ In Russian, the root of the word *bytizobrazhenie* is *obraz*: a figure or image (originally, an icon). *Izobrazhenie* is a figuration, a portrayal, or a representation of *byt*, that is, a way of life.

⁴⁸ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn’ v iskuustve*, 267. The atmosphere of Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Times* (1839) filled with adventure, crime, and daring represented an early landmark in the Russian romantic literature.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 267-68.

Although Stanislavsky later conceded that his early preoccupation with the sets and props that cluttered the stage worked to the detriment of developing the psychology of acting, it did succeed in creating an overwhelming sense of reality and presence for the audience. As the curtain opened, the setting riveted the audience's attention because the spectators reacted with awe, even if it was mixed with revulsion.

The milieu breathed claustrophobia and pestilence: smoke blackens the ceiling, plaster peels from the walls; the large table, benches, and stool are unpainted and dirty. The awe arose from amazing realism of the scene. At the premiere in 1902, the spectator knew that he actually sat in a comfortable seat in new theatrical establishment called the Moscow Art Theater, but a world of hopeless souls and wrecked lives appeared before his eyes, perhaps too close for comfort.

The first thing that the audience heard was not spoken lines, but sounds: keys jangling as Kleshch, the locksmith tried them in old locks, Anna, his wife coughing, and Satin clearing his throat as he awakened with a hangover. These sights and sounds set the atmosphere and, in a sense, introduced the characters before they said a word. This is a reminder that performance is a rich matrix, a fusion of media, perceived however more or less as a whole that unfolds with forward momentum in time and space, like reality in this case.

The realistic detail in a naturalistic theater production exerts a powerful force over the spectator. It initiates communication with the audience. As Stanislavsky came to realize, the challenge was to carefully build the milieu without extraneous detail, keeping in mind what each element signaled. Milieu is *modus operandi* in the naturalistic play, not an end in itself. In the richest examples of the genre, such as *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill, it draws the audience into the dramatic world to provoke the bigger questions moored in character. The movement from the exacting particularity of naturalism to its broader examination of the lives and the truths about people remains grounded in milieu and human minds. The naturalistic play's hold on the audience can become unnerving; at times its grip reaches almost intolerable intensity.

In detailed world of *The Lower Depths*, properties such as furniture, cigarettes, and cards represented extensions of the milieu defining the collective identity of the denizens of the lower depths. Each costume meshed with the milieu and uniquely defined the individuality of each character, complementing his particular voice. *The Lower Depths* features a large ensemble cast of eighteen characters. For example, the Baron's collared shirt symbolized the social status that he once occupied and squandered, as well as his vain insistence on being treated with due respect.

The opening scene in *The Lower Depths* is also a "domestic" one full of tables and chairs and what initially draws the spectator into the squalor are the normal exchanges you would expect to find there. The milieu has already hooked the spectator as Gorky's characters begin to talk about lies and truth, which unfolds as an animated, almost Socratic dialogue, and crescendos in Act IV with Satin's celebrated speech about truth and the figure of Man. Naturalism had profound implications for the stage.

First, the action in theater retreated from the stage apron to the proscenium arch: the “picture frame” defining the modern stage. The proscenium arch literally distanced the actors from the audience, in effect diminishing them in size; the quiet that reigned in the auditorium assisted them in projecting their voices to the farthest rows. The silence signaled the audience’s role in allowing the illusion of reality to develop onstage. On the practical level, it permitted conversations that occurred upstage to be heard throughout the auditorium and the full range of audiovisual signals—verbal, gestural, and musical—to be appreciated. Second, the defining convention of the “fourth wall” epitomized by Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is that the actors disregard the audience. The director designs the *mise en scène* to make the interaction among the characters as natural as possible. Sometimes rehearsals would take place with the realistic sets already in place and within the confines of an actual fourth wall to promote shutting out the audience altogether in the actors’ minds. The purpose was to create a fully believable world, a world unto itself however intimately connected with the experiences of the audience members, their worldviews, or the social controversies of the day, which they were invited to observe without intruding on in the least.⁵¹

The pretense of the fourth wall convention allowed the actors and auditorium to be exquisitely attuned to one another—and opened a fourth dimension: the temporal action within the three dimensional world onstage and an additional one constituted by the audience’s reflections upon it. The acting of the naturalistic play is intended to thoroughly entangle the public in the production.⁵² The orchestration of the actors’ movements, the actor-to-actor interaction, which is for the most part a series of exchanges between two actors at a time, represents the challenge of composing the *mise en scène* for the production.

The question of whether the artistic treatment of any given theatrical production is adequate to the demands and style of the play often constitutes the central problem addressed by the modern director and theater critics, but in the case of the Moscow Art Theater, it was paramount. Artistically, the new approach to the stage pioneered at the Moscow Art Theater richly compensated the audience. It provided a different way for the educated audience to experience the fictional worlds found in the tales and novels that it had read. Authors such as Balzac and Dickens and especially Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky created fictional characters of surprising complexity and psychological truth whetting the public’s appetite for such fully realized characters onstage. Although the sets, costumes, and props were essential ingredients of naturalism because they made the audience

⁵¹ With its preponderance of material items, naturalistic staging is a thing of the past. It represented an historical stage in the development of Western theater. The classics of naturalistic plays are still staged today, but in a range of styles, sometimes using visual quotations or elements from the original milieu.

⁵² Stanislavsky uses the term *sputat’* or “entangle” to describe what a successful production must do: to generate the necessary current it had to “shock the public” (*epatirovat’ publiku*) on some level. See Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*, 133. This is not to be confused with the French decadents’ rallying call of “*épater le bourgeois*.”

believe in the reality of what it saw, the deeper demands of the naturalistic play required a shift in the portrayal of character. This major shift transformed the art of acting.

The Moscow Art Theater satisfied the emerging aesthetic needs of the theatergoing public with the aesthetic experience that it alone could provide by producing the plays of the finest contemporary playwrights under the guidance of Stanislavsky's partner in the theatrical enterprise, Nemirovich-Danchenko, a playwright, professor, and literary scholar. The quality of the growing modern dramatic repertoire was crucial, but the onus of convincing the audience of the reality of the inner lives of the dramatic characters and, consequently, how it felt and reacted to the theatrical production fell firmly on the actors. Stanislavsky's description of the Moscow Art Theater revolution emphasized the new type of role playing that inspired the troupe from the theater's foundation although he acknowledged that the actors' ability to realize this vision only developed with experience over time. Ultimately it found expression in Stanislavsky's formalized system of acting techniques.

The new approach to acting brought Stanislavsky to the work of French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot who argued, "By recalling the sensory atmosphere of a past activity one can recapture the past emotion."⁵³ Through "emotional memory" and a variety of other creative techniques, the actor achieved a psychological truthfulness able to recreate the startling impact of real life for the audience.⁵⁴ *Perezhivanie*, or authentic emotion, became synonymous with acting in the public imagination.

Stanislavsky instructed the actor to imagine the biography of the character as well as inhabit the character's emotional world. The importance of drawing on the unconscious and using it to react to dramatic realities is hard to overestimate in Stanislavsky's approach to acting. However, this part of the creative process only preceded the hard work of rehearsing the role and perfecting the character's voice, inflection, movements, and gestures. As Mel Gordon, the expert on acting and the development of the Stanislavsky techniques has described, "the experience-actor behaves as if everything onstage were happening to him *for the first time*."⁵⁵ Much more than milieu, the presence and exchanges of completely believable characters

⁵³ See Nikolai Gorchakov, *Theater in Soviet Russia*, tr. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 35-38 for a concise discussion of the birth of the Stanislavsky System. Also see Mel Gordon, *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia* (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1987), 53-56.

⁵⁴ Gordon, 55. See also Konstantin Stanislavskii, *Rabota aktera nad soboi* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1938). This gets at the meaning of the key term of *perezhivanie* in the acting lexicon of the Moscow Art Theater.

⁵⁵ Gordon, 54. He continues, "The difference between these two actor-types is clear from the audience response. On stage, the image-actor is 100% conscious of his characterization (which is to say, it is completely controlled). Watching this, the spectator knows internally that he is only seeing an imitation of the individual. The actor of experience, however, works with his unconscious powers just as people do in everyday life, creating something more humanly and artistically profound."

on stage, who might signal their emotions with eyes that truly glistened with tears or widened with excitement, transported the audience into their world.

In this new theatrical experience, the nature of communication in the continual actor-to-actor interaction became the integral dimension of the naturalistic play. The conventions of realistic representation did not pose any true creative problems.⁵⁶ The real challenge became the actors' charge in creating the necessary current with fellow ensemble members and the audience. It took Stanislavsky to systematize the set of new skills required to build nuanced characters of convincing psychological depth and consistency. The Moscow Art Theater represented a director's theater for actors because the actors actually embodied the director's sense of the playwright's aims on stage.

In some naturalistic productions—*Tsar Fyodor* exemplifies this—the costumes and sets threatened to make the acting ancillary, but this is not the case for the best naturalistic plays, which vibrate with emotion. Here the challenge is more internal in nature. The audience must be convinced that the characters are real and be moved with immediacy similar to real life. By tapping into his unconscious powers and fusing them with his character's, this actor of a new kind brought essentially new meaning to the phrase of a "riveting" performance. In realizing the playwright's vision, the directors and actors alike shared the aim of bringing the audience to empathize with the characters in the modern sense: to listen to them, to identify with their emotions, to imagine their motivations, and thereby to engage the larger questions raised by the drama. In a strong gesture towards human life as realistically experienced with its indecisions, doubts, lack of moral direction, and ambiguities, naturalistic plays are usually imbued with a sense of uncertainty that haunts the thoughts and pervades the actions of the characters, while their conflicting emotions continually bubble below the surface, sometimes erupting and then subsiding. Accepting the drama on its own terms, the spectator had to grapple with the issues it raised and interpret its ambiguous meanings. *The Lower Depths* provides ample illustrations of how the characters successfully elicited the audience's empathy while making the play's ethical and sociopolitical questions absorbing ones.

THE MOSCOW ART THEATER AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION

Premieres, certainly those at the central dramatic theaters in Moscow, were major events in the cultural life of the city. Since the Imperial Directorate exercised a monopoly over theater until 1882 when private theaters first opened, the number of theaters was extremely limited as were their repertoires, especially in the area of contemporary dramaturgy. Foreign plays were few and limited to the classics, such as Shakespeare and Schiller. Overall, the Russian theater was provincial and lagged significantly behind developments in Berlin, Paris, and London at the turn of the twentieth century. Prior to 1882 in St. Petersburg there were two opera houses, one of which was devoted more to the ballet, and one dramatic theater. In Moscow,

⁵⁶ This is not to deny that symbols such as the wild duck in Ibsen's eponymous play or the cherry orchard in Chekhov's are not central, quite the opposite.

there was only one opera house and one dramatic theater. Consequently, dramatic premieres at the imperial theaters also brought displays of power, pomp, and privilege—the other show in the auditorium.

Since the lifting of the monopoly coincided with Alexander II's Great Reforms, theater in Russia inflected the momentous changes in social structure that industrialization brought. As the new middle class and workers acquired the taste for theater they began to attend dramatic performances even if their tastes inclined toward the melodramatic. By the turn of the century, the trajectory of dramatic theater in Russia seen in the broad democratization of the audience explains why the Moscow Art Theater first opened as the Moscow Accessible Art Theater: it aimed to capitalize on this new audience with its affordable seats.

While the development of dramatic theater in Europe and the United States saw the segregation of audiences, due to late development of dramatic theater as a popular cultural institution in Russia, the last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the rapid democratization of its audiences. This was in no small part a consequence of the cultural policies advanced by different political actors of the period: to employ theater to raise the cultural level of the working population, to provide alternatives to commercial entertainments, and to serve as part of temperance movement, for example.⁵⁷ It also promised to translate into a broader, shared public arena.

However, by the turn of the century, the social upheaval accompanying industrialization produced opposition to the regime that splintered the public into various political parties and the market for dramatic theater became more segmented politically and commercially. The wealthy sought refuge at the expensive new private theaters not for conspicuous consumption but the opposite: it constituted a reclusive milieu that appealed to their tastes; those of similar social status and political views surrounded them. The Korsh Theater thrived as a commercial enterprise precisely because its varied repertoire appealed to the variegated urban public.⁵⁸

The authorities were particularly concerned about the popular audiences that included workers at the Moscow Accessible Art Theater when it first opened. The censorship policy that restricted the selection of plays for “popular” audiences constrained the theater to drop “accessible” from its name in order to include the

⁵⁷ See E. Anthony Swift, *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), especially chapter 2, “People’s Theater and Cultural Politics,”

⁵⁸ Its morning performances were especially popular with young people because they could see the same production presented in the evening at a fraction of the cost (twenty to thirty kopeeks). There were other discounts and artists, drama students, and students at the conservatory were admitted for free. See T. Pavlov, “Teatr F.A. Korsh i zritel’”, in *Problemy sotsiologii teatra* (Moscow, 1974), 290. The repertoire included many plays by Ostrovsky and foreign classics, with a predominance of comedies. Farce, melodrama, and French plays filled the repertoire in the mid-1890s, but with the arrival of The Moscow Art Theater on the scene, its repertoire returned to the classics (293-296 and 30).

best plays of contemporary playwrights in its repertoire. Professional subscription theaters for workers organized by socialists developed in this period in Germany as theater audiences became increasingly socially and politically fragmented—Otto Brahm's People's Stage⁵⁹ and Piscator's Subscriber's Club made up of union workers and communist youth members in Berlin are good examples.⁶⁰

In Russia, conditions confined workers' theater to small amateur dramatic circles.⁶¹ The stringent oversight of the authorities that only increased after the turn of the century further eroded the position of the Moscow Art Theater as a public forum. Although a combination of artistic trends and political pressures contributed to the future direction of the work at the Moscow Art Theater, the promise of the "democratic" audience for professional artistic dramatic theater went unfulfilled until after 1917.

The Moscow Art Theater occupied a peculiar position in the public arena, poised between the public and the police. As seen, this was literally true during the first performance of *Philistines* in St. Petersburg, but in a figurative sense it well describes the structural situation of the theater. Owing to its visibility in the public arena and progressive credentials, the Moscow Art Theater incited the fears of the authorities.

It was the only private dramatic theater devoted to staging the best contemporary dramaturgy, convinced that the significance of the theater's work ultimately relied on the quality of the play. Consequently, the number of contemporary plays staged by foreign playwrights outnumbered those by Russian authors from 1898 to 1905. The theater staged more plays of Ibsen than any other playwright owing to Nemirovich-Danchenko's admiration for the playwright's cerebral and symbolic handling of controversial moral and social problems. Nemirovich-Danchenko oversaw the repertoire and often met with the censors to plead on the artist's behalf, that this or that phrase not be altered or struck from the script altogether.

In the case of *Philistines* Nemirovich-Danchenko persuaded the authorities not to ban the play altogether because the theater would not be able fulfill its obligations to its patrons. The theater's immediate financial obligation was to its shareholders. To turn a profit and succeed where its predecessors had failed, the Moscow Art Theater created a range of subscriptions for the public, including afternoon and evening performances with different selections from its growing repertoire, at different prices. This system aimed to maximize profits by filling the house.

⁵⁹ *Volksbühne*

⁶⁰ John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 19-24. The repertoire at the Ostend Theater, which opened in the 1880s, included five plays by Ibsen and plays by Zola's (*Thérèse Raquin*), Hauptmann and Schiller, that is, a repertoire similar to the Moscow Art Theater's. See also Swift, 185-195 for a discussion of workers' theaters and repertoire in Russia before and after 1905.

⁶¹ Swift, 186-91.

But selecting the best contemporary dramatic plays—by definition controversial ones—and seeing them staged proved to be a delicate political act. Of course, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky argued that the theater served art and cultivated the Russian public by providing artistic productions for its appreciation: if the public read politics into the plays, the theater had no real control over that—it delivered the plays word for word as approved by the censors whose minions sat in the auditorium during each performance.

Its progressive repertoire and enlightened public vexed the regime since it increasingly represented an articulate voice of the political opposition—without actually voicing opposition in any specifiable manner. Yet the regime also recognized that the theater served as a political safety valve for the respectable public. It was much more desirable for the spectator to identify with some bold hero on the stage than organize politically. After all, the regime set the terms of which dramas were permitted to unfold within the walls of the theater, reserved the right to revoke that permission, and edit out any unsavory word or phrase.

In conventional terms, the establishment of the Moscow Art Theater as a cultural institution might be described as the founders' success in realizing their bold vision for a new theater and the growth of its loyal subscriber base. In sociological terms, a "theory effect" was at play: Stanislavsky and his steadfast supporters symbolically reinforced their artistic project in the public arena by means of a performative representation—literally performances and public discourse about them in this case—that broke with dominant values of the reigning dramatic theater in Moscow and in turn mobilized real opposition by changing people's tastes and opinions.⁶²

This project had an auspicious start because the Chekhov plays were a joy to watch for the Moscow intelligentsia: they reflected contemporary moods and mentalities. This new approach to theater moved audiences tremendously. In effect, the Theater created the taste for the theater it produced and characterized as "sophisticated" to compliment its audiences and assert its aversion to those at the Maly Theater—and continued to satisfy the audience's demand for it. Attendance at the Moscow Art Theater became a symbol of progressive society. As the bonds between the Theater and its admiring audiences grew, the Moscow Art Theater public emerged as the product of a collective identity of the Moscow intelligentsia, the formation to which theater critics contributed.

Moreover, the Moscow Art Theater's endeavor proved highly successful because the concurrent revolutions in Russian dramatic literature and dramatic theater coincided with the rise of the intelligentsia against the autocracy. Its presence in the public arena contributed to shaping the collective identity of the Moscow intelligentsia. *The Lower Depths* proved highly successful for the Theater, in artistic terms, on moral grounds, and financially. Ironically, Gorky's association with the "rowdy sectarians" of the Moscow Art Theater actually consecrated its artistic endeavor, assisting it in becoming the new orthodoxy.

As a result, in the early years of the twentieth century the Moscow Art Theater had created a base of loyal subscribers who were proud to be part of its

⁶² On the "theory effect," see Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 134-36.

public. The admiring public and even the regime in a grudging manner came to view the Moscow Art Theater as a premier cultural institution of Russian public life. During this stormy period of politics, the friendship between Nemirovich-Danchenko and Count Witte, an advisor to the tsar, and other back channels allowed negotiations with the regime and sometimes softened its intransigence.

It struggled to bring the audience along with it: to challenge the public in new ways and build its reputation as the foremost dramatic theater in Russia. As seen, the audiences were not as enthusiastic about Ibsen as was the Art Theater's literary director, but the Theater did succeed in pressing the public in artistic terms and began to turn a profit, the bottom line for any private artistic enterprise, and an especially important matter for a private theater given the high costs of production.

If the publics at the imperial theaters were conservative in the true sense of the word, representing the status quo, the publics at the new theaters that arose in the last two decades of the nineteenth century pulsated with the vitality of the new lifestyles of their patrons: the ranks of urban workers, the intelligentsia, the middle class, entrepreneurs, and the nouveau riche. The audience of the Moscow Art Theater possessed its own profile. It was primarily intelligentsia, but also encompassed those from the new middle class, segments of the old and new rich, as well as administrators and clerics. Hence, given its artistic politics and public, more than any other theater it faced pressure from the police as it firmly nudged its public to accept increasingly more difficult dramatic material.

By 1902, Gorky was a popular icon and his association with the Moscow Art Theater was artistically exciting, politically risqué, and financially promising. The success of *The Lower Depths* inaugurated a series of productions that made the theater a symbol of progressive thinking and civic pride. Its symbolic power reached well beyond Moscow to touch those longing for change throughout Russia. From its foundation, it insisted upon its dedication to art and the public. By 1905 it had succeeded in significantly elevating theater art through building a repertoire of modern dramas of the highest quality by the best playwrights of Europe and Russia and through innovative acting methods and staging. Following the 1905 Revolution, the regime returned to the use of repression, setting the stage for what followed in the wake of World War I.

TWO

The Moscow Art Theater in Revolutionary Russia

The first two decades of the twentieth century were ones of experimentation in the arts. Major avant-garde currents such as symbolism and smaller ones from *Acmeism* to *Zaumnyi iazik* flourished in poetry, literature, music, painting, dance, and theater during the period of political reaction in the decade following Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin's "coup" in June 1907 dissolving the newly appointed Duma.¹

Beginning in 1906, discussions about the direction of theater art assumed an extraordinary range and intensity in the public arena, including the specialized press and public debates. It is inviting to see the rise of the avant-garde, symbolism, and the overriding concern with formal matters in art as the consequence of reactionary politics, but these anti-naturalistic trends were already well underway by the time of the premiere of *The Lower Depths* in 1902. New theories and new approaches to theater multiplied; new directors such as Fëdor Kommissarzhevsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Alexander Tairov staged electrifying productions of plays and operas in this period.

Between the period of its "sociopolitical line" at the turn of the century and the 1917 Revolutions, the Art Theater experimented with symbolism and its studios enjoyed great success with productions such as *The Cricket on the Hearth*, an adaptation of a tale by Charles Dickens and *The Flood* by Henning Berger. In keeping with its founding principles, it remained the citadel of the finest acting based upon presenting "authentic feeling" to the audience in its theatrical productions.

THE MOSCOW ART THEATER IN THE AFTERMATH OF 1917

Following the February Revolution in 1917 and through the summer, Stanislavsky led the public campaign by the Moscow Union of Artists to head all "socially philanthropic" work.² His statement about the "aesthetic cultivation of the popular masses" put theater at the center of the process and provided a variety of compelling reasons why dramatic theater was uniquely suited to the task. He obviously grasped the revolutionary moment. From his perspective, the Moscow Art Theater could finally embark on the mission of bringing *artistic* theater to the people, which the tsarist regime had curtailed two decades earlier. In view of the

¹ Acmeism was a movement among poets founded on the idea of expressing supreme clarity through symbols. Nikolai Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, and Osip Mandelstam were some of its chief exponents. *Zaumnyi iazik*, or transrational language was the invention of Alesandr Kruchennykh and Velimir Khlebnikhov. For a concise survey of this period in theater history see Marc Slonim, *Russian Theater from the Empire to the Soviets* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), chapter 6, "From the World of Art to Meyerhold."

² Stanislavskii, "Ob esteticheskom vospitanii narodnykh mass," 23-24.

avant-garde movements and directors that had surpassed the Moscow Art Theater in artistic vitality in the course of the previous decade, 1917 also presented a political opportunity to advance the Theater's role: to make it relevant once more, in social if not strictly artistic terms.

Whereas at the turn of the century he invoked the values of truth, goodness, and beauty in his call to a return to basics to contest the establishment embodied by the Maly Theater, Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater now represented the theatrical establishment. As the leading voice of the dominant theatrical institution in Moscow, Stanislavsky now invoked the People and its education to reinvigorate his power and set forth his proposal. He framed the mission in ways that drew on the substantial resources at his disposal in the form of nineteenth century cultural history in Russia. Rhetorically, it represented a call to action: he set forth the grounds, the warrant, and he concluded with a summary of the immediate practical action required.

Referring to the revolution, he observed that Russia was "renewing herself" and asserted that theater was the best means for the aesthetic education of the masses. Since "religion without aesthetics did not touch the soul" and "revolution without aesthetics became deformed and turned freedom into a lack of discipline," he argued that theater would "ennoble the soul of our new, untouched, almost primordial spectators."³ This syllogistic argument effectively made theater crucial for the success of the revolution. The grounds were easy to establish for the audience he addressed because the cultural backwardness of the people had been one of the most important political issues of the nineteenth century and a longstanding concern of the Russian intelligentsia.

He also claimed that the historical moment afforded Russia and dramatic theater an extraordinary opportunity but also portended extraordinary catastrophe if there were a failure to act. In particular, commercial forms of theater—mere entertainment—could debase the tastes of the unspoiled spectator. He expressed much concern about "theatrical exploiters" who "perverted" and "ruined" people's aesthetic tastes.⁴

Stanislavsky established the warrant—what ought to be done—by arguing that theater was the best means for the aesthetic education of the people because it acts upon a thousand spectators simultaneously; it easily attracts a crowd and influences the spectator through the heart; impressions come from a combination of all the arts and the artists; this "collective artist" acts like a friendly army that charges the crowd of spectators in unison; the charged atmosphere of the performance develops an "infectious mass emotion"; the spectators, "hypnotize" one another and further develop the force of the action onstage.⁵

Hence, theater was more easily understood than any of the other arts: easily accessible to a professor or a peasant, the young and the old. In brief, in his description of dramatic theater, which focused on the theatrical production as a means of "warming the soul of the simple spectator," Stanislavsky actually

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Ibid., 24.

emphasized the ritual and emotional aspects of the theatrical experience, rendering a prophetic statement about the psychosomatic effects of fear and euphoria exploited to great effect in the political spectacles of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany.⁶

He concluded that the action required consisted of providing the best theater at the cheapest cost in the form of People's Theaters, village theaters, and the like. The program of action that he articulated was eventually adopted in various ways. In 1917 the Moscow Art Theater frequently carted its own scenery and props over to the 2000-seat Solodovnikov Theater to perform before popular audiences. The existing People's Houses of the tsarist era were converted into Houses or Palaces of Culture and more were built during the early Soviet period to serve the workers.

Despite the fact that many of the patrons of the private theaters fled the Bolshevik controlled city after 1917, theaters that presented light theatrical fare and operetta theaters such as the Nikitsky still remained in operation in Moscow.⁷ The private Korsh Theater also weathered the storm and continued to offer a rich dramatic repertoire throughout the 1920s. The major pre-revolutionary dramatic theaters in Moscow remained. Five were nationalized and the Art Theater remained autonomous, all subsidized by the Commissariat of Enlightenment.⁸ The overwhelming majority of plays performed at by the Moscow Art Theater were Russian modern classics, which they also presented at People's Houses in the outlying working-class districts of the city and the surrounding area such as Ostankino. The Moscow Art Theater troupe performed *The Lower Depths* more than fifty times outside its main stage in 1919.⁹

This provides an idea of a typical week of performances at the Moscow Art Theater: During the first week of April 1919, two short plays by Alexander Pushkin, *Feast in the Time of Plague* and *The Stone Guest*, a performance based on Fëdor Dostoevsky's *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*, and Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* were given.¹⁰ However, from the 1917/18 to 1920/21 there was only one theatrical premiere, its first in the Soviet era: *Cain* by Lord Byron, a parable about the fratricidal Civil War in Russia, which closed after eight performances. Between 1917 and 1921 *The Lower Depths* was the most performed production in the repertoire: a total of 133 times. *Uncle Vanya* was

⁶ On the "organization effect" and the importance of "militarizing" the situation for imposing unanimity, see Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 202.

⁷ A.V. Anisimov, *Teatry Moskvy: vremia i arkhitektura* (Moscow: Rabochii, 1984), 53.

⁸ *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy*, vol 1: *Russkii sovetskii teatr, 1917-1921*, ed. A. Iufit (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1968), 115. This set included: The Moscow Art Theater and its studios; the Maly Theater; the Chamber Theater (*Kamernyi teatr*). There were other theaters such as the Children's Theater funded by Narkompros and the Moscow City Soviet but they did not date from the prerevolutionary period.

⁹ Simon Dreiden, "Khotelos' posmotret' etu p'esu. Na Dne 1919," in *V zritel'nom zale—Vladimir Il'ich*. Book One, revised third edition (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), 310.

¹⁰ Iurii Sobolev, *Vestnik teatra*, no. 17, 1919: 12-13. The First Studio accommodated 240 spectators.

performed seventy times and *The Cherry Orchard* forty-four times, but only *The Lower Depths* was in the performance repertoire every season.¹¹

The theater's connection with Gorky turned out to be ephemeral, like the art of theater itself. During the decade before World War I, the Moscow Art Theater staged plays by Leonid Andreev and Marina Tsvetaeva, which were artistically antithetical to Gorky's work. *The Lower Depths* disappeared from the repertoire from 1906 until 1912. *The Lower Depths* resonated more with the times and tastes of the new public after the Bolshevik Revolution. The play was emblematic of Soviet rule because Gorky knew Lenin personally.

Oliver Sayler, who surveyed Russian theater firsthand in 1920, reported that tickets to the Art Theater were sold out days in advance.¹² However, from late October 1917 through 1919, that is, during the Civil War, tickets were free. The box office instituted a lottery system for those who wanted to obtain tickets. The first step was standing in line for a number; the second, returning to find out whether the number had been drawn entitling the winner to tickets.¹³

Surprisingly, the Moscow Art Theater box office reported that between one hundred and fifty to three hundred spectators arrived late for the performance each day, unaware that they would not be able to enter the hall until the intermission.¹⁴ That figure represented upwards of one-quarter of the entire auditorium. The explanation for the policy directed at the *svezhaya publika*—no longer the “enlightened” or “educated” public, but rather the “fresh” new one—was painstakingly detailed in one tortuous, interminable sentence:

Like any work of art, the performance is a very delicate thing, which demands an extraordinarily careful relationship to it not only on the part of the artists but on the part of the spectators, the intense work of the artists,

¹¹ Totals based on performance figures in *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy*, 116-117.

The performances of plays by Chekhov totaled 143.

¹² Oliver M. Sayler, *The Russian Theatre Under the Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1920), 8. Van Gyseghem reports the same situation years later. He also provides a good sense of the air of tradition at the Moscow Art Theater, contrasting it with the Meyerhold Theater, the epitome of the revolutionary theater in Soviet Russia: “At the Theater of Meyerhold our clothes check had been thrust into our hands by a little old man...who feels himself neither better nor worse than any man in the world. Our check at the Moscow Art Theater is handed to us with a kind of hinting respectfulness, with deliberate care.” See André Van Gyseghem, *Theatre in Soviet Russia* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1943), 37. He carried out his research from 1933 to 1938.

¹³ Sayler also mentions the prevalence of ticket speculators and the inflation of ticket prices in *Inside the Moscow Art Theatre* (New York: Brentano's, Inc., 1925), 223-24.

¹⁴ The author noted that “Entering the Auditorium during the Performance is not Permitted” was printed on each ticket. Anonymous author, “Khudozhestvennyi teatr,” *Kul'tura teatra*, no. 1 (February 1, 1921): 55.

their coordination onstage disintegrates at the slightest hint of inattention from the auditorium; not only the arrival of latecomers in the rows—if that were permitted—but any noise, cough, or any kind of chewing in the rows would distract the spectators from the stage, destroy the atmosphere of guardedness, in which the theater can only fulfill its most refined work.¹⁵

This is a restatement of the Theater's original discourse about art and the public, which constructed the audience on the basis of rules of decorum. In actuality, the relationship of the artists to their work was not "extraordinarily careful" as numerous entries in both the Performance and Director's Notebooks in 1918 and 1919 make clear. After a performance of *The Lower Depths* in the spring of 1918, the renowned actor Luzhsky wrote in the Director's Notebook:

Please tell Konstantin Sergeevich (Stanislavsky) and Vladimir Ivanovich (Nemirovich-Danchenko) that our theater no longer can be called a model for group scenes!! ...I am hurt, hurt to tears about the matter, and ashamed for the wasted work! It's horrifying that this is happening, and nobody but me, a fool and an idiot, is paying any attention, but I can't do anything about the matter, which has gone rotten and already stinks like a corpse!¹⁶

Stanislavsky's own entries in the Notebooks decry the lack of discipline among the actors: "I insist, I demand, I beg for an immediate investigation into what has happened and to punish in an exemplary fashion those who are criminally guilty before the theater and art."¹⁷

Although under the protection of the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Moscow Art Theater was under attack in the public arena in 1919 by the forces of the theatrical left that deemed it a "harmful" institution and a symbol of the old regime.¹⁸ In 1920, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Lunacharsky's appointee to the Theatrical Section of Narkompros, declared outright war on the Moscow Art Theater under the aegis of "Theatrical October."

The times had changed: the Moscow Art Theater had lost its traditional audience, while the young people who had participated in the revolution wanted to see new plays voicing their contemporary interests and perspectives staged. The revolution decimated the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, many of whom opposed the revolutionary tactics of Lenin's party and fled Moscow, if they escaped summary execution by the Cheka, the secret police. The Moscow Art Theater was left to reckon with the new spectator.

¹⁵ Ibid. The "new public" (*svezhaia publika*, literally the "fresh public," was a term coined in the later 1800s by the prolific playwright and theater director Nikolai Ostrovsky to describe the audience uncorrupted by commercial fare, open to "aesthetic" entertainment, and inclined to see dramatic performances.

¹⁶ Quoted in Dreiden, 307.

¹⁷ Dreiden, 306.

¹⁸ See the discussion in chapter 3.

The Moscow Art Theater had difficulty finding a new footing because the composition of the audience was always changing. The new spectator was almost always new to the Moscow Art Theater because the season ticket holder no longer existed. There were those who had priority seating such as state officials and Communist Party members and their families; agents of the Cheka and the censors; and members of the new intelligentsia, such as the faculty and administrators of Soviet and Communist Party schools and institutes. Many members of the old intelligentsia who passively endorsed the new regime returned to Moscow Art Theater to travel back in time to prerevolutionary days.

Since the demand for tickets was much greater than their availability, the lottery system of distribution meant that the auditorium was filled with spectators who might never again find themselves in the theater. The actors were accustomed to a highly attentive and seasoned audience. Teaching the new spectator proper demeanor was the least of its problems since the audience watched but did not seem to “see” and listened but did not seem to “hear” much. The audience was aware that it was sitting in the country’s premier dramatic theater and strongly applauded the performances, but one can only imagine to what degree the subtle interaction between the audience and the actors, who were especially attuned this feedback, was affected.

The Theater was experiencing serious problems with discipline among the actors in this period of artistic stagnation when it suddenly was divided in half in 1919. A part of the company was touring Kharkov under the leadership of Kachalov and Knipper when Denikin, the general leading the White Army advanced. This prevented the troupe’s return to Moscow.¹⁹ Many of the troupe’s leading actors did not return for several years.

Unlike the “revolutionary theater” that was taking shape in the studios of Proletkult and the Meyerhold Theater where “process” and the spectator’s “active participation” were goals, the Moscow Art Theater, true to its founding principles, continued to rehearse and refine its productions. Its prime responsibility to the author and art precluded the interests of the public *per se*, whether patrician or proletarian. The vital connection with the new public had to be discovered since the old relationship with the deeply appreciative prerevolutionary spectator was sundered by historical events.

As a symbol of the superiority of state supported culture in Soviet Russia, the Moscow Art Theater was of utmost importance to the new regime. Clearly, the Theater was in internal disarray in the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution. But performances continued unabated in the theatrical seasons from 1917/18 until 1921/22 when the company left on tour for Europe and the United States.²⁰

¹⁹ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 392-93.

²⁰ It began in Berlin in September 1922; the last stop was Detroit, Michigan in May 1924.

During the 1917/18 the season, the Theater gave two hundred and fifty performances of sixteen plays, almost all of which were Russian classics.²¹ As the Civil War came to an end, the repertoire included lighter fare. By the 1920/21 season the number of performances was roughly the same, but Charles Lecocq's *opera comique, Madame Angot's Daughter*, which was performed at the Musical Studio, accounted for ninety-seven of the total number of performances. During that same season, Maurice Maeterlinck's *Bluebird*, a symbolist fantasy, had thirty performances.²² Under the new regime, the shift to the Russian classics did not eliminate the "art for art's sake" productions of the early 1900s from the Moscow Art Theater repertoire, but relocated them to its smaller studios for more select audiences. The new cultural policy was to provide the best, artistically "accessible" plays of Russian dramatic literature to the Soviet era mass audience.

As we have seen, the Moscow Art Theater played a significant cultural role in the formation of the progressive public in the early twentieth century. It helped to shape the aesthetic tastes and the social consciousness of the Moscow public on the eve of the major sociopolitical revolution of 1905. The theater's part in enlightening the progressive elements of society with its sociopolitical productions and in serving as a public symbol of principled opposition to the tsarist regime garnered the respect of the cultural leaders of the Bolshevik Party such as Lunacharsky, Krupskaya, Olga Kameneva (née Bronshtein, Leo Trotsky's sister), and Lenin.

These sons and daughters of the provincial intelligentsia were raised to respect culture as defined by the classics of Russian literature and the stage. Consequently, the Bolshevik regime supported the Moscow Art Theater as a national treasure and entrusted it to maintain its traditions of artistic excellence. In the Soviet era, it would play a major role in developing the tradition of realistic theater. Its intelligentsia audience of the Soviet period came from many of same occupations as its original public: teachers, professors, artists, and journalists.

For the edification of the new public, the Moscow Art Theater gave more performances of the productions that defined its history as a theater than any others in its repertoire. During the three years after the Bolshevik Revolution, *The Lower Depths* by Gorky saw ninety-nine performances; *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov, sixty-three; and *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich* by Alexei Tolstoy, sixty-one.²³ *Uncle Vanya* and *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich* were dropped from the repertoire after the return of the Moscow Art Theater from its tour abroad. *The Lower Depths* remained in the repertoire continuously from its revival in 1912 through the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1932. Four productions by the Moscow Art Theater topped the list of plays that most satisfied the audience according to the general survey of the Moscow theaters conducted in 1928: *The Lower Depths*, *Woe from Wit*, *A Burning Heart*, and *Blue Bird*.²⁴

²¹ *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy*, 117. The Russian classics included plays by Pushkin, Griboedov, Turgenev, Ostrovsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Chekhov, and Gorky.

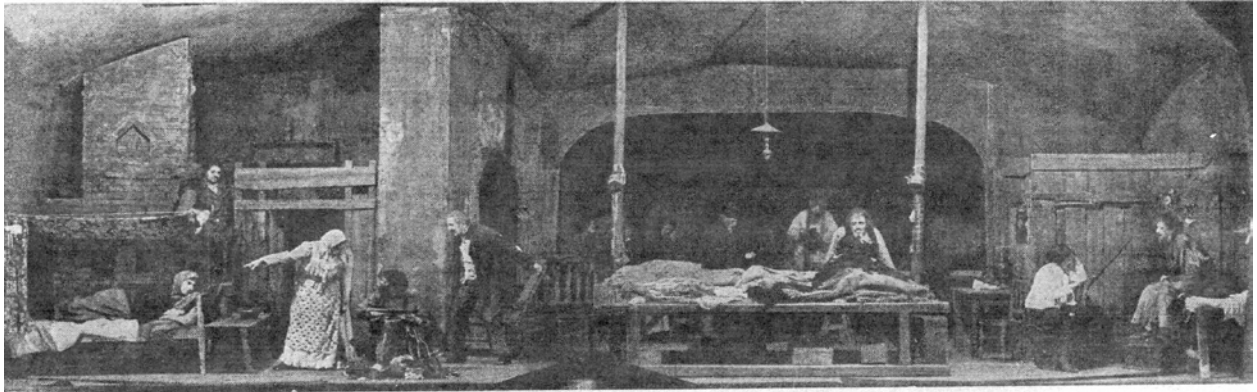
²² *Ibid.* The title of the Belgian playwright's play is *L'Oiseau bleu*. It premiered at the theater in 1908.

²³ *Ibid.*, 116-17.

²⁴ See the discussion of the survey results in chapter 5.

THE THEATRICAL PRODUCTION OF *THE LOWER DEPTHS*

The lower depths is not only a place, a vile boarding house in the urban slums where the class of impoverished exist by hook or by crook, nor is it their stigmatized social status: it is equally a way of being. The lives of those we meet are interwoven with amusing banter, death, hope, horrid brawls, raw self-revelation, and passionate philosophical exchanges. Act 1 takes place in the crowded dosshouse on an early spring morning.



І АКТ

К в а ш н я (М. Н. Николаева) Ты, вон, заездил жену-то до полусмерти...

Figure 2.1 Act I. Note the details of the milieu such as the smoke-blackened ceiling and the intricacy of the mise en scène, which directs attention to the left quarter of the stage (Anna's sick bed) although cast members fill the stage. The Tartar is wearing a skullcap. He is standing dead center, rear stage. *Source: Nikolai Efros, Na dne: p'esa Maksima Gor'kogo v postanovke moskovskogo khudozhestvenogo teatra.*

What the audience first sees is a cave-like cellar and people involved in their daily routines: Kvashnya the dumpling peddler cooking; Nastya, the prostitute reading a cheap romance novel; and Bubnov, the cap-maker measuring material.



Figure 2.2 Kvashnya, The Dumpling Peddler performed by Gribunina. *Source: Nikolai Efros, Na dne.*



Figure 2.3 Nastya, The Prostitute played by Olga Knipper-Chekhova. She is reading the romance novel "Fatal Love." Source: Efros: *Na dne*.



Figure 2.4 Bubnov, The Cap Maker played by Vasily Luzhsky. Source: Efros, *Na dne*.

Gorky introduces over a dozen characters and each engages us in some way. From Kvashnya's first words it is apparent that each has a personal story to tell. It begins on an amusing note as Kvashnya, the widowed dumpling peddler, tells the Baron that she would never remarry and lose her independence even if the guy were an "American prince":

Kleshch. You're lying!

Kvashnya. What's that?
Kleshch. You're lying. You'll marry Abram.
Baron. (Snatching Nastya's book and reading the title) *Fatal Love*. (He laughs)

The patter and mood quickly turns vinegary:

Kvashnya. (To Kleshch) You red-haired goat! I'm lying, am I? How do you dare speak to me like that!
Baron. (Hitting Nastya on the head with the book). You're a fool Nastya.
Nastya (Wrestling back the book) Give it back.²⁵

Gorky has given the audience a wink regarding the mass literature of the day since Nastya, the prostitute, is reading a cheap romance novel. Kleshch responds to Kvashnya with his own jangling rejoinder:

Kleshch. The great lady! And you will marry Abram—that's all you've been waiting for.
Kvashnya. Of course! I haven't got anything better to do! You've driven your wife till she's nearly dead.
Kleshch. Shut up, you nasty cur! It's none of your business!
Kvashnya. Ah! You can't stand to hear the truth!²⁶

Then a squabble ensues over who will sweep the place—but no one does.

In the naturalistic play, convention dictates that costume discloses the inner nature of the person and the rule of realism ensures that it will accord with the details of ordinary dress and milieu. Satin is a cynical, quick-witted cardsharp and ex-convict. He appears early in Act I:

Satin. (Rising from his plank bed) Who beat me up last night?
Bubnov. Does it make any difference?
Satin. Let's suppose you're right. But why did they beat me up?
Bubnov. Did you play cards?
Satin. I did.
Bubnov. That's why they beat you up.
Satin. The scoundrels!
The Actor. (Sticking his head out from the stove). Once they'll beat you to death.
Satin. You're a dolt.
The Actor. Why? Satin. Because you can't kill a person twice.²⁷

²⁵ Maksim Gor'kii, *P'esy* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo detskaia literature, 1966), 118.

²⁶ See Figure 2.2. Kvashnya points to Anna who is lying in bed and yells at Kleshch, the locksmith seated at the base of the stairs, "You have driven your wife half to death."

²⁷ Gork'ii, 119.

Like the others, Satin's clothes are shabby, but his outfit of vest, coat, and disintegrating sheepskin hat tipped rakishly to the side signals his outspoken, regal manner.²⁸ With his *krasheniny* trousers, *kosovorotka* shirt, and imposing stature, Stanislavsky in the role of Satin cut quite the romantic figure of the tramp. Visually, this image of Satin with rumples and rips suggested a larger than life character.



Figure 2.5 Konstantin Stanislavsky in the role of Satin. His costume, stature, and bearing gave the character a unique romantic presence. Source: Efros, *Na dne*.

Luka, a wanderer, arrives halfway through Act I. Stooping somewhat, he uses a walking stick and carries a peasant knapsack on his back. A kettle and teapot hang from his coat belt.



Figure 2.6 Luka, performed by Ivan Moskvina with walking stick in his right hand and the teapot hanging from his belt. Source: Nikolai Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*.

²⁸ Efros, "Na dne," *p'esa Maksima Gor'kogo v postanovke Moskovskogo khudozhestvennogo teatra*, 98.

He gives a warm greeting to all and the entire tone of the play abruptly shifts: the exchanges become more playful instead of derogatory and spiteful.



1 АКТ
Лука (Н. М. Москвин) Доброgo здорov'я, народ честной...

Figure 2.7. Act I. Luka's entrance. He is standing on the stairway under the arch on the left. His line is: "Good health to you honest people." Kleshch is sitting at the base of the stairs. Kvashnya is on the far left and Bubnov on the far right. Vasya Pepel has his back turned towards the audience. Source: Nikolai Efros, *Na dne*.

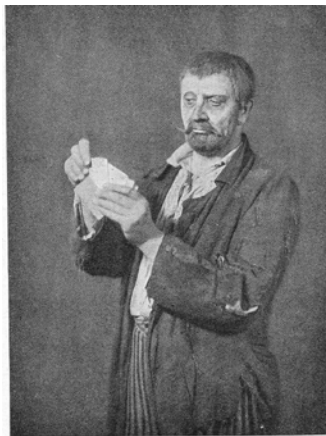
Luka peppers his talk with folksy witticisms. For example, the following conversation takes place as Luka and the Baron get acquainted:

Bubnov: ...We have no gentlemen here—everything has faded away—only the naked man remains.

Luka. That means we are all equal. And you, dear fellow, were a baron?

Baron. What is this? Who are you, you hobgoblin?

Luka. I've seen a count, and a prince too—but this is the first time I've ever met a baron, and such a fallen one at that.²⁹



В. П. Качалов «Барон»

Figure 2.8 The Baron, a déclassé gentleman, seen wearing his collared shirt and holding playing cards. Vasily Kachalov played the role in the 1902 production. Source: Efros, *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr*.

²⁹ Gor'kii, 129. In the Russian, a subtle rhyme scheme emerges in this exchange.

Luka. Was this guy actually a baron?

Bubnov. Who knows! An aristocrat: certainly. Even now it breaks out all of a sudden. It's clear that he still hasn't gotten out of the habit.

Luka. Maybe it—the aristocracy—is kind of like smallpox. A person gets healthy again, but the pockmarks remain.³⁰

If Satin's dress suggests swagger, one easily reads simplicity into Luka's worn clothing. Indeed, if these characters were captured on canvas we might be fooled into thinking it was a genre painting. But there is more to it than meets the eye. As soon as he appears, we learn Luka is hardly ingenuous despite his manner. His observations are often amusing (like his comments about Baron, the déclassé aristocrat); his words, sympathetic; his actions, compassionate.

Luka remains an enigma. He is part peasant, part wanderer, and part healer. Some contemporaries insisted that he was prophet of compassion; others, that he was mercenary: in Moskvin's performance he surely was a good-hearted wanderer, an impartial observer of the "better" that man seeks and lives for.³¹ This ambiguity reaches to the heart of the naturalistic style and its conventions.

By the time Luka hobbles in halfway through Act 1, the relationships among the lodgers have been established. Anna, the locksmith's wife, is on the verge of death; the landlord Kostylev is a greedy, religious hypocrite; his wife Vasilisa and Vasya Pepel are lovers, but Vasya has eyes for Vasilisa's younger sister, Natasha. Little is known about Vasya Pepel's background, but he definitely is involved in criminal activity with the landlord and his wife for which he has served time in prison.

Before the end of Act I, several more characters appear: Alyoshka, a happy-go-lucky young cobbler who stumbles in intoxicated, followed by Vasilisa, who is furious because Alyoshka has been spreading the news that Vasya Pepel is sick of her. Act I concludes with a terrible ruckus. The door bursts wide open. It is Kostylev the landlord calling for help. Vasilisa is beating the pulp out of her sister Natasha. The group runs off, leaving Anna and Luka to talk.

She tells him that he reminds her of her own father who was tender and soft. Luka responds with an old cracked laugh: "I'm soft because they trampled me a lot," which suggests that life dealt him some hard blows. It is not just what Luka says—his rhyming wit or consoling words—that create the image of the calm yet quick-witted old man brimming with wisdom, but the young actor Ivan Moskvin, Nemirovich-Danchenko's former pupil, who transformed the character into the spiritual fulcrum around which the production moved with his performance.

Luka

Moskvin's approach to the role of Luke played a decisive role in gluing the contemporary spectator's attention to him and setting the tone of the audience's

³⁰ Ibid., 130.

³¹ See Ira Petrovskaja, *Teatr i zritel' Rossiiskikh stolits 1895-1917* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo: 1990), 144 for a concise survey of contemporary views.

emotional response to him. He avoided playing Luka as a melodramatic “good soul,” which would have been both unfaithful to Gorky’s figure and rejected by the audience. Because Moskvin’s Luka was neither sentimentalized, nor romanticized, nor idealized, the actor convinced the audience of Luka’s authenticity and goodness through understatement. His entire approach to the role heightened its dramatic effect without seeking dramatic effect.³² As Nikolai Efros describes it, through his intonation, movements, and gestures, Moskvin animated Luka, revealing his complexity and vivacity: “A sly light shone in his small, weak-sighted eyes that looked out from under bushy eyebrows, a wily smile sometimes began to play across his lips. There was undoubtedly guile mixed in his unaffected soul.”³³

Since Moskvin established a believable character of psychological depth, Luka could shed some moral light on life in the dosshouse. Discussions about the nature of truth and why people lie recur throughout Act II as Luka spreads his ethos of compassion and brotherly love.³⁴ He overhears an argument and learns about Vasya’s criminal involvement with Vasilisa, her husband, and her uncle Medvedev, the police officer. Vasya tells Luka that he is the son of thieves and his path is already laid out for him. Luka recommends that he go to Siberia where a young man like him can start fresh and make a good living:

Pepel: Old Man! Why do you always lie?

Luka: What?

Pepel. Gone deaf! Why do you lie, I say?

Luka. What do I lie about?

Pepel. Everything. It’s good there, it’s good here you say—you see you are lying! Why?

Luka. Trust me and go and see for yourself. You will thank me. What are you sticking around here for? And what good is the painful truth to you? Think about it! Maybe the truth is just an axe-blow to you.

Pepel. It’s all the same to me. An axe is an axe.

Luka. Sure you fool! Why kill yourself?

Pepel: (To Bubnov) I want him to tell me, listen old man, is there a God?

(Luka keeps silent and smiles)

Pepel. Well. Is there? Speak.

Luka. (Quietly) If you believe there is, then yes; if not, then no. Whatever you believe in exists.

(Pepel silently stares at the old man with amazement).³⁵

³² Efros, “*Na Dne*,” 88-94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁴ The Russian term is *vozvysHENnyi*, or in this context, elevated or permissible lies, such as the ones he tells to Anna, to alleviate her suffering, and to the Actor, to kindle hope that he can cure his alcoholism.

³⁵ Gor’kii, 145.



Figure 2.9 Act II. Vasya Pepel asks Luka, “Listen, old man, is there a God?” Source: Nikolai Efros, *Na dne*.

In this exchange, as in many, Luka is evasive: The name Luka may be a biblical reference (Luke), but *luka* is also the root of the adjective *lukavyi* meaning “sly” and the root of the verb *lukavit’*, to deceive. This ambiguity reflects the complexity of Luka’s character. He is neither guileless nor crafty. This illustrates how the performance moved the audience from the delineation of milieu and character as Act I opened to involvement in big questions such as the nature of truth, freedom, and the existence of God by the beginning of Act II.

At the conclusion of Act II, Anna passes away and the Actor makes another entry. He has remembered the poem. He strikes a stage pose and begins:

Ladies and Gentlemen! If the world is unable to find
The way to sacred truth,
Honor be to the madman who brings mankind
A golden dream!³⁶

As soon as Luka reappears he continues his recitation:

If tomorrow the sun should forget to illuminate
Our planet’s path,
The thought of some madman
Would illuminate the entire earth.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 150.

³⁷ Ibid., 151.



Figure 2.10. Act II. The Actor recites his favorite verse while Nastya looks on. Source: Nikolai Efros, *Natasha*.

Natasha assumes he is drunk, but the audience might connect the verse with Luka and his effect on those in the dosshouse.³⁸

Satin reappears and mocks the Actor in a bone-chilling manner:

Actor. (Shouting) Old man! Come here, my faithful Kent!

Satin. Ha-ha! It's Miklukho Maklai!³⁹

Actor. It's all settled and done. Where's the town, old man? Where are you?

Satin. Fata Morgana! The old man lied to you. There's nothing! No towns, no people—nothing!⁴⁰

Luka wonders why Satin has “strayed from the path” and he proceeds to tell Luka how he once performed on the stage and later went to prison for trying to help his sister: he killed a man in a fit a temper.

Satin. You're such a curious one you little old man! You'd like to know everything, what for?

Luka. To understand the affairs of people, but I look at you and don't understand. You're so manly Konstantin, and intelligent enough too, but...

Satin. It's prison, old man. I was four years and seven months in prison—and after prison, there's no way out.⁴¹

Like during a play by Chekhov, the audience is absorbed in the lives of the characters and their deeply human dialogue.

³⁸ The Actor, Pepel, and Satin refer to Luka as a *chudak*, or “character” suggesting that he is at once peculiar and wonderful. A *bezumets*, the term used in the verse, literally means “madman” and evokes the Nietzschean subtext of the drama.

³⁹ Nikolai Miklukho Maklai was a renowned Russian born scientist and explorer.

⁴⁰ Gor'kii, 153.

⁴¹ Ibid., 166.

Act III: The Climax

In Act III, the plot is lively: Kostylev, the landlord, confronts Luka; Luka tells two tales; the landlord dies in the brawl when Vasilisa again attacks her sister; and the police raid the place. The landlord's "family business" includes thievery, which ties together Kostylev, his wife, her uncle (the policeman) and Vasya Pepel. The demi-monde element of "the lower depths" lent the play its exoticism for the contemporary public of 1902.⁴²

Luka tells his tales to the gathering in the courtyard: the action has finally moved outside the oppressive confines of the dosshouse. They are parables and represent the centerpiece of the entire drama. Both articulate Luka's ethos of community. In the first he recounts how he was the watchman of an isolated country house in the woods near Tomsk. It was winter and he was alone when noises at the window alerted him to a couple of thieves who were trying to break in.

He went out with his rifle and made them lash each other with sticks in punishment, but they began begging for bread. They were breaking into the house in search of food. Luka took pity on them and they spent the winter together. The moral of the story is encapsulated in Luka's observation that "feeling sorry for a man at the right moment can do a lot of good": do not judge your fellowman but treat each with compassion and dignity, especially those who are suffering.⁴³ This is a simple ethic of Christian community. He even invokes Christ as "one who felt sorry for everybody and bid us to do the same."⁴⁴ At the level of the drama, it validates Luka's gentle interventions in the lives of Anna, the Actor, Vasya Pepel, and Natasha.

Luka begins his second tale with the observation that "the truth doesn't always cure what ails the person and the soul."⁴⁵ A poor man believes in the "just land" where people respect and help one another. This land has become his sole solace and joy because moments of true despair arrive because he is so destitute.⁴⁶

One day a learned exile arrives in Siberia where this happened and the poor man asks him to show him where the just land lay on the map and how to get there. The scientist told him this land was not on the map; the poor man became indignant; the scientist insisted upon the accuracy of his maps—and the man punched him in the nose, went home, and hung himself. All the lodgers are dumbstruck. In a comedic stroke worthy of Chekhov, Vasya Pepel is the first to speak: (In a subdued tone) "What the hell! That's not a very joyful tale."⁴⁷ It foreshadows the play's ending.

At the level of its broader significance, this tale accomplishes two things. It recapitulates the bigger issues that the play brings its audience to consider: it

⁴² In Russian, *byvshyie liudi*, literally "former people."

⁴³ Gor'kii, 157. The two were runaways from a hard labor camp (*katorga*) of penal servitude.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 160.

repeats Luka's view of mankind's existential situation that demands hope and faith. It also articulates the real tension between outright lies, self-deception, comforting lies, and the many shades of truth experienced in real life.

The animated, quasi-philosophical conversations of Gorky's characters do concretize that tension, which both provides the imaginative lifeblood of the play and potentially shapes the response of the spectator who is actively engaged. Did the poor man kill himself because the just land did not exist? Nastya suggests a different interpretation: he could not stand the fact that he had been deceived by his faith in it.

By distilling in the two tales the two basic ethical themes of the play, this particular scene, like naturalistic plays generally, puts the audience in the role of judge. Since the motivations and actions of the characters are lifelike, the audience might well remain conflicted and ambivalent. In particular, the dramas of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Gorky tax the actor to move the audience by inhabiting the role: in this manner the actor is able to convey the full psychological complexity of the situation. Consequently, the problem of judging that devolves to the audience is complicated.

Satin

In contrast to Luka, Satin's pride and cruel mockery of his fellow lodgers makes him a questionable figure, perhaps the one least likely to engage the spectator's empathy, but he certainly enjoys living life. His name is a homonym of "Satan." He often plays the devil's advocate, but literally Satin means "sateen." To be sure, Gorky gave the good-hearted wander the name "Luke," one of Jesus's disciples, and Satin a name that could be associated with "Satan" in order to underscore the opposition between their philosophies of life. When Luka discovers a person's fears and vulnerabilities, he gives comfort. Instead, Satin destroys people's illusions in the name of truth.

He is a good-for-nothing, yet asserts, "When work is a pleasure, life is good!"⁴⁸ Within the context of the play's sociopolitical meanings, he does not rail against life for enriching the few and leaving the rest to fend for itself. The rich and social injustice enrages Kleshch who is nominally employed.⁴⁹ For Satin, life at the lower depths seems to represent a strange realm of freedom, not an indictment of the social system.

When Act IV opens, the setting is the same as in Act I only slightly altered, for the partition is gone: this is the first clue about what has changed in the dosshouse. Kleshch starts the conversation about Luka:

Kleshch. Yes...he disappeared in the confusion.

Baron. Vanished from the police like smoke from the fire.

Satin. Like sinners vanish in the face of the righteous.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁹ "There's no work, I haven't the strength! That's the truth! No refuge!" (Gor'kii, 158).

For Nastya, “the little old man” was “good”; for the Baron, “like a bandage for an abscess”; for the Tartar, “the old man was good law of the soul.”⁵⁰ What does the spectator believe?

The conversation takes amusing turns, the Actor becomes enraged, and finally Satin pounds the table. “Silence!” he insists: “You are all cattle. Dummies. Shut up about the old man! You are worse than everybody, Baron! You don’t understand anything...and you lie! The old man wasn’t a charlatan. What’s the truth? Man—that’s the truth.”⁵¹

Satin continues, “I understand the old man—I do. He lied, but it was out of pity for you, dammit!”⁵² Then Satin lists a variety of lies—the comforting ones, conciliatory ones, those that justify—and explains: “lies are the religion of slaves and masters” whereas “truth is the god of the person who is free!”⁵³ Satin remembers when he asked the old man what people live for and he attempts to imitate the voice of the old man: “Likewise all the rest, locksmiths, cobblers and simple working people, and the peasantry, and even the aristocracy—they all live for something better to come.”



IV АКТ
Сатин (К. С. Станиславский) И все крестьяне... И даже господа—для лучшего живут...

Figure 2.11. Act IV. Satin recalls his discussion with Luka. Satin is sitting on the left motioning with his left hand. The Baron is seated next to him. Bubnov is sitting off to the far left on the stove while Nastya, the Tartar, and Kleshch sit on the table in the center. Satin: “And the peasantry...And even the aristocracy, they all live for something better...” *Source: Nikolai Efros, Na dne.*

Nastya and the Baron exchange barbs and then Satin launches into his speech about Man, truth, and freedom. Imagine Satin, who thus far has only chided the others—something of a Mephistophelian rebel—somewhat inebriated, and very inspired, presenting his vision of man:

⁵⁰ Gork’ii, 171-72. The Tatar’s grasp of Russian is rudimentary.

⁵¹ Ibid., 173. The word that Satin uses is *chelovek*, or person, meaning both men and women.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 173-74.

Man, that's the truth! What is Man? Neither you, nor me, nor them—no! It's you, me, the old man, Napoleon, Mohammed, all in one. You understand? Only man exists and all the rest is the work of his hands and brains!⁵⁴

(Here he lifts his arms and raises an index finger to outline the figure of man):

Man! It's stupendous! It sounds...proud! M...a...n! Man must be respected. Not pitied. Not degrade him with pity...but respect him! Let's drink to Man, Baron!⁵⁵

He admits that he is a murderer, cheat, and has no desire to work in order to be "satisfied."⁵⁶ Yet he is a man and life at the lower depths is free. Pity for him and his situation is beside the point—and condescending.

His speech is extraordinary. The words—"Man—that's the truth!"—resonate like an aphorism.⁵⁷ If the spectator construed his speech as philosophical discourse or discounted it as tipsy rambling, its fuller meaning was obscured. Satin said little, yet it connoted much, evoking an identity based neither on religion, nor traditional community, nor social class.

By means of his appeal, Satin kindles faith in the idea of a modern world premised on the dignity of the individual and united with his fellow man, yet freed from the oppressive submission to the traditional communities of Russian society, for example, the peasant *obshchina*. He delivered a humanistic conception of man, freedom, and truth to the contemporary spectator succinctly in a form that seems to defy discourse and lodge directly in the mind. Satin put forward the idea of a world where Kleshch's fears about work and starvation are abolished.

As the Baron, Nastya, Kleshch, Bubnov, the Actor, Alyoshka, Kvashnya, the Tartar, Medvedev, and Satin sit drinking at the conclusion of Act IV, the atmosphere is mirthful not mean-spirited, although the acerbic and silly comments continue to the very end of the play. As they reminisce, it becomes clear that life in the dosshouse has undergone a change.

If Satin represented Gorky's philosophical leanings, and the character with whom he most closely identified, the author was unable to bring the character alive according to Stanislavsky, which, he explained, accounted for his difficulties with the role. Act IV altogether disenchanted Anton Chekhov who described it as didactic and extraneous, especially Satin's speech about Man.⁵⁸ Stanislavsky acknowledged in a conversation with the theater critic Nikolai Efros that he was

⁵⁴ Ibid., 177.

⁵⁵ Ibid. *Chelovek*, or Man, as in "mankind" (*chelovechestvo*).

⁵⁶ That is, preoccupied with "consumption" like a bourgeois.

⁵⁷ Satin's views on Man prefigured Gorky's own idea of "god-building," a moral, not a religious, awareness of the value and potential of man gained primarily through education, and inspired by enlightenment ideals. He came to believe that art had the power to inspire political action and held that socialism could have the force of a human religion.

⁵⁸ Efros, "Na dne," 44-46.

unable to attune himself to the role of Satin, which he found to be too contradictory, even “unintelligible.”⁵⁹

As a result, Stanislavsky averred that he only “presented” the character: he did not live the role. He played the role to the best of his ability and to great effect, but his acting was artful, even somewhat mediocre according to Efros, who witnessed the premiere and many more performances of *The Lower Depths*.⁶⁰ Ironically, Stanislavsky’s own system of acting techniques did not come to his rescue: his Satin represented competent artistic fakery, not genuine acting according to his own principles. Even if the Stanislavsky supplied a weak current in the role, did the contemporary audience amplify the charge?

As Luka tells his tale to the intimate group in the courtyard, those in the theater hall represent the public audience. As Satin makes his speech about Man in the dosshouse, the other characters are his audience. A range of spectators with different intellectual, social and political views heard Satin’s speech at the premiere in 1902, from moderates to radicals, with different moral, religious, and ideological beliefs.

Did the plight of those at “the lower depths” suggest a general indictment of social policy in Nicholas II’s autocratic Russia? According to one contemporary, it did: *The Lower Depths* was a vivid picture of social evil, “the destruction of human lives essentially no less worthy than those who occupy the upper ranks of the ladder cannot but bring pressure to bear on us, not touch our souls, not demand attention of social consciousness.”⁶¹

The plaintive prison song that begins Act II and ends Act IV distills the image of the lower depths as prison that society has created for them. In both Acts, the men sing it quietly at the indicated moderately slow tempo,⁶² which intensifies its poignancy. In both scenes they are playing cards:

The sun rises and sets,
But it’s dark in my prison.
There are guards day and night.
Oh, yes!
They guard my window.
Guard as you like, I am not running away.
I want my liberty,
Oh yes!
I can’t break the chain.⁶³

In Act II the song casts a pall over the scene because it expresses the mood of a prisoner consigned to spend his life behind bars. In Act IV, it is used instead as a device to end the entire play on a suitable tragicomic note. The atmosphere has

⁵⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Uncited source quoted in Ira Petrovskaja, 144.

⁶² *Andante molto tranquillo*

⁶³ Gor’kii, 139.

changed at the dosshouse: Luka, Pepel, and Natasha have disappeared during the melee. Kostylev is dead. His wife is in jail and her uncle, the police officer, has been sacked. As they sing at the card table, the Baron runs in to announce: “The Actor has hung himself!” The last line belongs to Satin: “He ruined the song, the fool.”⁶⁴

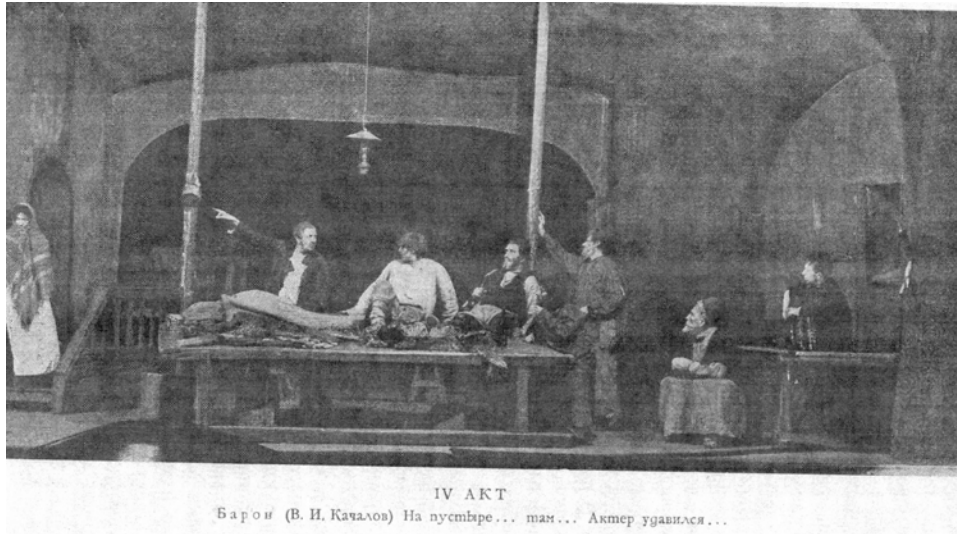


Figure 2.12. Act IV. The Baron runs in and announces that the Actor has hung himself in the courtyard.
Source: Nikolai Efros, Na dne.

In order to understand the play’s broader meaning and impact, we must listen to the audience and the critics: they were the judges. They, like the theatrical production, were situated in a unique historical moment, sociopolitical context, and moral terrain. What was the public response to the 1902 production?

A CASE STUDY OF RECEPTION

In his description of the impression that Luka’s tales made on the audience at the premiere on December 18, 1902, Efros, the theater critic and historian of the Moscow Art Theater, drew on the metaphor of purification from V. Botsianovsky’s study of Gorky to characterize their effect and the theater’s capacity to transform its public:

This purificatory effect was not confined to the boundaries of the stage, but extended to the other side of the footlights, and continued its process in the communal soul of the auditorium. Once this track is laid it remains. Although unseen and unrecognized, it exists. The theater is a *pulpit*, not because the truth is proclaimed from it, but because oral testament is made.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid, 182.

⁶⁵ Efros, “*Na dne*,” 94.

He uses the adjective *sobornaia* to describe the “soul” of the auditorium. Within the context of the theater, two connotations seem pertinent. The theater constitutes the audience, creating an assembly or community (*sobor*), and it strengthens its communal soul (*sobornost’*), that is, the spirit of love, freedom, and truth that reigns in the auditorium as the play unfolds, acting as a meditation on these very themes. By purifying the audience, the theater purifies the public and society at large. The implication is that the impact of a theatrical performance is essentially sociological in nature: it forges community as a rich symbolic vehicle of meaning.⁶⁶

The Moscow Public as an Interpretive Community, 1902

This cannot be discounted as the dramatic hyperbole of a sole theater critic. Not only the Moscow theater critics across the political spectrum responded with “uncharacteristic unanimity,” the audiences were ecstatic.⁶⁷ Eyewitnesses reported that rapturous storms of applause began at the first intermission.⁶⁸ It was thunderous and persistent. Gorky appeared with the actors and the applause turned into a roar. The ovation after Act III was even stronger. As Efros described it, “it reached the upper limit.”⁶⁹ V. Mirovich saw Gorky’s onstage appearance as the underlying cause of the audience’s rapturous ovations.⁷⁰ Another witness who chronicled the event agreed, describing how attention focused on Gorky.

The Lower Depths represents an estranged world of hate and despair before Luka brings his healing understanding of truth and human worth to it and becomes the symbol of its newfound unity. By the play’s end they have formed a tenuous community with a modicum of moral direction. Joviality follows Satin’s awkward evocation of Man and Truth: even Kleshch and the Tartar who are customarily rancorous join in the celebration. Bubnov gives what little he has earned to Satin. Alyoshka is entertaining everyone with his accordion as Satin pours the wine. The theater audience, already transported into the world onstage, perhaps fleetingly experiences the sense of human equality and unity projected from the stage, completing the emotional circuit established by the performance, as eyewitness accounts suggest.

⁶⁶ Like totemic symbols, or moral beliefs, theatrical performances are collective representations. As Ann Swidler explains, “collective representations are the vehicles of a fundamental process in which publicly shared symbols constitute social groups while they constrain and give form to individual consciousness.” [Swidler, “Cultural Power and Social Movements,” 311].

⁶⁷ Efros, *Na dne*, 76. His survey of the press following the premiere permitted him to characterize the critical response as “unanimous”: in Russian the term he used was *edinodushie*, the literal equivalent of the English combining the prefix “one” with the root “anima” or “soul.”

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 111-12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Another Moscow critic describes how Moskvina in the role of Luka spoke: "Conviction without artificial fervor, spirituality without sanctimoniousness, and manifest sincerity were heard in his voice."⁷¹ In a piece for the journal *God's World*, F. Batiushkov specifically noted the "absence of underscored sententiousness" in the performance.⁷² As a result, Luka endeared himself to the audience and elicited its affection: his observations seemed precious instead of tendentious, his spiritual voice resonated. From the perspective of the theater critic of *The Russian Gazette*, the morally edifying aspect of the production led him to declare that "the entire play can be given the title of *The Arrival of the Prophet of Love in the Den of Discord*."⁷³ Emile Durkheim best captures the thrust of their musings:

Between society as it is objectively, and the sacred things which express it symbolically, the distance is considerable. It has been necessary that the impressions really felt by men, which served as the original matter of this construction, should be interpreted, elaborated and transformed until they became unrecognizable. ...The unique task of expressing the real with the aid of appropriate symbols is not enough to occupy them. A surplus generally remains available which seeks to employ itself...in works of art.⁷⁴

The complex *mise en scène* momentarily brought attention to one character and then another, but Luka was the play's fulcrum; the action only centered on Satin in Act IV.

Clearly, Luka won the hearts of the audience when it first premiered. It is tempting to assume that the intelligentsia audience adopted a cool attitude toward Satin, given the ideological tenor of his speech about Man and the negative opinions of both Chekhov and Stanislavsky regarding it. However, Efros also wrote, "Satin and especially his monologue excited very much sympathetic attention, almost as much as Luka's preaching."⁷⁵

Naturalistic plays attempt to provide spectators with "unvarnished" pictures of the "real world": questions of moral judgment become murky. This is less true of a play like *The Lower Depths* owing to its moralistic drive. In *The Lower Depths*, or a successful production of it, the characters' discussions of Luka and one another should stimulate similar inner dialogues in the spectator. Despite the didactic notes in Gorky's play, the colorful characters and their questioning intrigue the audience. In keeping with Aristotle's maxim, neither Luka nor Satin is especially "good" or "bad."

Perhaps Vladimir Doroshevich best captured the spirit of the audience's overall reaction to the premiere performance of *The Lower Depths* in 1902:

⁷¹ Unnamed source quoted in *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷² F. Batiushkov, "Na Dne. Teatralnye Zametki," *Mir Bozh'ii*, April 1903. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷³ Unnamed author, *Russkie vedomosti*, No. 351 (1902), quoted in *Ibid.*, 85. This publication represented conservative views.

⁷⁴ Emile Durkheim, 426.

⁷⁵ Efros, *Na dne*, 46.

The sun peeked into the dosshouse and poured onto the floor and joyful reflections played on the walls. And the sun illuminated much, much of everything. And the dark alleyways of the soul became light. And what happened? Nothing. Nothing truly. Life goes on, goes on like a circle, like a wheel. But midst the thick darkness there was a minute when the sun shone brightly.⁷⁶

Efros also affirmed that the Moscow public perceived those two key elements, the gloom and this light, which were bound together in struggle and “constituted the true dramatic contents and dynamic of the play.”⁷⁷ As we have seen, the opposition between “light” and “darkness” was an enduring binary in nineteenth century public discourse about culture, society and politics. The play did not engender hopelessness with the world as it was, but rather a sense of the world as it could be. The widespread, triumphal praise for the performance included critics who despised *Philistines*: some thought that Luka’s philosophy coincided with Gorky’s and represented a major shift in Gorky’s worldview.⁷⁸

The play’s reception displeased Gorky. As he articulated his concerns in a letter at the time, “Neither the public nor the reviewers got to the core of the play. They praise it and want to praise it, but not to understand it. Now I am wondering who is to blame? Moskvín-Luka’s talent or the author’s lack of skill? And I am not very happy.”⁷⁹ Certainly the script itself, the strength of Moskvín’s performance, and shortcomings in Stanislavsky’s *Satin* cannot be discounted, but the audience’s appropriation of the play’s meaning remains central.

Whatever the artist’s intended meaning—and at the Moscow Art Theater, its mission was to be true to the playwright—audiences appropriate art works in their own ways. Whereas a book can be read lazily, a performance charges willy-nilly to the finale. Interpretation is continually chasing the action on stage. This is further complicated in the case of naturalism because, unlike tragedy or melodrama, the outcome remains ambiguous: it is eminently open to interpretation. Furthermore, the audience’s response is a collective and constructive affair driven by affect. In the case of *The Lower Depths*, Moscow audiences responded to the striking characterizations, the epigrammatic expressions of ideas, the ethical questions, to Luka’s tales, yet disappointed the playwright’s expectations.

We should recall that the Moscow Art Theater was founded just four years prior to the premiere of *The Lower Depths*. Its new aesthetics shaped the public’s horizon of expectations. Operating as a private establishment, the Theater carefully selected the works of a relatively small set of playwrights in order to groom its public and stay afloat financially. Each performance was equally “art” and a “commodity”: it represented hundreds of hours of rehearsal time and ten of thousands of rubles in subscription sales.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Dreiden, 313.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

The Lower Depths was a spectacular success. Its aesthetic conventions expanded the public's horizon of expectations; its politics appealed to progressive political sensibilities; its humanism charmed moderates; and its exotic milieu fascinated everyone. The theater profited from Gorky's notoriety. The public appropriated his play. Was the public in St. Petersburg also unanimous in its praise?

The Dominant Interpretive Community in St. Petersburg, 1902

To place it in historical perspective, at the 1902 premiere of *The Lower Depths* in Moscow, the core audience represented groups in Russian society that would shortly coalesce into the articulate elite of the political opposition to the regime. In 1902, they were not yet highly politicized. The audience consisted of "respectable" citizens who held season tickets: doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers. There were members of the rising middle class, including liberals who had a growing interest in participating in politics.⁸⁰

The primary school teachers, technicians, medical personnel, and workers at postal, telegraph, and railroad offices further democratized the Moscow Art Theater public. Peasants, workers, craftsmen, servants and soldiers rarely entered the Moscow Art Theater until after 1917.⁸¹ In 1902, *The Lower Depths* could only give expression to the public's inchoate sense of the need for political reform. In 1903, conferences of teachers and doctors would actually demand reforms of the tsarist regime. By 1905 the Constitutional Democratic party formed, encompassing both republicans and constitutional monarchists.

The demands of workers outpaced the intelligentsia's interests in political and social reforms. The formation of two major radical opposition groups, the Marxist Social Democratic party, associated with the labor movement, and the Socialist Revolutionary party, accelerated the pace of political events in Russia. Student protests and disturbances continued almost uninterrupted from 1898. This explains the authorities' wariness about the presence of students in the Moscow Art Theater audience. This segment of the audiences was educated, radicalized, and more inclined to participate in public protests.

In Moscow the audiences and critics of all types and political stripes responded very favorably to the premiere of the play: the public was enraptured with it and the reviews in the press were glowing. The critical response in St. Petersburg, the political capital, was almost the obverse: the critics were shocked by how Gorky and the Moscow Art Theater had "debased the elevated and noble art of theater."⁸² In their view the stink of the tramps' rags seemed to permeate the stage.⁸³ The publicist for *The Petersburg Gazette* wrote: "There are outbursts of

⁸⁰ Nikolai Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 406.

⁸¹ Contemporaries referred to these social groups as the "simple folk" (*prostoi narod*).

⁸² Efros, "Na dne," 80.

⁸³ In St. Petersburg, the authorities prohibited performances at the imperial Alexandrinsky Theater. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, "A.M. Gor'komu ianvar'

despair, vice, indigence, that cannot be fully exposed in public without artificially creating the most repulsive result.”⁸⁴ A. A. Stolypin forcefully added to the flood of negative press: “I never have had to endure a more debasing impression than what I witnessed with Gorky’s *Depths*—the sensation that they are forcibly thrusting you into a cesspit.”⁸⁵

Many critics in the Petersburg audience disliked the production. Gorky romanticized life at the bottom to evoke how it could be at once joyous and terrible. Petersburg was a city divided between officialdom—government officials, military officers, and nobility centered on the Court—and the growing “proletariat” of industrial workers at large enterprises, semi-skilled workers, soldiers, and sailors. The former were disinclined towards the playwright who was the poetic voice of the rumbling “masses” of workers, peasants, and poor that constituted Russia’s rapidly changing urban landscape. The interpretive community in Russia’s political capital was very different than Moscow’s.

The reaction in Petersburg reveals another aspect of the naturalistic production: the milieu invites the audience to enter the fictional world onstage. But the spectator can refuse to enter, reject the challenge, and erect barriers, such as an emotional one, including derision. Some sources reported that the audience on the main floor snickered during the performance, especially during the fight scenes. There is no reason to doubt the accounts of eyewitnesses about the tittering in the hall.⁸⁶ It is possible that the Petersburg public found *The Lower Depths* to be below a certain level of moral and intellectual seriousness: it seemed tasteless.

The New Public and the “Lower Depths,” 1919

The revolution rocked the country in 1917 and reconstituted the Theater’s public. The public, at least the better educated and more cultured, knew that the Maly Theater was the “House of Ostrovsky.” Nikolai Ostrovsky was the prolific playwright of the second half of the nineteenth century, best known for his comedies about mercantile society and the common people. He became the Director of the Maly Theater in 1860s. In the popular imagination, the Moscow Art Theater was the House of Chekhov. It was an exalted symbol of Russian culture associated with the progressive opposition to old regime in 1905 and February 1917. The Moscow Art Theater remained untouched while the Winter Palace was looted in 1917. The uneducated and largely illiterate public of the post-1917 period felt privileged to see performances at this renowned theater.

The Theater drew on its rich repertoire of modern classics for the edification of the new public. In the *Worker and Theater*, a new periodical of the Soviet era, B. Mazing reports that Moskvina still remained in the key role of Luka.⁸⁷ In fact, in

1903,” in *Izbrannye pis'ma*, vol. 1 (1879-1909) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979), 315-16 and fn. 2, 546.

⁸⁴ E. U. *Petersburgskie vedomosti*, April 9, 1903. Quoted in Efros, *Na dne*, 80.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Petrovskaja, 145.

⁸⁷ B. Mazing, “Na dne,” *Rabochii i teatr*, no. 24 (1927).

1927, three decades after the foundation of the Moscow Art Theater, all the principals in *The Lower Depths* remained: Moskvin, Stanislavsky, Knipper-Chekhova, Luzhsky, and Kachalov.

The production of *The Lower Depths* remained fundamentally the same after 1917. Therefore, it represents an ideal case for studying reception. How did the interplay between the stage and the spectators change over time? According to Efros, who continued to follow history of the Theater in the Soviet era, the audience continued to be swept up in the intimate atmosphere produced by the excellent acting of the Moscow Art Theater productions.⁸⁸

The review in the section devoted to the Moscow Art Theater in the first issue of *Theater Culture* provided an historical overview of the reception of *The Lower Depths*. Comparing the audience response to the production in 1902 and 1922, Efros averred that “the play proved to be near and needed” for both audiences despite the significant changes in the class composition of the audience, its psychology, its view of theater, and its feelings toward theater and art.⁸⁹

He argued that the novelty of the milieu in part accounted for its original success, but notwithstanding the many changes in the previous two decades, the expressive colloquial speech and singing continued to excite the spectator’s attention. He concluded that although the times might shift the audience’s center of attention to some extent, the play’s interest in issues common to all mankind, its *joie de vivre*, wisdom, romance, and revolutionary spirit ensured that it would be apprehended in essentially the same way.⁹⁰ The curtain calls and long applause certainly appeared to evidence his claims.

Despite the author’s enthusiasm for the Moscow Art Theater and the production, the public is a product of its history and experience. Over time, the public’s horizon of expectations evolved because its frame of reference and values changed. For example, the critic Sergei Glagol writing in the journal *Theater* in 1912 made the following observation about the revival of *The Lower Depths*:

The public went to the theater overjoyed to have the chance to see something superior but left disenchanted almost without clapping. Eight years have passed for both the public and the theater. Consequently, the impression you get is that of meeting a woman who was an object of attraction years later. You await the meeting with a beating heart, await those feelings that were so vivid and upon meeting you don’t recognize what once provoked such enchantment.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Nikolai Efros, “Na dne,” *Kul’tura teatra*, no. 1 (February 1, 1921), Moscow: 33

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid: 35. Nemirovich-Danchenko had a different view in his appraisal of the repertoire. In a letter to Kachalov he called it a bore. “Iz pis’ma V.I. Nemirovich-Danchenk V.I. Kachalovu, July 17, 1921, *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy*, 131.

⁹¹ Sergei Glagol, “Na dne,” *Teatr*, January 19, 1912. He used the adjective *bol’shaia*, or general, to describe the public.

His remarks definitely suggest that the public's horizon of expectations evolved while the theatrical production had not. Glagol is telling his reader that *The Lower Depths* was *passé*.

Writing in the *Theater Herald* in 1919, Iurii Sobolev noted how *The Lower Depths* still remained in the Moscow Art Theater's repertoire as an example of one of its most "brilliant achievements."⁹² He added that "district" performances were given for the "democratic public."⁹³ Most interestingly, he remarked that Chekhov's words at the turn of the century about Act IV being "unnecessary and boring" proved to be prophetic: in 1919, popular audiences responded "attentively and fervently" to the first three acts, but they were bored by the fourth—they didn't care for it."⁹⁴

It appears that audiences were extremely appreciative but not deeply moved after 1917. As we have seen, the public response in 1902 was extraordinary, in Moscow and Petersburg alike, although for different reasons. In 1919, the reviews evince the public's respect for the production, but no delight in it. The reviews suggest that it resonated less with public in general. To be sure, the Bolshevik Revolution deflated the play's original sociopolitical significance: the themes of social equality and social justice held less political valence. Nonetheless, the play still engaged the contemporary public. It is possible that the Revolution and the ongoing Civil War enhanced the charm of the production's arresting naturalism and Gorky's expressive colloquial language.

Maybe Gorky was correct in suspecting that he had succeeded in creating a magnetic image in Luka—an archetypal figure of Russian folk wisdom and gentle compassion—and a considerably weaker figure in Satin, despite his intentions. Certainly Moskvina as Luka outshone Stanislavsky as Satin. At the level of dialogue, it seems that Luka and Satin agree that God is dead. Luka insists that the illusion of truth is necessary for most people, who are always "hoping for something better." Satin insists that the illusion of Truth is a lie and that lies are the "religion of slaves and masters."

At the level of the dialogue, those in the audience most steeped in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism might have rejected Luka's spirituality. Satin rejected religion and placed Man at the center of the new order that he envisioned, but this Man seemed to be more promethean in conception than proletarian. The idea of respecting Man was furthest from the thoughts and actions of Communists during the Civil War in 1919. Efros conjectured that the post-1917 public might embrace Satin, but Sobolev implies that the audience did not. Unfortunately, the historical materials provide little evidence on this point.

⁹² Sobolev, "M. Gor'kii v khudozhestvennom teatre," *Vestnik teatra*, no. 17: 9.

⁹³ This suggests that owing to their location, the central stages in downtown Moscow did not serve the working class although, ideologically speaking, the theater now belonged to "the masses." The new "proletarian" audience of skilled and unskilled workers, among them many who still returned to villages to work in the fields, actually lived in the city's outer "working class districts" and attended theatrical performances there, if at all.

⁹⁴ Sobolev: 9. I have translated *goryacho* as fervently.

In contrast, Luka affirmed the importance of community, which was consonant with communism's foundational belief in the *kollektiv* as the building block of society. Sometimes Lenin would joke about the fact that peasants would construe communism to mean "commune-ism."⁹⁵ Luka's spryness, wit, and colloquialisms continued to captivate the audience. Since soldiers and workers constituted a large part of the audience in this period, perhaps Luka especially appealed most to them because most came from peasant backgrounds. They were familiar with Luka's folk wisdom and commonsense.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the Moscow Art Theater embarked on a tour abroad. A quick detour to consider the reception of *The Lower Depths* in the United States is instructive.



The Moscow Art Theater Company in the United States in 1922. In the front row, Morris Gest, Moskvín, John Barrymore as Hamlet, Kachalov, Stanislavsky, Ethel Barrymore, Arthur Hopkins, Robert Edmond Jones; in back, Baliev and his wife.

Figure 2.13. The Moscow Art Theater on Tour, 1922. Source: Marc Slonim, *Russian Theater*.

The Interpretive Community in the United States

During its extended tour abroad, audiences in New York, Boston, Pittsburg, Chicago, and Oakland were treated to a limited repertoire of its world-renowned productions: *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich*, *The Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *The Lower Depths*. Obviously, these selections were calculated to ensure the financial success of the tour and bolster the Theater's reputation abroad. The plays were performed in Russian; the programs included synopses of them.

The reviews are fascinating because they evidence distinct interpretive communities. Roswell Dagne of the *Oakland Tribune* claimed that he had "never

⁹⁵ The peasant "commune" (*kommuna*) was synonymous with the *obshchina* and *mir*, traditional forms of peasant community with customs governing land, labor, and marriage. Kharkhordin explains that Maksim Gorky and Anatolii Lunacharsky "endowed collectivism with an almost religious meaning." See Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 79.

seen a company give a more perfectly balanced performance than this one does of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*."⁹⁶ Certainly, this is a great compliment about the company's ensemble acting. The reviewer for the *Boston Herald* agreed with others that *The Lower Depths* was more engaging than *Tsar Fëdor*, arguing that the characters were more strongly defined than those in the Tsar's court, "even when represented in pantomime."⁹⁷ Indeed, it was true that each character in *The Lower Depths* was defined more strongly visually than those in *Tsar Fëdor*, who tended to blur into one another other owing to the luxurious period costumes.

Henry Parker, the music and drama reviewer for the *Boston Evening Transcript* was the dean of the Boston's theater critics.⁹⁸ He criticized *Tsar Ioannovich* for its lack of satisfying characterizations, despite the wealth of visual pageantry. This is precisely the shortcoming that Stanislavsky recognized in the work after its premiere in 1898. It motivated him to expand the psychological depth of the Theater's following productions of naturalist plays.

In Parker's estimation, the opening performance of *The Lower Depths* in Boston on May 11, 1923 stood as a good introduction to the performers' skills and technique.⁹⁹ He favorably mentioned Moskvina, Kachalov, Knipper-Chekhova, and Luzhsky but singled out Stanislavsky for criticism as Satin who "flaunted his rags as though Don Caesar de Bazan had chosen and was wearing them" and broke the illusion that the company so carefully crafted.¹⁰⁰

These reviews indicate shared ways of reading the production in specifically aesthetic terms: "the balance" of the ensemble; "performers skills and technique"; and "breaking the illusion." These leading voices in the American theater world were applying the aesthetics of the naturalism, which Stanislavsky had developed a quarter of a century earlier, to the performances of the Moscow Art Theater itself.

A SPECIAL SPECTATOR

When Vladimir Ilich Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaya arrived at the mezzanine level entrance of the Moscow Art Theater on December 25, 1919, Fëdor Mikhalskii, the manager-on-duty, led them to the director's box for the performance of *The Lower Depths*.¹⁰¹ Lenin had wanted to see the production for more than a decade. The performance upset him. Krupskaya recalled that he paced the floor for hours afterwards due to his irritation: "The excessive theatricality of the production

⁹⁶ Roswell Dagne, "Russian Players Divide New York Theater Opinion," *Oakland Tribune*, March 18, 1923. Quoted in Gary Genard, "The Moscow Art Theatre's 1923 Season in Boston: A Visit From On High?" *Theatre History Studies*, vol. 16 (1996): 28.

⁹⁷ Philip Hale, "Moscow Players in Work By Gorky," *Boston Herald*, 12 May 1923. Quoted in *Ibid*, 34.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 29.

⁹⁹ H.T.P., "A Russian Triumph. Actors—and a Play," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 12 May 1923. Cited in *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁰¹ Dreiden, 298.

bothered Ilich. After *The Lower Depths* he quit going to the theater for a long while.”¹⁰²

Yet this production in particular was renowned for its realistic portrayal of life. The Moscow Art Theater was founded on the basis of its rejection of the stale “theatricality” of the productions at the Imperial dramatic theaters, on the one hand, and the second-rate fare at theatrical enterprises, on the other. As Stanislavsky explained in his memoirs:

Our plan for the new undertaking was revolutionary. We rebelled against the old style of acting and theatricality, against false pathos, the declamatory style, and overacting; against the dull conventions of staging, sets, and the star system that spoiled ensemble acting; against the entire system of producing plays and the triviality of the contemporary repertoire.¹⁰³

How could Lenin have objected to the play’s “theatricality,” a pejorative term in the vocabulary of the Moscow Art Theater?

When Lenin finally saw *The Lower Depths*, he surely admired Moskvina’s great talent in bringing the character of Luka alive onstage. Did he view Luka as an embodiment a “class enemy” who spread Christian moral ideas? If Lenin interpreted the play within the context of the Bolshevik Revolution, then all the characters were deluded. Marxism armed people with the “objective truth” of the history of the class struggle.¹⁰⁴ “Scientific communism” enlightened people. Instead, the term “theatricality” implies that he applied aesthetic criteria in his judgment of the production.

If understood in the modern sense, *teatral’nost*—“theatricality” or “overly theatrical”—means “inauthentic.” For example, an ensemble performance with weak acting is simply not believable. The world onstage seems artificial. It does not

¹⁰² Nadezhda Krupskaya Lenin, “Lenin i Gor’kii,” quoted in *Ibid*, 299-300.

¹⁰³ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn’ v iskusstve*, 196. In his notebooks, Stanislavsky contrasts “sincerity and simplicity” in acting with “pathos and poses,” but he has in mind the “false” pathos mentioned here. He developed his entire system of acting techniques to produce the talented actor capable of making audiences believe in the reality of the complex emotion (pathos) displayed on stage. See Konstantin Stanislavskii, “Publika dolzhna verit’ artistu i schitat’ ego sozdaniia zhivymi litsami,” *Zapisnaia kniga no. 758, 2-5*, in *Moe grazhdanskoe sluzhenie rossii: vospominaniia. stat’i. ocherki. rechi. besedy. iz zapisnykh knizhek* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), 526-27.

¹⁰⁴ For example, in 1936, the theater critic Boris Alpers described the new approach to Luka in Tarakanov’s performance as one in which there was much less softness, deception (*lukavost’*), and equanimity: “He makes (the production) more cruel and more truthful. That human softness, which Luka-Moskvina carried into the milieu of embittered dying people has almost disappeared from the production.” Boris Alpers, “Na dne v MKhAT,” *Teatral’nye ocherki v dvykh tomakh*, vol. 2, *Teatral’nye prem’ery* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977), 288. The article was originally published in *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, April 1936. Trapped within this heartless logic, one must be cruel to be kind.

succeed in immersing the audience in the world onstage, and consequently it leaves it disappointed.

As we recall, the entries by Luzhsky and Stanislavsky in the Director's Notebooks reflected the crisis at the Theater in 1919 when the troupe was split during the Civil War. The Moscow Art Theater production of *The Lower Depths* defined ensemble acting, but it was in a dismal state according to the leading actors. Kachalov, the original Baron, was leading the tour of the troupe when it was cut off by Denikin's advance.

Writing specifically about Satin's speech, Stanislavsky once observed that the actor had to pronounce Gorky's text simply, without bombast, so that it "resonated and lived."¹⁰⁵ Otherwise, it easily might turn into a melodrama.¹⁰⁶ As the history of productions of *The Lower Depths* demonstrates, Satin's speeches were serious stumbling blocks for many actors.¹⁰⁷ Combined with the play's romanticism, this could upset and embarrass any serious-minded theatergoer.

Finally, there is the play itself. It hardly gestures toward the forces, that is capitalism and class politics, which created such social injustice and the degrading milieu in which these destitute people live. Did Lenin consider that to be a grave shortcoming? Krupskaya repeatedly used the term *bytoopisanie*—the concrete detailing and description of social themes—as a possible inadequacy in the structure and style of Gorky's play as Lenin saw it.¹⁰⁸ *The Lower Depths* voices anger at social injustice and powerlessness, but leaves it at that. From the point of view of Chekhov and Stanislavsky, Gorky's naturalistic play was not restrained enough in this respect: its ethical posture and political stance were too pronounced.¹⁰⁹

Also, Satin expounds humanistic ideas. Gorky and Lunacharsky came to believe that art had the power to inspire political action and held that socialism could have the force of a human religion.¹¹⁰ They developed these ideas about "god-building" in Capri after 1905 after breaking with Lenin. As Gorky's ideas matured, he saw education as the key to the future. They broke with Lenin because he maintained that the Bolshevik Party was the key to the emancipation and enlightenment of the "proletariat." On its own, he argued, the "proletariat" of workers and peasants would never develop revolutionary consciousness.

¹⁰⁵ Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn v iskusstve*, 266.

¹⁰⁶ This theme runs throughout Part III of Stanislavsky's memoirs, "Artistic Youth," especially the section entitled "A New Quandary" (*Novoe nedoumenie*) and his discussion of clichés in performance. See *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*, 127-135.

¹⁰⁷ See E. Ia. Dubnova, "Luka i Satin: k istorii stenicheskikh interpretatsii *Na Dne*" in *Neizvestnyi Gor'kii: k 125-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1994) for a survey of productions from the late-1950s to the late-1970s.

¹⁰⁸ Dreiden, 303.

¹⁰⁹ This is not the same as *bytizobrazhenie*, the portrayal of a way of life.

Bytoopisanie emphasizes the sociopolitical context of everyday life and the moral component of art.

¹¹⁰ Mally, 5-6. Known as left Bolsheviks, they attacked Lenin's political strategy and socialist theory.

The most likely explanation of Lenin's upset is a combination of the above. Most embarrassingly for the Theater, two major theater critics—Efros, one closest to the Moscow Art Theater, and Parker, the dean of the Boston theater critics who was steeped in the traditions of naturalism—remarked that Stanislavsky fell noticeably short in the key role of Satin. His weakness in the role and the poor quality of the ensemble acting in 1919 likely accounted for its inauthenticity, its "theatricality," in Lenin's opinion. In addition, *The Lower Depths* is Gorky's least political play: ideology takes the backseat to its expressivity and human spirit. Also, Gorky had broken with Lenin's views of politics and culture and remained abroad.

In 1931, Gorky returned to Russia and a hero's welcome. When he became the first Chairman of the Writer's Union, he disowned *The Lower Depths*. As Gorky put it, "The falsity of the figure of Luka generally puts into question the usefulness of the play: *The Lower Depths* is an obsolete play and, possibly, even harmful in our times."¹¹¹ Moreover, ambiguity in literature and art had become suspect.¹¹²

Satin may have been a bold prophet and outspoken critic of false hope and lies, but Luka remained the heart of the play for audiences through decades of performances. *The Lower Depths* always found its public, but never the one that Gorky anticipated in vain, beginning in 1902.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Dreiden, 313.

¹¹² See Dobrenko, especially chapters 3, 4 and 7.

THREE

The Experience of Revolutionary Theater

The play was a great success, but the audience was a disaster.

Oscar Wilde

Almost two months after the premiere of *The Dawn* in 1920, the first production of the Theater of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic No. 1, the director Vsevolod Meyerhold sent a telephonogram to Vladimir Lenin with the salutation “Dear Leader” extending a warm invitation to him from the troupe as well as “all technical and support personnel” to attend the performance on the following day—December 28th.¹ This was not a belated invitation to the original production: the invitation referred to it as a “new version.”

In fact, December 27, 1920 marked the premiere of the revamped version of *The Dawn* and the telephonogram should be read both as an official invitation to it—and an apology for the original version. This revamped version ran until May 1, 1921, International Workers’ Day. The original production opened on the third anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, November 7, 1920, amid the celebrations in Moscow. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Enlightenment, and Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, were honored guests.

Surely Krupskaya’s husband learned about her reaction before the readers of *Pravda* where her review appeared three days later. She was outraged and excoriated the production on artistic and political grounds. One phrase summed up her artistic opinion of it: from the set designs to the acting, it was a “mish-mash”.² She explained how the theater had managed to turn “gold into tinsel”: although the action takes place in some unnamed country at an unspecified time, “someone unfortunately had the idea of adapting *The Dawn* to contemporary Russia substituting ‘the proletariat’ for the ‘poor and oppressed,’ ‘the bourgeoisie’ for ‘the government,’ [and] ‘imperialist forces’ for ‘foreign troops’; ‘Soviet power,’ ‘social revolution,’ and the like appeared on stage.”³ She also called it an “insult” in light of its political ramifications.⁴

¹ V.E. Meierkhol’d and Bassalygo, “Telefonogramma V.I. Leninu,” *V.E. Meierhol’d: stat’i, pis’m’a, rechi, besedi (1917-1939)*, ed. Boleslav Rostotskii (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), 23.

² Nadezhda Krupskaya, “Teatr i iskusstvo: postanovka *Zor’ Verkharna* (v teatre b. Zona), *Pravda*, November 10, 1920 (no. 252): 2. She used the nonsense term *martobria*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 3.1. Krupskaya and Lenin

Lunacharsky had appointed Vsevolod Meyerhold, the director of *The Dawn* and the culpable “someone” whom Krupskaya had in mind, to head the Theatrical Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment on September 16, 1920. The artistic director of the imperial Alexandrinsky and Marinsky Theaters in Petrograd at the time of the 1917 revolutions and notorious for his extravagant productions and *recherché* ideas about theater and staging, Meyerhold joined the communist party after the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 and now wore the accoutrements of a Soviet soldier: cap with a red star, greatcoat, and leg-wrappings.⁵



Figure 3.2. Anatolii Lunacharsky

Now a Soviet official, he had a measure of power and resources at his disposal to embark on a new direction in his stage work and supplement it with what might be characterized as public outreach, or to use the proper contemporary terms, artistic and cultural “agitation,” which is, by its very nature, political. This

⁵ David Zolotnitskii, *Zori teatral'nogo oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), 80.

politicized, educational work spread the message about the theater's work and aims, the agenda of Theatrical October, and the importance of support from the new spectator. Of course, the specific aim was to develop the audience for revolutionary theater. To this end, the theater mounted organizational exhibitions, lectures, and studies of the new spectator.⁶

The theatrical run of *The Dawn* coincided with his short tenure at the Theatrical Department and showcased his ideas for revolutionary theatrical culture, which he promulgated as the artistic-political program of "Theatrical October." *The Dawn* achieved iconic status in the history of Soviet Russian theater. Pavel Markov, the eminent Soviet theater historian and critic, called it *The Seagull* of the Meyerhold Theater owing to its political drive "directed toward the average mass spectator."⁷ *The Dawn* raised the banner of "revolutionary theater" around which a "proletarian" public would soon rally.

THE DAWN AS REVOLUTIONARY THEATER

In a programmatic speech to the troupe a week before the opening, Meyerhold repeatedly used the play's central trope—the sun and the dawn—to drive home his key points. He likened communism to the "new sun" and "the fire" that would inspire their theatrical agenda and work.⁸ He envisioned "a lot of light, joy, monumentality, [and] infectiousness; a simple style drawing the public into the action and the collective process of creating the performance."⁹ Evidently work on *The Dawn* had not proceeded precisely in this manner because in the same speech Meyerhold lamented the fact that neither the adaptation of the play nor the mise-en-scène had been a collective process.¹⁰ But his co-director Valery Bebutov and he certainly touted the production as a bold work of revolutionary art for the new era that was dawning, in both an artistic and political sense. As a former pupil of Stanislavsky with over two decades of experience in the theater, Meyerhold possessed an intimate knowledge of Moscow Art Theater principles and practices that he would subvert with relish if not panache in *The Dawn*.¹¹

The Dawn is a four-act play written in prose and verse by Belgian symbolist poet Émile Verhaeren whose verse enjoyed considerable popularity in Russia after the revolution.¹² It was written in 1898 and banned in tsarist Russia because it was anti-militaristic and anti-imperialistic; it illustrated the growing importance of the

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Pavel Markov, "Pis'mo o Meierkol'de," *Teatr i dramaturgiia*, no. 2 (1932) quoted in Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkol'd* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 243.

⁸ V.E. Meierkol'd, "Rech' pered kollektivom teatra RSFSR pervogo 31 oktiabria 1920," *Vestnik teatru*, no. 72-73 (November 7, 1920): 19.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Boris Alpers, "Teatr sotsial'noi maski," *Teatral'nyie ocherkii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977), 35-37. Originally published in 1931.

¹² Aleksandr Fevralskii, *Zapiski rovesknika veka* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1976), 203-204. Proletkult in Petrograd even staged a version of *The Dawn*.

working class; and it adumbrated the coming social revolution. Meyerhold and his contemporaries regarded it as a revolutionary tragedy owing to the death of the hero, the clashes between the lead characters, and their exchanges with the various social groups in the drama, each of which, as Verhaeren stipulated, acts as “a single person of multiple and contradictory aspects.”¹³

Although David Zolotnitsky, the Soviet theater historian, has referred to this play as a popular melodrama, which properly calls attention to the antagonism between the virtuous hero and the evil, duplicitous regime, in Russian theater studies the contemporary term “melodramatic” implied qualities such as action-packed, spectacular, suspenseful, or heart-rending.¹⁴ Verhaeren wrote the drama to be declaimed from the stage; despite Meyerhold’s intentions, contemporary accounts suggest that his production lacked a sense of action and suspense although the finale did prove heart-rending. In any case Meyerhold viewed the play as a revolutionary tragedy.

From the point of view of genre, heroic drama comes to mind: Hérénien, the hero of *The Dawn*, is a decisive, strong-willed, even impulsive individual. The central themes of the play involve grand matters, in this case, rebellion against the political authorities and the quest for an end to a sanguinary war that has devastated the land. Although not written in “heroic” verse (iambic pentameter in closed couplets) as in Dryden’s founding plays of the genre, *The Dawn* does contain passages of verse in an iambic rhyme scheme of closed couplets. Moreover, the etymology of the name “Hérénien” directly relates to the word “hero” in French.

Hérénien’s brother-in-law and political opponent, a hard-boiled revolutionary and proto-Bolshevik, is “Haineau” a name etymologically related to the French word for “hate” (*haine*). Fortunately for the producers, this was lost in the translation from French into Russian, but the fundamental opposition had major consequences for the premiere’s reception. Naturally, the contrast between the beliefs and political positions of the protagonists was critical within the context of Russia’s Civil War.¹⁵ The plot of the play revolves around political intrigues in the city of Oppidomagne (*Velikograd*).¹⁶ The action centers on the charismatic Hérénien who brokers peace with the rebels within the capital and the exhausted enemy forces led by Hordain, who have besieged the city. After realizing his glorious dream of bringing an end to the war, Hérénien dies at the hands of the Regents’ assassins.

¹³ Émile Verhaeren, *The Dawn (Les Aubes)*, tr. Arthur Symons (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1915), 9.

¹⁴ Zolotnitskii, 110.

¹⁵ The difficulties that this presented for spectators is discussed below.

¹⁶ At the suggestion of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, the name of the city was russified to *Velikograd*, that is, the “Great City.”



Figure 3.3. Hérénien, the hero of *The Dawn*. Source: Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*.

Vladimir Propp's morphology of Russian folktales provides a useful instrument for identifying critical moments of the plot.¹⁷ The play lends itself to Proppian morphological analysis because the hero embarks on a quest and must overcome a series of challenges before he achieves his goal. *Fire*, the First Scene, simultaneously conjured the elemental conflict between the city and the countryside, the rebellion between the strikers and political authorities in the city, and the literal fire of war on the battlefield. At the Theater RSFSR One, the opening scene described the suffering of the community and exposed the villainy of capitalism. In Proppian terms, it constituted the initial "mediation" that cemented the hero's resolve and motivated his actions until the tension found resolution. At the level of the tale, Hérénien left the city to be at his dying father's side. His father dies mistaking the conflagration of war for the rising sun (it is a "false dawn"). This scene represented the symbolic passing of the torch from father to son; the father is "the sender" and functions to drive the action forward.

Herenien reenters the city in Scene Two, overcoming the obstacle of the guarded gates, which separated him from his loyal followers. Scenes Three and Four represented two classic components of folkloric tales: in this case, trickery by the perfidious villains, the Regents of Velikograd, and Hérénien's apparent complicity with them. However, in Scene Five (*Proklamatsiia*), Hérénien proved his integrity and reclaimed the people's trust with his public speech. He proceeded to negotiate a truce with the invading forces in Scene Six and finally achieved his goal. Scene Seven encompassed both the classic Proppian interdiction to the hero and his assassination.

¹⁷ In the sense of a "paradigmatic" schema based on binary oppositions like Greimas' model of narratology, not Propp's strictly sequenced "syntactical" structure of action.

The Final Scene takes place on People's Square. The revolutionary community mourns the fallen hero who lies in state and celebrates his exalted vision of the future. Hérénien's widow presented their child to the people, symbolically passing the torch to the future leader, thus completing the cycle initiated in the First Scene. The play concluded with the toppling of the symbol of the Regents' oppression—the column on the square—and the people, united, affirmed the new dawn.

Although written two decades earlier, the play meshed nicely with the historical circumstances in Russia at the time: it is understandable why the directors decided to adapt the script for their production. There were broad similarities between the fictional world in *The Dawn* and the recent historical past in Russia where involvement in the First World War had led to economic collapse, the disaffection of Russian troops, and ultimately the 1917 Revolutions.

While 1920 had been the year of fiercest fighting yet in the civil war, by November it appeared certain that the Reds would emerge victorious in their struggle against the Whites. In ideological terms, the partnership between the “people” or “proletariat” on the one hand—workers, peasants, soldiers, sailors and others who embraced the Bolshevik revolutionary cause—and the “vanguard” Social Democratic Workers' Party of Bolsheviks on the other was the fundamental formula that the leader of the party Vladimir Lenin supplied. He had insisted on a party of organized, revolutionary cadres to agitate among the “masses” and spread propaganda in order to lead them to victory in armed insurrection against the tsarist regime.

Meanings accrue to works of art within interpretive contexts. In the case of theater the primary interpretive context is the ongoing interplay between the performers and the people in the theater hall as they watch the theatrical production shaped by the director. But the immediate interaction between artists and audiences within this primary nexus where art is a vehicle of meanings, is also mediated by the public's tastes, its understandings of conventions, community based beliefs, ideological and political commitments, and the interpretive views shared by specialized audiences such as theater critics and cultural critics. Every audience has a history. The complex modern contexts of art give wide-ranging scope to its meanings.

For example, theater programs, lectures, exhibits, and other public presentations provide contexts for understanding the theater. They may also inform the spectator's interpretation of the “meaning” of theater art in general as well as the specific meaning of particular theatrical production. In the case of *The Dawn*, the temporal frame was momentous and its spatial framing was monumental.

On November 7, 1920 in Moscow, the festivities associated with the third anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution provided the overarching political context that framed the meaning of the performance. Plans for the celebrations developed by the Moscow Department of Education included decorations on city squares, theatrical performances, concerts, cinematography, and children's entertainments.¹⁸

¹⁸ Vladimir Tolstoy, Irina Bibikova, and Catherine Cooke, eds. *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia 1918-33* tr. Frances Longman, Felicity

Meyerhold and Bebutov, the co-directors of *The Dawn* specifically justified their adaptation of Verhaeren's play on the basis of the "exciting order" that they had received from the contemporary spectator.¹⁹ In their article "On the Production of *The Dawn* at the First Theater RSFSR," published on the day of the premiere in the *Theater Herald*, they explained that the spectator's demand "had become even keener since this production was for the October festivities."

The premiere marked the opening of the theater itself and the production telegraphed a dramatic if schematic representation of the Bolshevik Revolution to the audience and beyond, proclaiming the inexorable victory of the worldwide workers' revolution. In later performances, the production would deliver actual news of battlefield victories. The massive reenactment of the *Storming the Winter Palace* directed by Nikolai Evreinov had taken place in Petrograd the day before. Whereas this reenactment commemorated the momentous end of the old regime, *The Dawn* celebrated the birth of the new one in a double sense: it was given in honor of the October Revolution in 1917 as a specific historical event and the play itself portrayed the dawn of the new era, the birth of the new society, the advent of communism.

The thousands of actors and onlookers who took part in the *Storming* contributed to shaping the spatial dimension defined by Palace Square. During this mass spectacle in Petrograd, the line separating the "actors" from the "spectators" blurred. As conceived by the directors, *The Dawn* also merged the audience with the actors. In the adaptation, the people of Velikograd became a chorus hidden in the orchestra pit from which voices would rise and fill the entire auditorium.²⁰ The heroes stood on stage according to the directors' spatial design of concentric circles that radiated from the epicenter of the stage and spiraled along the staircase leading to the orchestra pit and down onto the main floor of the hall. Hence, the production's meta-theatrical framings emphatically grounded it in time and space and the directors further ramified this in the details of the play's adaptation and staging.

O'Dell, and Vladimir Vnukov (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 137. See also James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁹ V.E. Meierkhol'd and V.M. Bebutov, "K postanovke *Zor'* v pervom teatre RSFSR," *Vestnik teatra*, no. 72-73 (November 7, 1920): 8.

²⁰ Mikhail Zagorskii, "*Zori*. Etiud," *Vestnik teatra*, no. 74 (November 20, 1920): 6 and Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol'd* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981), 251.

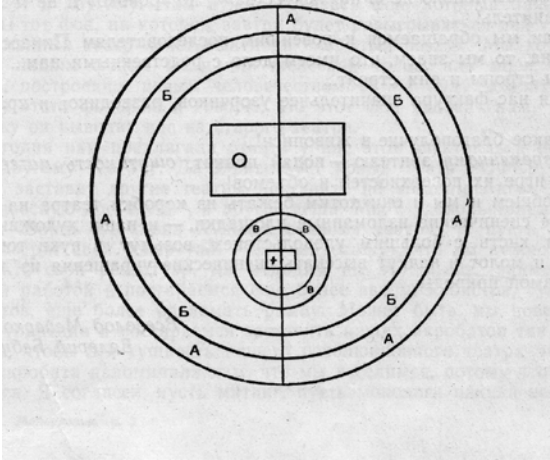


Figure 3.4. Plan for the staging. The outer circle marks Hordain's troops. They surround the circle of troops defending Veliokograd. "B" is the group of strikers at the graveyard. "+" marks the location of the graveyard. Source: V.E. Meyerhold, *Stati, pis'ma, rechi, besedy*. Pt. II, 1917-1939.

Theatrical October

The immediate theatrical setting of the performance at the Theater RSFSR One, from the foyer to stage, augmented these frames. The setting with its unique atmosphere must be seen within the context of Meyerhold's radical initiative to remake theater culture in revolutionary Russia. In his role as the Director of the Theatrical Department of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, Meyerhold launched "Theatrical October," which created the artistic-political framing that suffused the Theater RSFSR One and its premiere production. Two decades earlier, the Art Theater had defined itself against the theatrical establishment, citing the widespread hackwork and lack of discipline at the imperial theaters. Now Meyerhold intended to knock the still revered Moscow Art Theater off its pedestal by impeaching both its artistic and political credentials.

Deploying militaristic rhetoric in his report "On Weak Places at the Theatrical Front," Meyerhold described contemporary theatrical culture as "degenerate" and specifically noted "its lack of discipline, eclecticism, absence of definition, loss of tradition, and widespread hackwork."²¹ Despite minor similarities in rhetoric between these two historically contiguous missions, both of which sought to change to the theatrical culture of their times, the fundamental initiatives of Theatrical October sharply distinguished it from its predecessor's. Actually, Meyerhold had little interest in reforming the theatrical establishment. As a highly politicized artistic-cultural movement, Theatrical October intended to offer "revolutionary theater" to the contemporary audience—the "masses" in the terminology of the day—and also aimed to provide them with the "critical tools" necessary to

²¹ V.E. Meierkhol'd, "Ob uiazvimykh mestakh teatral'nogo fronta," *Vestnik teatra*, no. 78-79, 1920, quoted in Aleksandr Fevralskii, "Teatral'nyi oktiabr' i Zori," *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 1 (January 1931): 5.

appreciate it, which, at face value, represented a mission similar to the Moscow Art Theater's original aim of bringing art to the "people."²²

However, Theatrical October represented a militant agenda to remake the theatrical establishment in its entirety, indeed to supplant the existing pre-revolutionary theaters and their schools, as well as to reinvent instruction in the public school system. For instance, one foundational slogan of Theatrical October encapsulated both the "political-enlightenment" aspect of its mission and its radical insistence on extirpating the legacies of the traditional theaters, which were in fact revered by average people and authorities alike: "The proletariat's slavish assimilation of the values of the past is deemed to be harmful."²³ Theatrical October sought to construct a new theater culture but it was also rabidly anti-establishment.

Meyerhold diagnosed traditional theater as the problem and its corrupting influence on the proletariat as the primary "motivational frame" for change. "Theatrical October" was much more than rhetoric: Meyerhold's organizational directives started to reverberate through the Moscow theater world. For instance, he renamed The Korsh Theater—one of the oldest commercial theaters in Moscow with a broad repertoire of classic plays and melodramas—the Theater RSFSR Three. He called on it to produce "revolutionary comedies."

In his view, Theatrical October "necessitated" revolutionary destruction as well as creation. However Lunacharsky, Meyerhold's boss, quickly issued an order forming "The Association of Academic and State Theaters," placing the former imperial Maly Theater (where he was the artistic director), the Moscow Art Theater and its studios, the Chamber Theater, and several other Moscow theaters under his direct control and protection.²⁴ Consequently, Meyerhold and the theatrical "left" openly declared a "civil war" in the theater to publicly attack the theaters under Lunacharsky's guardianship.

Beyond this politically motivated and ideologically driven agenda lay Meyerhold's acknowledged mastery of the stage and his iconoclastic new direction for theater in Soviet times. He was inspired by two decades of experience in theater and predilection for experiment, which quickly attracted a devoted young following from a variety of social backgrounds to his ranks and into the auditorium.²⁵ He had prodigious knowledge of the history and practice of theater in Russia, Europe, and Asia. Being a consummate artist, he sometimes looked back to his own work and drew upon it, but always moved forward. His willingness to experiment and break new ground made continual demands on his acting troupe and the public alike.

Meyerhold and Bebutov telescoped the above frames into the production of *The Dawn* as they mounted the premiere to mark the third anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution and inaugurate their own revolutionary theater.

²² Fevralskii, "Teatral'nyi oktiabr i Zori," 4.

²³ Ibid and Zolotnitskii, 100-101.

²⁴ Fevralskii, "Teatral'nyi i oktiabr," 8.

²⁵ See Fevralskii, *Zapiski rovesknika veka*, 210-212 and 218-221. He discusses the new spectator and why the new public turned away from prerevolutionary theater. Boris Alpers describes the organizational bases of youth involvement in revolutionary theater in "Teatr sotsial'noi maski," 34-35 and 48.

Consequently, to a greater degree than established theaters with existing reputations—and all the more so as the headquarters of Theatrical October—they aimed to grab the spectators' attention and stake the Theater RSFSR I's claim to being the epitome of revolutionary theater. To this end, from the street level to the stage, the theater melded the frames described above. The theater abounded in signifiers for theatergoers, casual and cognoscenti alike. Most can be seen as counterweights or binaries opposed to the codes embodied by the prerevolutionary theaters—and those at the Art Theater, first and foremost.

Whereas the Moscow Art Theater was and remains to this day a symbol of good taste and propriety—and the former imperial theaters, bastions of grandeur and tradition—the Theater RSFSR One gave its performances in the battered, former Sohn Music Hall on Triumphal Square (now Mayakovsky Square). Viktor Shklovsky, the formalist theoretician and literary specialist, described it as “an overcoat with its collar ripped out.”²⁶ The rundown building lacked heat and smelled musty. The setting bespoke “revolutionary” asceticism not “bourgeois” comfort, at least as Meyerhold saw it, and its large size for a dramatic theater suited his high profile vision for it.

When *The Dawn* premiered, posters and ROSTA windows adorned the corridors.²⁷ The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had just joined the theater's Artistic Council, previously worked for ROSTA, the Russian Telegraph Agency, where he helped establish the making of the satirical ROSTA windows, that is, small-format stenciled posters with images and caricatures to broadcast the latest news with a party slant.²⁸ The minutes from a meeting of the theater's Artistic Council in early 1921 discussed moving the buffet to the other building to make more room for ROSTA windows and survey tables.²⁹

The “popular” rules of etiquette established at the Theater RSFSR One represented obvious symbolic counterparts to those at the traditional theaters. The announcement published in the Moscow theater bulletin that included the complete repertoires of the Moscow theaters (typically posted at box offices throughout the city and sold in newspaper format at news kiosks) included this notation for the Theater RSFSR One: “Entering the auditorium during the performance is allowed; signs of approval (applause) or disapproval (whistling) are permitted; actors take curtain calls after each act and in the course of the show.”³⁰ In addition, at the performance they announced that spectators could eat nuts or smoke makhorka in

²⁶ Quoted in Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol'd*, 249.

²⁷ In his biography of Meyerhold, Rudnitsky writes: “They affixed posters, slogans, and caricatures to the walls of the corridors.” (Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol'd*, 250).

²⁸ Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 199; Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery *The Theatre as Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain, 1917-1934* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 11.

²⁹ RGALI, f. 963, op. 1, d. 3, l. 5, Protokol dated 3 February 1921. Vladimir Mayakovsky, Olga Kameneva, and Mikhail Zagorskii were present.

³⁰ Fevral'skii, “Teatralnyi oktiabr i Zori”: 6.

the lobby and corridors.³¹ Meyerhold wanted to create an informal atmosphere where the target “proletarian” audience would feel at home and encouraged to participate in the theatrical performances.³²

Upon entering the hall itself, spectators could have noticed box seats missing their railings and the general disorder of the seating on the main floor.³³ Boris Alpers, the theater critic, likened the auditorium to a circus hall because it was stripped empty and barren.³⁴ Presumably the new breed of spectator was to take this in stride.

Vladimir Dmitriev designed the main stage curtain to harmonize with his set. It also served as a stark counterpoint to the iconic seagull and waves logo of the Moscow Art Theater. There, the gentle cream-colored and grayish blue seagull and waves logo blended into the flat tones of walls. At the Theater RSFSR One, it was a striking composition of primary hues. A huge misshapen red circle cut through on the right side by a large yellow wedge stood out against the black curtain. “RSFSR” was inscribed in the center of the circle.³⁵

To those familiar with the work of suprematist or cubo-futurist artists, the bold design might have communicated dynamic power.³⁶ The set design could have been read as a three-dimensional explosion of the two-dimensional curtain design, but actually the set design preceded the making of the curtain. If first impressions are everything, then the curtain caused bewilderment in the hall even before the performance started. As one twenty-two year old student complained, “The curtain spoils the entire impression of the theater.”³⁷ It turned out that she was hardly alone in her disappointment.

The Theater RSFSR One aimed to capture and activate the imagination of the radicalized public bequeathed to it by the revolution. The directors expected the new spectator to enter the hall with values, attitudes and beliefs inflected by the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War, especially the desire for a theatrical experience that expressed the heroic sensibility of the times.³⁸ In what ways could they express to the new spectator the mix of ideals and ideas coalescing in this revolutionary

³¹ Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol'd*, 250.

³² Valerii Bebutov, “Nezabytoe,” *Tvorcheskoe nasledie V.E. Meierkhol'da: sbornik*, ed. L.D. Vendrovskaiia and Aleksandr Fevralskii (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1978), 273.

³³ Zolotnitskii, 103-104.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 103. See Lisa McCormick, “Music as Social Performance,” in *Myth, Meaning, and Performance: Toward a New Cultural Sociology of the Arts*, ed. Ron Eyerman and Lisa McCormack (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006) for a discussion of the means of symbolic production such as venues and instruments that shape the “constructedness” of performance.

³⁵ Fevralskii, *Zapiski rovesniki veka*, 204.

³⁶ From Fevralsky's description, the composition of the curtain seems reminiscent of El Lissitzky's propaganda poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* of the previous year (1919).

³⁷ RGALI, f. 963, op.1, d. 9, l. 16.

³⁸ Zolotnitskii, 102.

society, in particular the young, revolutionary generation? How would they signal the break with the past and the birth of revolutionary theater?

These spectators represented the fledgling theater's prospective public. Rejecting the idioms of the traditional theaters as aesthetic currency constituted one strategy in the search for an innovative artistic language that resonated with the times. But the chief strategy consisted of presenting the revolutionary theme in strikingly new visual idioms. The theatrical production that they made negated theatrical traditions, but more importantly it advanced a new paradigm in an idiosyncratic amalgamation devised by Meyerhold.

The Production of "The Dawn"

Selecting *The Dawn* as the premiere production of the Theater RSFSR One proved a straightforward matter. At the suggestion of Platon Kerzhentsev, theater historian, critic, and member of the Theater's Artistic Council, Meyerhold decided to adapt this play for performance to more effectively translate its general mood, rhythm, and significance for the present day. As Bebutov put it: "Setting the revolutionary spirit of the hall on fire" was the aim of their adaptation.³⁹ Adaptation displeased some powerful figures in the sphere of culture such as Krupskaya, but defenders of the practice, like Lunacharsky, maintained its necessity given the lack of suitable material after the Revolution, and others, like Meyerhold, also dismissed the naysayers as devotees of the "fetishism" of the text. More to the point, the language in Verhaeren's play was turgid and adaptation could remedy that.⁴⁰

More than mere adaptation, or editing, the directors used "modernization"⁴¹ to heighten the play's interest for the contemporary audience. In contemporary usage, they sought to intensify the production's "agitational impact"⁴²: to rivet the audience's attention by publicly articulating its political beliefs and harnessing its emotions to the action on stage; to bring audiences to participate in the production, at least at selected moments.

If this artistic strategy succeeded, then the audience would be deeply moved by the heroes' speeches, join in with the chorus in the orchestra pit, chant slogans in unison, and sing hymns in a show of communal solidarity during the finale. To this end, the directors reworked the script in a variety of ways, shortening it with cuts and converting the four acts into eight scenes. They also interpolated Soviet slogans into the script, replaced some words with terms out of the Soviet political lexicon, and ended it with a salute to Soviet power and the world commune of labor.⁴³

As the show began, spectators might have wondered why the house lights remained on. They remained lit throughout the performance. This was just one of the many traditional theatrical conventions that the production overturned. As the

³⁹ Valerii Bebutov, "Peredelki i ob'ektivnoe iskusstvo," *Vestik teatra*, no. 76-77 (December 14, 1920): 5.

⁴⁰ Fevral'skii, "Teatral'nyi oktiabr," 7.

⁴¹ *Osovremenizatsiia*.

⁴² *Agitatsionnoe vozdeistvie*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

curtains opened, the audience saw the Prophet-Alexander Mgrebov in a long, loose-fitting robe standing on a large cube on the right side of the stage. As he intoned his lines in rhymed verse, likening capitalist cities to “grasping octopuses” intent on sucking the blood out of the heart of the world, the Old Peasant Ghislain-Igor Ilinsky stood on another cube stage left, bemoaning the hopeless situation of the peasantry.⁴⁴ Both stared straight into the auditorium addressing the audience directly.⁴⁵ To further rouse the audience during this opening scene, actor-confederates⁴⁶ sitting in the hall shouted out phrases and slogans typical of the revolutionary and early civil-war period, for example:

Workers of the world!
The accursed borders of the capitalist states smother you,
Divide you, weaken your will for victory.
Shake them with your concerted efforts!
Build Soviets!
Long live the world commune of labor!”⁴⁷

The cubes on which the Prophet and Old Peasant Ghislain stood appeared to be made of metal, but in fact they were plywood shaded with steel-colored paint.⁴⁸ The stage set also modernized the production, but caused considerable consternation in the audience judging by numerous eyewitness accounts and contemporary reports. The profusion of geometric shapes confused and perplexed many spectators. As seen in Illustration One, the model of Vladimir Dmitriev’s set, an elongated triangle and cone were suspended above the stage.⁴⁹ Realized onstage it consisted of two yellow triangles and an iron cone held in place by cables and ropes plainly visible to the spectator.⁵⁰ Meyerhold and Bebutov proudly referred to it as “the progeny of Picasso and Tatlin”.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Erast Garin, *S Meierkhol'dom: vospominaniia*, (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974), 13. I will use the original French for the characters’ names but the lines below are from the “modernized” Russian script.

⁴⁵ Fevralskii, *Zapiski rovesnika veka*, 205.

⁴⁶ *Zazhigatel'i*

⁴⁷ Zolotnitskii, 104.

⁴⁸ Garin, *S Meierkhol'dom*, 13.

⁴⁹ Note the cubes stage right and left, the city gates standing farther back stage left, and the spiral staircase stage left front, leading into the orchestra pit.

⁵⁰ Boleslav Rostotskii, *O rezhisserskom tvorchestve V.E. Meierkhol'da* (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1960) 23. For detailed descriptions, see also Fevralskii, *Zapiski*, 205 and “Teatral'nii oktiabr',” 6-7; Garin, 15; and Rostotskii, 22-23.

⁵¹ Meierkhol'd and Bebutov, “K postanovke *Zori*,” 10. Vladimir Tatlin was best known for his constructivist tower, the unrealized monument to the Third International to be built out of iron, glass, and steel.

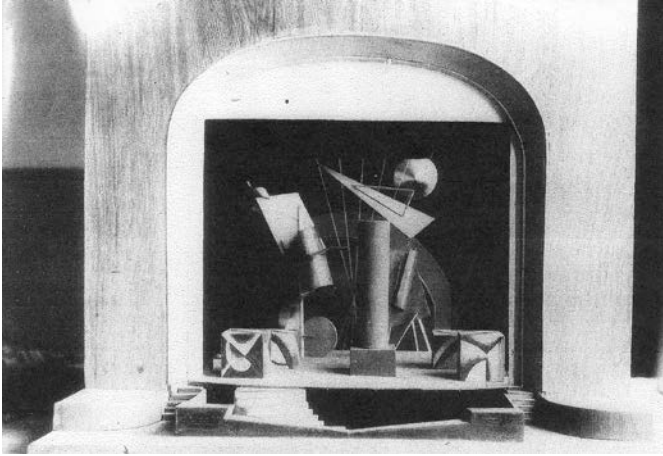


Figure 3.5. Model of Vladimir Dmitriev's set for the final scene of *The Dawn*. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*.

With a hint of irony, Lunacharsky recounted how workers flocked to him during the intermission, “confused and almost breaking out in a sweat from cognizance of their lack of culture, pointing at this or that detail of the set asking what the hell it meant.”⁵² At the first formal discussion of the production two weeks after the premiere he sharply criticized the set as “stinking Picasso for the proletariat”.⁵³

From the artists’ perspective, it was nothing more than a futurist construction intended to project the future presaged in Verhaeren’s play. According to Erast Garin, a young Red Army soldier and future star of the Meyerhold Theater, the intellectual⁵⁴ who sat next to him at the performance was sympathetic to the theater’s experiment. Looking at the set, he guessed that the cone symbolized the sun and told Garin: “Look carefully: that tin is the real thing!”⁵⁵ This spectator surmised two essential and intertwined aspects of the set.

For constructivist artists, it embodied *faktura*, that is, texture, tangibility, and materiality combined with geometric, non-representational forms.⁵⁶ The stage design evoked a range of reactions from those who debated its meaning, many whom it completely nonplussed, and still others who experienced barely disguised disgust. Krupskaya belonged to the last camp. As she described it, the stage set

⁵² Quoted in Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol’d*, 251.

⁵³ “Beseda o Zoriakh. V teatre RSFSR,” *Vestnik teatra*, no. 75 (November 30, 1920): 14.

⁵⁴ *Intelligent*. This term denoted an educated and cultured person, sometimes an “intellectual” in the academic sense.

⁵⁵ Garin, 13. In his 1931 article, Fevralskii argued that the set suggested the “idea” of a city. See Fevralskii, “Teatral’nyi oktiabr,” 6.

⁵⁶ Meierkhol’d and Bebutov, 10. See the discussion in the next section of this chapter about the poster-like quality of the staging and acting and the section on the finale on People’s Square below.

consisted of “odd geometric shapes” that a carpenter would never make and they “stick out in the most unnatural combinations, contrary to the laws of nature.”⁵⁷

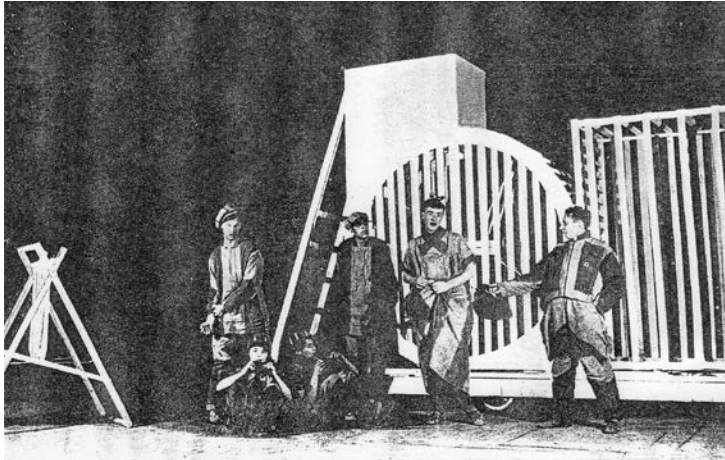


Figure 3.6. Constructivist stage set for *Tarelkin's Death* in 1922.

The staircase that spiraled from stage left into the orchestra pit was the other integral part of the set. The removal of the footlights from the main stage helped merge the stage and hall. Meyerhold and Bebutov explained that they were inviting the thousands of spectators who filled the hall to take part in the “live action” of the performance by providing ovations for the actor-tribunes onstage.⁵⁸ Within the production design, the spectators in the hall became “extras” (supernumeraries) who might for instance support the strikers and their leader Haineau during Scene Four on the Aventine (*The People's Meeting*).

In brief, the production plan encompassed the whole auditorium, uniting the characters onstage with the chorus below and the spectators in the hall. If everything went as planned, the line between the actor-tribunes and the spectator-participants would blur in the theatrical space just as the temporal dimension of past, present, and future would compress into several supercharged revolutionary rituals at pivotal moments during the performance. Certainly the production represented a complex, multilayered design despite its outward simplicity.

Within the context of this general plan, the house lights remained lit, as during a public meeting that called upon everyone to participate, which diverged entirely from the Moscow Art Theater principle of plunging each spectator into darkness to quietly ponder the inner lives of the characters onstage. There were many other deliberate choices that the artists made to shape the production and code it as “revolutionary theater.”

Perhaps the directors deliberately tapped into deep-rooted cultural resources as they shaped the formal aspects of the production in order to precipitate the sense of collective ritual that they sought. For example, *The Dawn* was built upon a “topographic” plan of circles radiating from the center of the

⁵⁷ Krupskaja, 2.

⁵⁸ Meierkol'd and Bebutov, 9.

stage.⁵⁹ Circles represent potent if not archetypal symbols of social solidarity, unity, and power. In Russian peasant culture, dancing circles or *khorovody* and song are traditional forms of celebration and entertainment. Likewise, the ancient towns and cities of Russia were built on circular plans with monasteries and fortresses at their centers.

But any specific sign on stage—and the over-coding of this theater venue with posters and announcements—directs our attention to the importance of the context in which interpretations and meanings emerge. This applies to the routine social interactions of everyday life as well as the especially intricate ones of theatrical performance. The subtlety and nuances of meanings and interpretations, depend upon a setting or ground, usually referred to as “custom,” “commonsense,” “convention,” that is, familiar ways of seeing and knowing that allow both players and audiences to recognize and respond to ongoing exchanges.⁶⁰

When the interaction is stretched to the limit, highly tenuous, or breaks down, it ultimately compromises the existential security of those involved on some level. Therefore, the strange mix of geometric forms, especially the distracting vertical construction of Dmitriev’s set design—the literal “ground”—worked at cross-purposes with the sense of participation in a collective creative endeavor that Meyerhold and Bebutov wanted to foster in the hall. Judging by the production’s overall impact on the audience and the comments of individual spectators, *The Dawn’s* meaning and the emotional resonance owed more to the audience’s reactions to the heroes, forerunners of Meyerhold’s “social masks,” and their curiously static acting in what the directors conceived as a “performance-meeting.”⁶¹

The Staging of the “The Dawn”

Mikhail Zagorsky, a theater critic who joined the Artistic Council at the Theater RSFSR One in 1921, provided a detailed if overdrawn picture of the emotions that the production evoked in spectators in, as he saw it. His theatrical review seemed to disclose the secret of the production’s power. He asserted that:

⁵⁹ Meierkhol’d and Bebutov, 10.

⁶⁰A conventional distinction is that audiences “suspend their disbelief” during theatrical performances. Much more intriguing is a situation, whether in “reality” or the theater that precipitates the suspension of belief. When the ground shifts, as when conventions are broken, or unexpected elements are foregrounded, regardless of the intention, disorientation typically results. It is taken for granted that Goffman employs the stage as a metaphor, but it is more a matter of degree. On performances in real life, when actors alternate in the roles of audiences for each other, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1973), chapter 1 “Performances” and especially chapter 5, “Communication Out of Character” for crises in communication.

⁶¹ Zolotnitskii, 102.

The show gave us everything we thirsted for and longed for: to find our times in art, feel its rhythm, touch its quickened pulse, and find ourselves in the total art of theater apart from the words, above them, as it were, carrying the spirit of the Revolution, and only the blind and benumbed didn't recognize it. It was present in everything.⁶²

His "Étude" would have been little more than an eloquent restatement of the directors' aforementioned aims, except for the fact that he introduced the idea of another bedrock artistic antinomy that distinguished revolutionary theater. The Moscow Art Theater attended to the subtle nuances of the subtext in performance, expressed through realistic gestures, intonation, and pauses; instead the Theater RSFSR One advanced the "super-text" as a theatrical innovation.⁶³ In terms of the *mise-en-scène*, this meant communicating the spirit of rebellion at the core of Verhaeren's drama through the staging of a select set of pivotal moments.⁶⁴

In this connection, the directors alluded to the poster-like quality of the set design: "Present the contemporary spectator with a poster, the tangibility of materials, the play of their surfaces and volumes!" in their introduction to production published in the *Theater Herald*.⁶⁵ This was even more evident in the staging, each scene of which can be viewed as an animated poster, or viewed as a whole, a series of tableaux—a *lubok* of revolutionary struggle.⁶⁶ The directors built the super-text in two ways.

First, by creating the chorus and concealing it in the orchestra pit, the co-directors emptied the stage. This magnified key moments and the stage presence of the revolutionary protagonists on stage. They expected to involve the audience in the theatricalized meeting with the revolutionary figures of Hérénien, Haineau, and Le Brioux onstage, with the chorus below accentuating the clashes between them. Second, each of these scenes involved interplay between those on stage (who acted as tribunes engaging the audience directly) and the chorus (which served as the political avant-garde of the public in the hall). Paradoxically, Meyerhold insisted that the actors deliver their lines with restrained movement and minimal modulation of their voices.

For example, during a rehearsal of Scene One, when Igor Ilinsky, the young comic actor who played Old Peasant Ghislain, tried delivering his monologue in the popular "eccentric" style of the day, Meyerhold corrected him:

Comrade Ilinsky, I am not staging *The Dawn* in the style that you wish to. The entire staging is spare and the performance should be monumental.... I am

⁶² Zagorskii, 6.

⁶³ Zolotnitskii, 103. He describes *The Dawn's* "exaggerated, rebellious *super-text*" (my emphasis) and the "stormy popular mood" that charged the auditorium.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Meierkhol'd and Bebutov, 10.

⁶⁶ *Lubok* was the old popular broadsheet with illustrated narratives in strip format adapted by Mayakovsky for ROSTA Windows. See Victoria E. Bonnell, 292, fns. 3 and 4.

requesting you to stand on this cube...with outstretched arms and gaze directly into space. That is how you will fire off your monologue. It will be good that way.⁶⁷

Rostotskii has argued that the *mise-en-scène* and acting were subordinated to the geometrical framing of the production.⁶⁸ Consequently, the manner of acting was “severe and grandiose;” the actors’ movements “mighty and elevated”.⁶⁹ In contrast to the acting method of “authentic emotion” (*perezhivanie*) pioneered by Stanislavsky, Meyerhold was developing his own method of acting in “biomechanics” that would communicate emotions and attitudes directly through kinetic movement.

The production of *The Dawn* as a performance-meeting and the blocking of the actor-orators by Meyerhold indicates an iconic mode of theatrical presentation diametrically opposed to the illusionistic presentation used at the Moscow Art Theater.⁷⁰ The contrast has significant ramifications for the structure of performance from the conceptual level to the level of acting seen by the audience. As Beckerman summarizes it, the defining features of iconic presentation are: the spatial significance of the action (as opposed to the temporal one); the ritual enactment of prescribed movements (speech and gesture are precise and critical); and decentering of emotion in favor of producing a sense of wonder and awe.⁷¹

Meyerhold insisted that the actors’ gestures and speech be precise because he transformed the theatrical action into icons. Powerful beams of light from trouper-projectors illuminated the faces of these orator-icons who depicted the new heroes of revolutionary times.⁷² During the climactic Scene Five, *The Public Speech*, when Hérénién addresses the crowd, Haineau even remarks to Hérénién’s wife Claire that he (Herenien) is “the sentimental tribune in speaking, big gestures, big words: he magnetizes, he does not convince.”⁷³ Hence, the super-text crystallized in big gestures, steady intonation, and calculated pauses of the stage orators like speakers at political meeting who addressed the audience directly in the lit hall.

The Dawn’s austere composition, iconic acting, and monumental staging were intended to glorify the revolution and celebrate the revolutionary spirit. Rostotskii held that a severe grandeur pervaded each scene. Instead, Krupsaya’s comments and those of spectators showed that many judged the production’s symbolic

⁶⁷ Igor Il’inskii, *Sam o sebe*, ed. Iu. Kalashnikov (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral’noe obshchestvo, 1961), 127.

⁶⁸ Rostotskii, 23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁰ Bernard Beckerman, 43-44. As Beckerman explains, celebrations, parades, and the performance of feats, such as a tightrope act epitomize iconic acting. He contrasts it with “dialectical presentation” to emphasize the relative yet critical distinction between the more “open demonstration” of the former and more “oblique display” typified by illusionistic presentations.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷² A high intensity projector similar to a military searchlight.

⁷³ Verhaeren, Act III, i, 65.

means—the costumes and props for instance—to be inferior. The costuming, in effect the uniforms for actors, was intended to imply the power of collective action and presented an aesthetic counterpoint to the carefully crafted costumes at the Moscow Art Theater, where literally every stitch of clothing expressed the psyche of each individual character.

This perceived poverty surely undermined the show as a celebratory glorification of the revolution. Rather than watching heroes of revolutionary struggle with awe, some spectators reported that the acting was stiff and there was little action. Clearly, the disconnect between the aesthetics that the avant-garde employed to express “radicalism” and the new public’s unfamiliarity with them help to explain the audience’s reactions. For example, during Scene Four at the graveyard in which Hérénién negotiates with the strikers, three huge crosses stood on stage to reinforce the image of the three central figures in the drama and the symbolism of the trinity that is vital to the imagery and meaning of the next scene. The crosses had crucial importance for the resonance of this scene and the ritual dimension of the production as a whole.⁷⁴ Did the new public read the scene in this way?

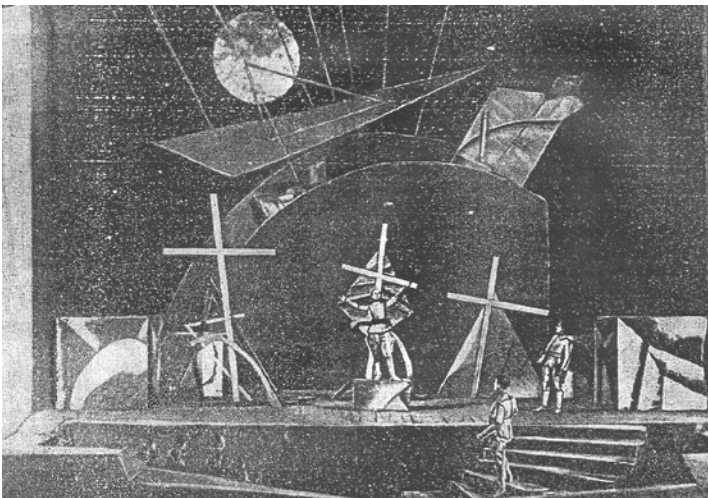


Figure 3.7. Sketch of Scene Four on the Aventine (in the Cemetery) with Herénien, Haineau, and Le Breux. Source: Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*.

Moreover, the play’s potential to stir spectators, especially those who had immediate experience of the Revolution or Civil War was paramount, yet the adaptation of the script fell short on this point. The adapted script retained Verhaeren’s focus on Hérénién and sidelined Haineau. Yet Haineau articulated a proto-Bolshevik mentality, which presumably would have made him the natural leader in the eyes of many a contemporary spectator.

Scene Five, *The People’s Meeting*⁷⁵ is central because it pits Haineau against Le Breux. Haineau tells his fellow rebels that they must go down into the city in

⁷⁴ Rudnitskii, *Rezhissër Meierkhol'd*, 239.

⁷⁵ *Narodnoe sobranie*

bands and destroy the Regents and the Capitol. “You must cut off his head if you would master the beast,” he argues.⁷⁶ He continues, recalling the days of the past:

Banks and theaters were blown up,
And fearless, unflinching, the admirable assassins of
Old ideas died; they seemed to the judges madmen, but
To the people heroes. That was the time of ingenuous
Sacrifices, tragical decisions, swift execution.
Contempt of life swept over the universe. Now today
Everything is flabby and flaccid: energy is like an unstrung bow.⁷⁷

He ran down the spiral staircase into the auditorium and hurled his speech directly at the spectators in the hall. His blood-curdling monologue seemed to capture the viciousness and uncompromising worldview of the Bolsheviks, especially in light of the ongoing Civil War.⁷⁸

In Zagorsky’s view, the spectator was “not shocked by his words so much as the bestial, energetic force of this advocate of bloody civil war.”⁷⁹ Le Breux—the incarnation of the revolution’s “noble conscience” in Zolotnitsky’s words—delivered his appeal to the audience in tandem with Haineau, vying for the spectator’s ear.⁸⁰ Hérénien succeeds in winning the backing of the striking workers and soldiers by suggesting compromise, to which the rebels agree. Hérénien’s strategy of conciliation wins out over Haineau’s strategy of cold-blooded terror against the regime.

After Hérénien delivers his speech exposing the Regents’ corruption, Le Breux and Haineau pledge their loyalty to him. The three heroes, a symbolic trinity, henceforth function as a team. At this point, the Emissary dispatched by Hordain, commander of the enemy troops, arrives to announce his intention to ratify a truce. On November 18, 1920, at Meyerhold’s direction, before the Emissary delivered his lines, he read the following news “hot off the press.”⁸¹ The newspaper *Communist Labor* reported the event in its pages on November 21, 1920:

In the Fifth Scene the Emissary said: “What I must tell you pales before those enormous events that have played out in the theater of military action in the Crimea.” He read the communiqué about the assault on the Crimean Peninsula from November 13, 1920, the heroism on the southern front, and the terrible cost of the victory over Wrangel. [There was] a thunderous reaction of support. The impression produced by this communiqué on the public in the packed hall was huge. The audience took the communiqué as the culmination; the climax of the entire development of *The Dawn’s* scenario and it was first met with cautious waiting and then thunderous applause. The Emissary’s speech was interrupted several times by

⁷⁶ Verhaeren, Act II, ii, 53.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Zolotnitskii, 106.

⁷⁹ Zagorskii, 5.

⁸⁰ Zolotnitskii, 106.

⁸¹ *Zlobonevnoe soobshchenie*.

applause from the auditorium. Toward the end of the communiqué the singing of *You Fell Victims* began somewhere from above. The public stood up and listened in profound silence.⁸²

The Bolshevik victory at Perekop in the Crimea represented the last stand of the White forces in the Civil War.⁸³ The event also altered the historical framing and consequently the meaning and reception of *The Dawn*. Reading dispatches from the military fronts became a regular part of subsequent performances, further modernizing the production and synchronizing the performances with the present. It underscored the interplay between the stage and the audience as well as the framing of the entire production within the context of the unfolding military and revolutionary struggle.

Yet the reporter noted that the singing of the revolutionary hymn started “somewhere above” but the audience listened in “complete silence.” As Zolotnitsky pointedly inquired, why didn’t the audience join in the singing of the revolutionary hymn?⁸⁴ It appears that the singing began at the initiative of the actor-confederates. The tone of the production was martial and severe. This also might have constrained audience participation. *The Dawn* presented the audience with an episodic drama interlaced with Soviet slogans and revolutionary hymns in which to participate. The joining of popular forces within the fictional world of the drama was its center of gravity: Haineau’s strikers and Hordain’s troops join Hérézien and the people in bringing down the Regency.

Since the production loosely indexed actual political events in Russia (1917-1920), every performance in a sense served as a celebration of the October Revolution and also a ritual mourning of revolutionary martyrs. If this production deliberately drew upon the Wagnerian idea of the fusion of artist and audience which informed the theater theory of the Russian pre-revolutionary symbolists—most notably Vyacheslav Ivanov and Fëdor Sologub with whom Meyerhold was well acquainted—it appears that the audience joined in perfunctorily. From the director’s perspective it was a bold experiment in revolutionary theater. From the audience’s perspective, *The Dawn* was stilted and lacking in “production values.”

The monumental super-text of *The Dawn* created by employing a minimalist poster-like staging for each scene glorified the charismatic leader Herénien more than the community, but it also gestured more strongly to the role of the people in historical change than any play that had come before.

⁸² “Perevnyi opyt,” *Kommunisticheskii trud*, no. 203 (November 21, 1920). “You Fell Victims” was the traditional funeral march of the revolutionary movement. Its moving lyrics refer to sacrifice for the lives, honor and freedom of the people. This moment is also described in Fevral’skii, *Zapiski*, 205-206 and Zolotnitskii, 107-108.

⁸³ The storming of “the last stronghold of the Whites” on the Isthmus of Perekop, the only land connection between the Crimea and the mainland began on November 7, 1920. See William Chamberlain, *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*, vol. 2, *From the Civil War to the Consolidation of Power 1918-1921* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), 332-33. Baron Wrangel led the White forces that fell to the Reds several days later and evacuated by sea.

⁸⁴ Zolotnitskii, 106.

Some contemporary critics in Western Europe and Russia considered Verhaeren's drama in verse to be the world's first "socialist" play because it represented a popular rebellion led by striking workers. The adaptation at the Theater RSFSR One was intended to reflect the grand historical shift from a bourgeois society to socialism in revolutionary Russia. The play was punctuated with moments portraying suffering and sacrifice, rebellion and victory, and the directors used technical devices to coax the audience into participating in prescribed ways. Those moments were in turn embedded within the very contours of the production's specific historical context and meta-theatrical frames.

The interpretation of *The Dawn* presented thus far is based upon a tapestry of evidence and cues provided by those closest to the making of the production which, by its nature, privileges the artists' aims and aesthetic means. In what ways did the Theater RSFSR succeed in sparking audience participation? The question extends beyond the historical case of this particular theatrical production because the nature of the relationship between artists and audiences is central to any sociology of art and concerns the fundamental issue of how conventions as ways of producing art and ways of seeing art intertwine.

In the case of *The Dawn*, the question of what this avant-garde production succeeded in communicating to its audience at the dawn of the Soviet period is an intriguing one. Fortunately empirical materials allow an examination of it. As an oddly rich and challenging artwork, *The Dawn* called forth strong reactions from its audiences. The evidence provided by questionnaires filled out by spectators at performances of *The Dawn* is a reminder of the capacity of artworks to generate multiple meanings and interpretations. For many, the production's meaning remained quite inchoate; for others it was quite clear. It was powerfully moving for some yet left others emotionless.

THE EXPERIENCE OF REVOLUTIONARY THEATER



Figure 3.8. Audience at the Meyerhold Theater

On opening night, Igor Ilinsky had an exceptional view of the auditorium and the reactions of the spectators: he played Old Farmer Ghislain and stood on the cube stage left when the play began. In his memoirs he wrote: "The premiere was a success, but the spectator was not especially taken by the show. Neither the acting nor the staging won over the average spectator."⁸⁵ Recalling the performance that he saw with his Red Army collective during a cultural fieldtrip,⁸⁶ Erast Garin wrote that frankly neither he nor any of his comrades liked it. However, it apparently grew on him. He liked it more upon seeing it a second time.⁸⁷ Six years later, Garin would star in Meyerhold's celebrated staging of *The Inspector General*.

Questionnaires filled out by spectators after performances in the spring of 1921 provide the empirical basis for an examination of these questions. However, before examining the material, it is important to consider its limitations.

Under Meyerhold's regime, tickets were distributed for free, especially to organized groups, although individual spectators had to pay for admission.⁸⁸ Hence, many would have seen it because admission was free of charge or quite cheap. Economic enterprises and military bases organized groups to attend theatrical performances. The "organized spectator"⁸⁹ constituted a major cultural institution that shaped the composition of audiences for *The Dawn*. It worked in the following way.

Cultural workers or other organizers attached to military schools, barracks, factories (for example, in workers' clubs), technical schools, and the like assembled groups to attend performances *en masse*, either by request from the organization to the theater, or at the theater's invitation.⁹⁰ For example, on November 24, 1920, a performance was given for the Moscow Garrison of the Red Army.⁹¹ The troops

⁸⁵ Quoted in Rostotskii, 26.

⁸⁶ *Kul'tpokhod*. See Chapter 5 for a discussion of key institutions of Soviet cultural education.

⁸⁷ Garin, 12.

⁸⁸ Meierkhol'd and Bebutov mention "the spectator who buys or receives a ticket" in "K postanovke *Zor*", 9. A spectator's response on the theater's questionnaire also confirms this. In response to the question "What else did you like or dislike" this forty-five year old worker answered, "Only to add about the performance that it is not a performance but a political meeting with an admission price." RGALI, f. 963, op. 1, d 9, l. 118. Statistics compiled by Theatrical Section of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences show that roughly fourteen percent of the performances presented at theaters in the Moscow Department of People's Education (MONO) and Moscow district theaters during the 1920/21 season were free. This number represents an arithmetic mean, therefore the number of free performances at the Theater RSFSR One cannot be ascertained. A. Mogilevskii, V. Filippov, and A. Rodionov, *Teatry Moskvy 1917-1927: stat'i i materialy* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvnykh nauk, 1928), Table 3, 13.

⁸⁹ The organized spectator or *organizovannyi zritel'* was another key institution of Soviet cultural education.

⁹⁰ I discuss this in more detail in the chapter 5.

⁹¹ Zolotnitskii, 109.

brought their banners and band instruments and reportedly participated during the key moments of the performance, producing the merging of the hall and stage envisioned by the co-directors.⁹²

Various sources attest to the role of the organized spectator in bringing groups to the theater in the spring of 1921 when interest in the show waned and attendance dropped significantly, but they likened it to “conscription.” For instance, an article in the labor union newspaper *Gudok* cited the example of a Red Army soldier who said he did not like the production, yet was seeing it for the third time. When asked why he was seeing it for the third time he explained that they were “herding” people to performances.⁹³

However, theatergoing represented a matrix of values for the new spectator of Soviet times as for the spectator of urbanizing nineteenth century Russian before him: culture, education, and enlightenment represented values of empowerment that workers, soldiers and peasants often willingly embraced.⁹⁴ Given the Theater RSFSR One’s public reputation as the premier “revolutionary theater,” it is possible that many wanted to attend the performance, especially with the fanfare surrounding the premiere. It seems that by the spring of 1921, word of mouth significantly diminished public interest in attending.

Although the organized spectator appears to have been an important way to fill the hall, the questionnaires indicate a broad social spectrum in the auditorium that included the broad “non-proletarian” occupational category of “employees” (*sluzhashchie*) and “intelligentsia” (*intelligenty*). The large size of the hall ensured that it would be difficult to fill for any given performance, therefore it is hard to imagine that people wanting to see the show were ever turned away.

The hall was cold and drafty. According to one account spectators were dressed in fur coats and Caucasian fur hats, which suggests that better off segments of Soviet society attended performances.⁹⁵ With his characteristic petulance, Meyerhold insisted that the audience was “mixed” with the “bourgeoisie” and the “proletariat,” which prevented the full realization of the proper dynamic to be established between the actors and the audience during the performance, but it is difficult to imagine that this veteran of the theater truly believed it himself.⁹⁶

As the director of the Theater RSFSR One and the leader of Theatrical October, he projected the scheme of class division onto the formation of the theater public. Understanding the power of performance, he knew that his speeches and statements in the public arena about class division in the theater and “civil war in theater” would insinuate themselves into minds of the public, and help to bring into existence the very situation he supposedly described.⁹⁷ He instinctively knew that

⁹² Ibid. Meyerhold mentioned this at the first “Monday” discussion at the theater. See footnote 147 below.

⁹³ Quoted in *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1917-1921*, ed. A. Iufit (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1968), 158. See also, Zolotnitskii, 113.

⁹⁴ See for example “Respectability and Self-Improvement” in Swift, 183-85.

⁹⁵ Fevral'skii, *Zapiski roveskniki veka*, 206.

⁹⁶ Fevral'skii, “Teatral'nyi oktiabr i Zori,” 5.

⁹⁷ See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 132-36.

the foundations of audience tastes and expectations were based on the conventions of naturalism, melodrama, and fairground entertainments, but this theatrical production.

Meyerhold arrived in Moscow from Petrograd in 1918, but he had not yet established his reputation in the city where Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater were beloved and had become synonymous with dramatic theater. The production of *The Dawn* aimed to change this state of affairs. From his years of experience in the theater, Meyerhold was quite familiar with success and failure, controversy and notoriety, and he knew that recognition on any account was preferable to no recognition at all. He had the courage to stage risky productions and fail. His extensive work in the theater dating from 1902 provides ample proof of this.

The Questionnaires

From November 7, 1920 to May 1, 1921 the theater performed *The Dawn* seventy-eight times, or roughly three times a week.⁹⁸ The number of spectators who saw the production totaled 66,489.⁹⁹ In terms of overall attendance, *The Dawn* ranked among the top thirty productions in the first decade of Soviet rule. Reports indicate that the hall was filled to capacity on some occasions and almost half empty on others. The Moscow City Soviet covered the theater's expenses so performances were always given as scheduled regardless of attendance.

The Theater Laboratory attached for study of the spectator conducted the survey. The tables for the questionnaires were set up in the lobby. Perhaps respondents were self-selected, asked to do so by the organizers of cultural outings or the workers of the laboratory. Few of the respondents answered the questionnaire in full because its designers broke several cardinal rules of survey construction: it was too lengthy and consisted mostly of open-ended questions instead of selected responses for the spectator to check off.

I examined all the questionnaires available, a total of 158, representing a fraction of a percent of the total number of spectators who attended the show. Many factors could account for this, such as the high rate of illiteracy.¹⁰⁰ A handful of the questionnaires were completely illegible. Respondents often skipped over questions and answered many others in abbreviated form, for instance, "yes" or "no" and "good" or "bad." Others answered the questions at length.¹⁰¹ In any case, the comments provide refreshing firsthand information about the production from the perspective of theatergoers, some avid ones and others barely acquainted with the theater. Dates on some of them indicate that most of them were completed at

⁹⁸ A. Mogilevskii, V. Filippov, and A. Rodionov, 171.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ A number of other additional factors may account for the small quantity of questionnaires. See chapter 5 for a discussion of survey research.

¹⁰¹ I could not ascertain whether the questionnaires were selected for inclusion in theater archive nor whether the collection was edited over time.

performances given at the end of March 1921, shortly before the production closed.¹⁰²

The questionnaire consisted of twelve questions. The first four requested basic demographic information: age, gender, social class,¹⁰³ and occupation.¹⁰⁴ Most respondents possessed secondary school education. They ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five. The frequency of theater attendance is revealing: many wrote that they had rarely attended prior to the revolution but now frequented it once a month or more.

The remaining questions concerned the production itself: whether the respondent liked the play and the acting and asked about specific elements of the production such as the costumes, the set, the lighting, and the music. The final question concerned the spectator's overall assessment of the theater and the production. It asked: "Are you satisfied or not by the theater and show in general?"

A classic "double-barreled question," it cannot be determined whether the spectator was referring to "the theater" or "the show" unless respondent spelled it out. Both Questions Ten and Eleven were completely "open" ones, the former asking respondents what more they had to say about the production, and the latter, prompting them to add anything else about the Theater RSFSR One. With these limitations, data summaries cannot be viewed as representative of the audience or audience response. In short, the excerpts shed some light on the production from the perspective of everyday spectators.

АНКЕТА

Заставьте вас и надолго анкеты, но все-таки заполните еще одну!

Анкеты устраиваются для того, чтобы узнать, что думают о театре сами зрители. Отказы в анкеты, составленные на основании слухов, будут помещаться в "Журнал зрительский".

Отказы зрителей о пьесах позволяют совершенствовать театр. Один и та же пьеса может понравиться одному и не понравиться другому. Это зависит от многих условий (возраст, профессия и др.). Поэтому в анкете поставлены вопросы под №№ 1-5. Они имеют такое же значение, как и последующие вопросы.

Заполните анкету, отнесите анкету в отделение в ящик, который находится в Рязань-Пол. Части Кузнецкого МХТ РСФСР. Большая Дворянская, 1, между 2-й.

- 1) Вам нравится? **Да.**
- 2) Вам **не** нравится? **Нет.**
- 3) В какую сторону правды?
- 4) В какой предпринята или учреждена работайте?
- 5) Какую работу так выполняете?
- 6) Как часто бывали в театре?
- 7) В каких иностранных театрах вы бывали?
- 8) Какие из них вам больше всего нравятся и почему?
- 9) Какую пьесу вы смотрели на этой неделе?
- 10) Понравилась ли содержание пьесы или нет? Почему понравилась или нет?
- 11) Какие вещи пьесы понравились вам больше всего? Почему?
- 12) Игра актеров пьесы вам больше всего понравилась и чем именно?
- 13) Кто из артистов пьесы больше всего понравился и почему?
- 14) Понравилась ли постановка пьесы и чем именно?
- 15) Какие мысли возникли у вас в связи с пьесой?
- 16) Как вы относитесь к постановке театра? Честно или нет раньше эту пьесу?
- 17) Как вы относитесь к спектаклю после посещения. Что читали в своем ящике? О чем говорили с знакомыми и товарищами?

Figure 3.9. An Audience Questionnaire. In bold it reads: "Although you are fed up with questionnaires, all the same complete one more!"

¹⁰² *Oprosnye listy (ankety zritelei c otzyvami o postanovke dramy E. Verkharna "Zori" v teatre RSFSR-I, RGALI, f. 963, op. 1, d. 9.*

¹⁰³ *Sotsial'noe polozenie, or social origins.*

¹⁰⁴ *Glavnaia professiia, or occupation.*

The Respondents and Their Overall Assessments

Most respondents identified their sex: 144 out of 158 in the sample. Among these respondents, males outnumbered females almost five to one (119:25). If the survey tables were set up at special performances for the “organized spectator” such as military bases and metalworking factories, this might account for the skewed the gender ratio. At any rate, the Theater RSFSR One specifically targeted the ranks of the urban proletariat—factory workers and soldiers—who were predominantly male.

The questionnaire provided a mix of six different “social class” categories that overlapped with occupational ones: worker (*rabochii*), “employee” (*sluzhashchii*), “intelligentsia,” (*intelligent*), student (*uchashchieshchsia*), Red Army soldier (*Krasnaia armiia*), and peasant (*krest'ianin*). Respondents could also identify their occupation. The distinctions between categories were not clear-cut and relied on self-definition. For instance, an actress identified herself as an “employee” instead of a member of the creative “intelligentsia.”¹⁰⁵ For the purposes of this analysis, I will combine the numbers of “intelligentsia” respondents with “employees” and refer to them as “white-collar workers” in contrast to “blue-collar workers” (*rabochie*, or “manual workers”). Roughly equal numbers identified themselves as “blue-collar workers” (44) and “white-collar workers” (40).

Sixteen peasants and thirteen students answered the questionnaire. Only seven respondents were Red Army soldiers. The group of respondents who identified themselves as “intelligentsia” (*intelligenty*), that is, writers, artists, teachers, and the like was sizeable, totaling twenty-four. Thus, Meyerhold might have been correct about the audience being “split,” at least at face value.

This gets to the heart of the problem of interpreting the data: the social categories were fuzzy, especially in this revolutionary period. Many “Red Army” soldiers came from peasant backgrounds while “students” and respondents with “white collar” occupations came from working class backgrounds. It is likely that some “intellectuals” claimed solid “working class” backgrounds.

Judging by some anecdotal evidence about reactions to the production and the stage set in the press, one might expect a majority of respondents to be “dissatisfied.” However, more respondents were “satisfied” than not: sixty compared with forty-two; thirty-three respondents were “undecided.” Twenty respondents did not identify their class background and an additional four did not respond to question twelve. The set of questionnaires from respondents who were “undecided” provide little or no comment about the production itself; such respondents were most likely to skip questions altogether.

Despite all the problems of interpreting the questionnaires, which are considerable, probably the most robust figures are the totals of those who were “satisfied,” “dissatisfied,” or “undecided” about the production overall, with the high percentage of those who answered “undecided” being the most noteworthy. The

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, l. 93. See chapter 5 for a discussion of social categories within the context of audience research and spectator studies.

group of “peasants” was most “undecided” or “dissatisfied” with the production (almost three-quarters). The data also indicate that the group of “white-collar workers” was quite “dissatisfied” or “undecided.”

Finally, the Red Army soldiers were the most “satisfied” overall and less likely to be “undecided” (like “intelligentsia” who, although split in their opinions, were least likely to be “undecided”). The satisfaction among “workers,” “intellectuals,” and “students” was comparable, with nearly half “satisfied” in each group.

It is worth examining the comments of individual spectators because they might reveal aspects of the early Bolshevik-period sensibilities, but also disclose the legacy of the past. On the one hand, the cultural role of revolutionary theater was closely tied to its radical politics, avant-garde currents in theater art, and the project of making the spectator a “conscious” part of the performance, indeed in *The Dawn*, an actual “participant.” Yet this revolutionary direction in theater art was conditioned by historical processes such as the trajectory of the pre-revolutionary symbolist movement in art of which Meyerhold was a major exponent.

Furthermore, in the immediate post-revolutionary period, new theatrical conventions, habits of viewing, and expectations were just taking shape, yet the experience of theater also derived considerable direction from the past. Albeit purged by the Bolshevik regime of “crass” commercial forms such as “pornographic” theatrical revues, prerevolutionary theatrical institutions, including traditional ways of experiencing theater art by audiences, shaped the audience’s interpretation of meaning.

The Spectator Comments

Upon reviewing the questionnaires one basic pattern is clear: few of the spectators who reported that they were satisfied with the theater or production elaborated much on why, but instead confined their answers to “yes,” “good,” “okay,” “more or less,” or “fifty-fifty.” For example, a Communist Party member wrote: “Very [satisfied] and I always attend with pleasure when I am in Moscow.”¹⁰⁶ In contrast, spectators who were dissatisfied sometimes waxed at length about the grounds for their dissatisfaction. A third group of spectators, although a small number, provided more nuanced observations in their “mixed” reviews of the production.

Comments about the Production

An example of this was a nineteen-year-old serviceman with secondary school education who reported that he went to theatrical performances twice a month on the average.¹⁰⁷ He wrote that the play was “interesting” (*soderzhatel’naia*) and he especially liked the acting. Moreover, he added: “I liked

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., l. 12.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., l. 156.

the set—although I do not much like the futuristic style—because it suited the play. I did not like props or set in general because they were poorly made.”¹⁰⁸

The comments of a girl with secondary education who attended the performance on April 10, 1921 also exemplified this type of “mixed” review. She liked the production owing to its “originality” (*vypuklost'*) and “vividness” (*iarkost'*) but called the acting poor due to the actors’ enunciation.¹⁰⁹ Although the costumes and makeup were good and original in her opinion, she called the “hanging triangles” making up the stage set “unintelligible”. She added: “A speech before the performance to introduce it is a must” and closed with a practical suggestion: “Heat the hall—it smells moldy.”

In some cases the performance occasioned brutal reactions. One respondent concisely expressed his view of the production by scrawling “CRAP” (*GADOST'*) diagonally across the entire questionnaire from the bottom left corner to the top right corner.¹¹⁰ Another was appalled. He called the production “nonsense” (*erunda*).¹¹¹ In light of the impression it made on him, he thought it would be best to close the production down. Other comments were biting but, perhaps, incisive. A forty-year-old “white collar” worker of proletarian background who attended the performance on March 24, 1921 had this to say: “It’s clear that this theater is for the public, but you can’t say the opposite.”¹¹²

Comments about the Acting

The comments of a respondent aged twenty-one of peasant origin were representative of the views of a definite contingent of those who saw *The Dawn*. I found a set of similar reactions among the questionnaires as well as the comments participants at the discussions of *The Dawn*. The spectator disliked the production. In his view: “The play is uninteresting (*nesoderzhatel'na*) and the acting is disgusting in general. The artists do not perform or act, but read.”¹¹³ The author’s remark about how the artists do not “perform” is particularly interesting because the term he used (*perezhivat'*) related to the “emotional” acting method at the Moscow Art Theater, that is he implicitly and negatively contrasted the Theater RSFSR One to with the Moscow Art Theater where actors evoke emotion.

This respondent may not have been aware of this and hence unintentionally articulated a basic contrast between the Art Theater and the acting at the Theater RSFSR One, but there is no question that many spectators objected to *The Dawn* because of the acting. Perhaps they expected the Theater RSFSR One to conform to their ideas of what theater should be to some degree, but Meyerhold instead ensured that this was not the case in almost every respect. On the aesthetic level, it is easy to fathom why spectators had such a strong visceral reaction to the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., l. 138.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., l. 36.

¹¹¹ Ibid., l. 42.

¹¹² Ibid., l. 13.

¹¹³ Ibid., l. 4 dated March 20, 1921.

performance: it confounded them by radically departing from their previous experience of the theater, assuming they had some experience.

Data collected by the Academy of Artistic Science shows that theater attendance in this period was in fact extremely high. It is apparent that many spectators didn't know what to make of the production at the Theater RSFSR One, which resulted in many negative reactions. Spectators grew irritated with the performance. Some, but a minority most likely (as tends to be the case when the public and innovative artworks meet) were open-minded about the merits and meanings of *The Dawn*.

As a rule, avant-garde works and the general public rarely meet as Pierre Bourdieu has persuasively argued because small segments of the public that are rich in cultural capital and fellow artists, tend to constitute the audience for challenging new works.¹¹⁴ Therefore, the performances of *The Dawn* for the "average" spectator might be viewed as an historical oddity that occurred because the regime subsidized both the theatrical production and covered the cost of the spectators' tickets.¹¹⁵

None of the respondents offered any compliments about the building or the theater hall. If the hall projected the "revolutionary" aesthetic of halls used for political meetings, as Boris Alpers wrote, it was lost on the spectators. Those who mentioned the building in their comments described it as dank, dim, and in need of repair.

Comments about the Use of "Agitation" in the Production

In their "unprompted" comments, many respondents shared complaints about the "political agitation" in *The Dawn*. One worker underscored the tension inherent in Meyerhold's program of Theatrical October: "As a communist, I like the fact that theater can serve as a platform for political agitation (*pynkt agitatsii*), but if we look for art in theater, then unfortunately art is missing here."¹¹⁶

A third respondent, a technical worker thoughtfully explained his negative opinion of the show. He liked the acting, but he "did not like the show since it is non-stop (*sploshnaia*) political agitation".¹¹⁷ He continued:

The worker is tired of political agitation at gatherings, meetings, etc. in everyday life and if you cram this into theater too, then it will soon turn into a deserted place. If it is really necessary to carry out political agitation even in the theater, then it should not be done so crudely: the conclusion should present itself on the basis of everything seen without making it so obvious.... In a word, the sooner your tragedy *The Dawn* is removed from the repertoire the better it will be for the theater and whomever I ask about *The Dawn* I get the same answer everywhere: "It is no good at all, you even pity the artists

¹¹⁴ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, , especially Chapter 2, "The Emergence of a Dualist Structure".

¹¹⁵ See chapter 5 for a discussion of tickets prices and distribution systems.

¹¹⁶ *Oprosnye listy*, l. 77.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 92.

who act in such a thing." I consider it my duty to add that I am giving you not only my opinion, but the opinion of the majority of those who attend.¹¹⁸

"The Dawn" as a Revolution in the Theater

As any seasoned theatergoer knows, one performance is not the same as another; an artist's performance varies from show to show. Individual spectators and their perspectives also change. A young man serving in the military wrote that he liked the performance, but remarked that he had seen *The Dawn* before, and the acting was "much better" then.¹¹⁹ Others disliked it the first time and then changed their opinions. In other words, performance is a complex and dynamic process involving interacting groups of actors and audiences comprised of spectators in evolving local contexts affected in turn by larger historical contingencies (here, victorious battles in the Civil War) and conjunctures (a new phase of history: the end of the Civil War and the building of socialism in Russia).

In this case, the production incorporated contemporary events and historical ones, all of which were framed by the grand historical narrative of the inevitable victory of the proletariat. Evidence suggests that *The Dawn* played to packed houses, including audiences of specially invited "organized spectators" to participate in performances during the fall of 1920, when the general energy level was high, in comparison with the spring of 1921 when production reached its shelf-life at the end of the Civil War. According to a reporter for *Trud*, despite the free distribution of tickets, workers were refusing to attend in the spring of 1921 and supposedly said they hoped anything would replace *The Dawn*—"even an eclipse of the sun."¹²⁰

Despite the reception, Meyerhold hoped it would attract attention and he did not miscalculate. For Meyerhold, the "new spectator" signified a revolutionary spectator who could be mobilized in the battle against the "moldy" aesthetics of the traditional theaters. *The Dawn* represented a direct artistic expression of revolutionary values—although not Bolshevik ones *per se*—and directed its message to all those who embodied them in real life and formed a vital part of the new revolutionary community in Russia—Soviet youth in particular.¹²¹

Many young people understood the mission of Theatrical October and took part in "demonstrations" and others actions designed by Meyerhold to publicize his theater politics. For instance, on October 6, 1920 the Amateur Red Army Theater of the Moscow Okrug occupied the premises of the Nezlobin Theater in Moscow to compel the theater to "voluntarily" give up part of its space.¹²² Meyerhold fans, referred to as "Meyerholdites" (*Meierkhol'dovtsy*) executed this partisan maneuver.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., l. 20.

¹²⁰ Kovalkin, "Zori," *Trud*, no. 40 (9 April 1921), 4. Quoted in Zolotnitskii, 114.

¹²¹ By "Soviet" youth I mean young people who adopted Soviet attitudes, values, beliefs, and forms of conduct.

¹²² Zolotnitskii, 83. In Russian the name of this theater was the *Okruzhnyi samodeiatel'nyi teatr Krasnoi Armii*. An *okrug* designated a territorial division, in this case a military district.

The two troupes merged the following month to form the Theater RSFSR Two. Such staged actions were not confined to the champions of Theatrical October. Enthusiasts of Tairov's Chamber Theater, or "Tairovites" (*Tairovtsy*) heckled Meyerhold in December when he delivered a speech. The citadel of dramatic theater, the Moscow Art Theater was under attack in the press from the theatrical left, but it remained aloof under Lunacharsky's protection.¹²³

In 1920, Meyerhold explained the failure of *The Dawn* to achieve the anticipated response: he blamed it on the audience.¹²⁴ Meyerhold sought to extend his directorial dictatorship via his actors over the reactions of the audience in the hall. In order to investigate his methods and evaluate their results, Meyerhold had the Theatrical Laboratory develop a "chronometric method" for recording the live audience's response to each segment of each episode of a given performance.

The announcement of news hot off the press became a routine part of the show, but on one occasion, after the Herald spoke and the audience applauded, a woman in a double-breasted leather jacket took to the stage to salute Hérénien. The stage assistants were frantic because she was carrying a mauser and two strapping sailors flanked her. Moving to the edge of the stage, she gave a passionate speech about the victories of the Red Army and the courageous operation of the sailors on the Volga and Kama.¹²⁵

This apparently unrehearsed public performance bore the same signature as thousands upon thousands of speeches celebrating the actions and sacrifices of individuals, groups, and collectives who demonstrated their steadfast commitment to the Revolution. Meyerhold was ecstatic because it happened onstage at the Theater RSFSR One. Such actions and their public acknowledgment at the "micro-level" in face-to-face communication played an integral role in forging a sense of community across this new society in the making. The press, posters, propaganda, books and film were the central media for projecting a sense of Soviet identity, however only the revolutionary theater combined the power of art and public assembly to this end.

For the finale, Meyerhold staged a revolutionary ritual. He counted upon the bedrock emotions of sympathy and sorrow for loss and the pride and devotion triggered by the Soviet anthem to unify the audience. It was successful, but in a knee-jerk fashion. As Clifford Geertz observes, "ritual is not just a pattern of

¹²³ Fevral'skii, *Rezhissër Meierkhol'd*, 209-10. Protected by Lunacharskii, the prerevolutionary theaters, including Tairov's "consecrated avant-garde" Chamber Theater, could engage in the time-worn strategy of those in dominant positions: perpetuate the status quo with their reserve, understatement, or silence. Meyerhold called into question the "taken-for-granted world" of the prerevolutionary theaters. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 82-86.

¹²⁴ Meierkhol'd, "Zakliuchitel'noe slovo Meierkhol'da na dispute v teatre RSFSR *Ob uiazvimykh mestakh teatral'nogo fronta*," *Vestnik teatra*, no. 78-79. Quoted in Fevral'skii, *Teatral'nyi oktiabr*, 5.

¹²⁵ Zolotnitskii, 108.

meaning; it is also a form of social interaction.”¹²⁶ The way people maintain solidarity in everyday life is very different than the show of solidarity that Meyerhold created for the audience in its role as the People in *The Dawn*.

The Finale on People's Square

The play concluded on *People's Square* with a scene of profound gravity and pathos. By all accounts the episode succeeded in generating audience participation. It began with the funeral march that brought the bier of the assassinated hero to center stage. The center of the stage represented the central square of Velikograd itself, where Jacques Hérénién's body lay in state as the people mourned the fallen hero. A column of soldiers holding military banners stood from the backstage all the way down the spiral staircase to the main floor, framing the eulogies of Hordain, Haineau, and Breux.

Emile Beskin, a leftist theater critic and eyewitness, suggested that it was a cathartic experience for the audience:

I saw how the Red Army spectators instinctively took off their caps as the sounds of the funeral march rang out triumphantly and formidably. The beat of the general pulse, the general rhythm, was felt in the theater. And when the column representing the power of the old world standing beside the coffin of the murdered is smashed with hammers in the hands of the workers, the entire hall and actors merged to the sounds of *The International* in a oath to build the new world.¹²⁷

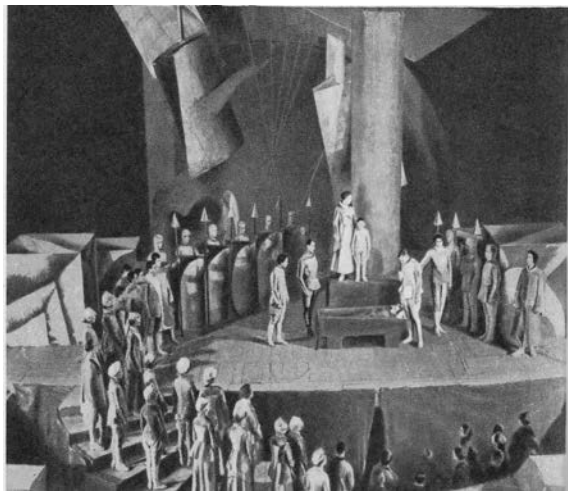


Figure 3.10. *The Service for Hérénién on People's Square. Scene Seven.* Source: René Fülöp-Miller and Joseph Gregor, *The Russian Theatre*.

¹²⁶Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 168.

¹²⁷ K. Famarin (pseudonym), "Drama v Moskve," *Vestnik rabotnikov iskusstv* no. 2-3 (November-December 1920), 62. Quoted in Zolotnitskii, 106-107. Beskin attended a performance of the original version in 1920. See also Garin, 12 and Rostotskii, 24.

“The International” was the traditional hymn of the working-class movement that became the Soviet national anthem after the Bolshevik revolution. In the final verse, the audience sang in unison:

Only we, the workers of the world's
Great army of labor
Have the right to rule the land
But the parasites—never
And if the great thunderbolt strikes
Over the pack of hounds and executioners
*For us, evermore, the sun
Will shine with the fire of its rays.*¹²⁸

By interpolating the hymn into the production here, Meyerhold closed the circle from the “false dawn” at the play’s opening to the dawn of socialism, related it to the Bolshevik victory, and extolled the leadership and sacrifices that made it possible. Zagorsky explicitly made this connection when he directly addressed his reader to inquire, “Did you really not see and feel the might and grandeur of those days when they buried the leaders, heroes, and martyrs on the square of our city?”¹²⁹

His question paraphrased Haineau’s monologue about the heroic era of sacrifice quoted earlier. Hérénien’s death represented the sacrifice for the revolutionary cause that was central in communist culture—a sacred act that would be hallowed in public monuments throughout the Soviet Union. Symbolically, the scene amounted to a public service uniting the people of Velikograd (workers, soldiers, peasants, the young and old, men and women), which served as a synecdochic trope for the audience, and in turn, for revolutionary Soviet society as a whole.

Within the world of the revolutionary tragedy, the requiem reaffirmed the community’s shared ideals, values, and beliefs. With its aim of merging the actors and audience, the scene became a demonstration of sociopolitical solidarity. Tragedy affirms the shared values and belief of the community. The iconicized action, grandiose speech, and monumental performance space consecrated the moment; the finale presented a quartet of revolutionary subjects: the funeral march, Claire’s dedication of her child to the revolutionary cause, the eulogies, and the smashing of the Column of the Regency.

After Hérénien’s corpse had been laid upon the platform, his widow Claire held their child aloft in dedication to the people and the “new beginning in the world.”¹³⁰ The image distilled the profound sorrow and revolutionary sweep of the

¹²⁸ “The Internationale (Internatsional)” *History of the Soviet Union: Volume I Revolution and Civil War* (New York: Folkways Records and Service Corporation, 1964), Side II, Band 1, Introduction and notes by Louis Menashe, Album no. FH 5420. My italics.

¹²⁹ Zagorskii, 5-6.

¹³⁰ Verhaeren, 109.

final scene. It also completed the narrative circuit as the torch passed to Hérénien's son and all of the actors and chorus members filled the stage, gazing with inspiration toward the future. As she presented the child to the people, Claire spoke:

I dare confide to you this child, child of his flesh,
I dare devote this child to proud, to tragic duty,
To that chimera, dazzling and divine.
His father bridled and broke in and rode.¹³¹

The audience could be counted upon to respond forcefully to the scene not just because of the revolutionary pathos of the scene, but because it connected with the spectators' living sense of loss and death, their awareness of the costly victories of the Civil War. Those who had lived through the preceding decade witnessed virtually uninterrupted war. The audience rose without prompting to sing the Soviet anthem. In this scene, Claire, the wife widowed by the "class enemy," her child, whose future life she dedicated to the revolution, and the community's commitment to the arduous struggle for peace and justice on earth represented the apotheosis of the sacrosanct. Many spectators were moved to tears.¹³²

The toppling of the column signified the destruction of the old world. Aleksandr Apsit's poster "International" of the previous year used the metaphor of a monster for the old regime (See Figure 6). Apsit depicted capitalism as a horrendous figure with breasts and fangs.¹³³ The text at the bottom of the poster is the lyrics to the International, including all six verses.¹³⁴ In this image one sees workers wielding hammers to destroy the pedestal bearing the huge beast that towers above them. Recalling Meyerhold's idea of giving the public a "poster," the final scene in the play can be seen as a poster-like, staged version of Apsit's image replete with the singing of the hymn "International."

At a public discussion of the production shortly after the premiere, Mayakovksy jokingly remarked that he liked the play but kept hearing about a "chimera" that never took part in the action.¹³⁵ Of course, as a symbol of capitalism and corruption, the "chimera" was omnipresent during the play. It is possible his quip was intended to underscore several problems with the production. For instance, the new spectator may have been familiar with a "chimera" in a visual sense—a monster—owing to its depictions in posters and ROSTA windows, but not necessarily the literary word "chimera" that remained in the supposedly "modernized" script.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Zolotnitskii, 106.

¹³³ Bonnell, 190, fig. 2.7.

¹³⁴ The Soviet anthem consisted of the first, second, and sixth verses of the original lyrics to "The Internationale."

¹³⁵ Cited in Rudnitskii, *Meierkol'd*, 251.



Figure 3.11. Aleksandr Apsit, “Internatsional” (International), 1918. Source: Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*.

Conversely, the words “dawn,” “sun,” and “city” recurred throughout the performance but their futurist representations onstage remained unclear to most spectators. Although the artists may have been convinced that it would appeal to the audience, artistically and conceptually *The Dawn* was a deceptively and oddly complex, even overwrought amalgamation of revolutionary traditions and rituals, Soviet official culture, and avant-garde art—with an admixture of mysticism.

Ironically, the detailed plan to prompt audience participation seems to have backfired. Despite the cues from the actors, chorus, and the confederates placed in the audience, they instead induced paralysis. As seen in the comments, some spectators openly rebelled against the idea of theater obliging the audience to participate and recite slogans that they had heard ad nauseam.

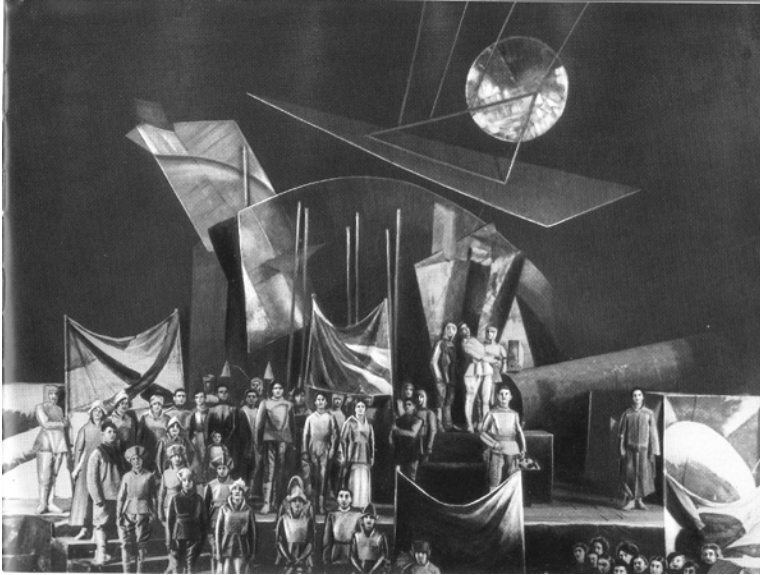


Figure 3.12. *Finale on People's Square after the Toppling of the Column.* Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater.*

The Dawn was indeed martial: the actors barked out the lines like commands, the set summoned the supreme severity of army barracks, the costumes not only looked like uniforms, they were uniforms for actors (See Figures 1 and 7). Perhaps this best explains why the production appealed most to soldiers. The performances that enjoyed special success tapped into the esprit de corps of organized collectives.

Hence, "Theatrical October" represented a "revolutionary" conception of theater as a cultural institution and *The Dawn* constituted an attempt to engage the revolutionized, proletarian audience. But the former also represented a campaign against the widely respected established dramatic theaters and the latter a symbolic attempt to subvert their aesthetics. Meyerhold incorporated avant-garde aesthetics into the premier production of "revolutionary theater," but these conventions disaffected many. The "average" spectator was more accustomed to the realistic conventions of dramatic stage: Meyerhold's production struck many spectators as simply inartistic, not as an artful, radical subversion those aesthetics. How did theater people and critics react to it?

THE PUBLIC CRITICISM OF *THE DAWN*

The celebrated opening of the Theater RSFSR One and its premiere production garnered major attention in the public arena: reviews in the press, debates, and organized discussions ensued. The institution of *ponedelniki*, or "Monday discussions," was established at the Theater RSFSR One. Theaters did not give performances on Mondays: they used them for rehearsals and meetings. *Ponedelniki* were an institution at the Moscow Art Theater; as a new theatrical establishment in Moscow, the Theater RSFSR One followed suit. Lunacharsky attended the first "Mondays," but most of the discussants were members of the theater's own Artistic Council, which included artists as well as workers

representing the broader public. Therefore, it represented a relatively narrow slice of the theater world in Moscow, but as Alpers characterizes it, it was the “first open public tribune (*obshchestvennaia tribuna*)...that destroyed the professional reserve and caste system of the theatrical milieu.”¹³⁶

At the first “Monday” on November 22, 1920, Lunacharsky opened the discussion by noting that it was of the utmost importance to correct any “errors” at the outset before revolutionary theater lost the very public it sought to address, compromising its entire future development.¹³⁷ In his turn, he spoke at length about the substantive problems and formal aspects of *The Dawn* as he saw it. The discussion also identified issues that were most salient for those closest to its making.

The comments by members of the “public” at the Monday discussions complemented those made by other spectators in the questionnaires, but articulated them more emphatically. A certain comrade Gromov called *The Dawn* “interesting, important, and difficult” but concluded that it was not for those whom it was seemingly intended since it was only accessible to “theater people, professionals, directors and literary specialists.”¹³⁸ Like Gromov, Comrade Telapov deemed the sets, and the curtain in particular, “incomprehensible.”¹³⁹

Although Telapov granted that the last scene was moving, he qualified his statement, explaining that this was to be expected in light of the singing of *The International*, the banners, and the slogans. He concluded by asserting that “we need general [aesthetic] products (*produkty*), not those that are the property of only a well-known literary movement and accessible to only a few.”¹⁴⁰

Comrade Shur put it plainly: “We simple people cannot understand the innovators and their demands. We know that there is such a theater, the pride and glory of Russia, which could stage *The Dawn*. It is the Moscow Art Theater.”¹⁴¹ The article parenthetically noted: “Greeted with laughter and applause.” Samuil Margolin, a theater critic, said the play had been drained of its spirit and blood, which explained why it was cold emotionally leaving nothing that the participants in orchestra could respond to, let alone the audience in auditorium.¹⁴²

In response, Mgrebov (who played the Prophet) said these comments presupposed a spectator who possessed no imagination and needed everything spelled out for him. He averred a unique connection with the auditorium since he was an actor who was present onstage—and words alone did not establish the connection and the meaning of the production for spectators. What he described as “simple Red Army spectators” had told him: “It was strange, not understandable, yet you feel it, only you can’t find words for it.”¹⁴³ In other words, he claimed that

¹³⁶ Alpers, “Teatr sotsial’noi maski,” fn. 26, 148-49.

¹³⁷ “Besedy o Zoriakh,” 13.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

the Theater RSFSR One had indeed created a conduit between the stage and the spectators.

Mgrebov, Mayakovsky, and Meyerhold all argued that the new spectator grasped *The Dawn* on some level, however inchoate the production's meaning for him. Although they contended it forged such a connection, none refuted the fact that it had failed to activate audience participation as anticipated or that the constructivist sets may have hampered their aims. Their point was that the workers recognized this revolutionary theater as their own and the production somehow communicated fundamental meanings about society and the revolution to their proletarian public. Mgrebov contrasted this spectator with the one to whom theater delivers a "nice tasty treat."¹⁴⁴ Mayakovsky advanced the rebuttal without mincing words. He called the critics of the production "philistines."¹⁴⁵ He also reminded the discussants that the public was supposed to "play" along with the actors.

For his part, Meyerhold was uncharacteristically defensive but hardly conciliatory. He even acknowledged the serious shortcomings that Lunacharsky found in the production's use of the meeting format and the "good-for-nothing monologues" as Lunacharsky described them, but he insisted that the Theater RSFSR One was happy because it was in a struggle:

We have our own spectator who tells us: this is our theater. For instance today during our conference they gave me the following request.¹⁴⁶ I do not think that Red Army soldiers would take their take banners to a performance of *Uncle Vanya* but [only] to go to a show that they called their own. The Moscow Art Theater, who held the spectator in captivity, is most guilty for his passivity.¹⁴⁷

Meyerhold spoke in the name of a public that would eventually recognize itself reflected in his words. Meyerhold's to serve the interests of the new public impelled the rise of it just as Leninist ideology in part propelled the revolutionary insurrection that overthrew the old regime. Of course, such representations of the public were not a sufficient factor, but a necessary one in this process. He instinctively sensed that there was a new public ready for his brand of revolutionary theater. The Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War had profound demographic consequences for Russian society and theater. The average age and educational level of the spectator had dropped while his level of "political education" had increased.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ The explanatory note below the article explains that the Red Army soldiers of the Moscow Garrison sent the Theater a request to attend a performance of *The Dawn* and to actively participate in it. They were invited: this is the performance described above when the soldiers arrived bearing banners.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 14. In the *Theater Herald*, his speech was followed by the parenthetical note "extended applause."

As usual, Lunacharsky set out a moderate position. As the commissar set forth his normative claims about the theater and his critique of *The Dawn*, it became obvious that he was advancing an idea of theater in Soviet Russia that favored the pre-revolutionary type of people's theater and the dramatic theater at the state and academic theaters under his aegis. He castigated the production because it confused the spectator on almost every level, especially the formal one. The artists defended *The Dawn* explaining that critics of its expressive means were philistines, but Lunacharsky retorted by saying the artists were captivated by "Boulmich," (*bulmish*), a perjorative term referring to the left-bank artists at the Parisian cafes of the Boulevard St-Michelle.¹⁴⁸ The workers simply did not connect with their work owing to its formal qualities.

Furthermore, he attested to the fact that they did not participate in the show, preferring instead to smoke their makhorka. He stated outright that political agitation had no place in theater because people were fed up with it in real life, although art did enter into the performances of orators at real meetings. He concluded that albeit the production was a "false meeting" it represented something new, the promise of revolutionary theater, and agreed with Mgrebov that the spectators recognized this on some level.¹⁴⁹

Lunacharsky methodically addressed his central theme of the relationship between the "role" and the "methods" of dramatic theater in the Soviet era. He flatly contradicted Mayakovsky by arguing that the theater must act as a "prophet" who could "open our eyes" and "move our hearts."¹⁵⁰ Theater would not take a backseat in the revolution, but concern itself with the "great substance" of contemporary life—the new worldview, human relations, and the revolutionary ethos—using the extraordinary means at its disposal to move people emotionally.

His argument took an unexpected turn. He stated that the proletariat sought prophecy in art and invoked Dostoevsky to drive home his point: "Any religion without faith is the same as sauce without the rabbit."¹⁵¹ In his view, *The Dawn* lacked what is most essential in theater: genuine action and real life relationships that interest the spectator. Consequently, *The Dawn* had not resonated within the depths of the spectator's spiritual experience and consciousness. He asserted his firm belief that theater must interest the spectator in the inner life of the character. Since Meyerhold's production focused on external matters and offered characters that merely served as "hangers for ideas" it failed to excite workers and soldiers.¹⁵² This accounted for the "deafening silence" that greeted it.

In addition to the forum of the "Mondays" at the theater, public speeches, lectures, and debates also signified sharp divides among different camps in the theater. On December 20, 1920, the Theater RSFSR One hosted the follow-up debate

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵² Ibid., 13.

and discussion of Meyerhold's militant speech delivered at the Polytechnic Institute on December 6, 1920, entitled "Weak Points the Theatrical Front."¹⁵³

The auditorium was packed. The debate was extraordinarily stormy in character owing to the sharp antipathy between the Meyerhold and Tairov supporters. The latter put together a noisy public disturbance as Meyerhold sought to speak. The stenogram parenthetically recorded the commotion: "Shouts of 'Don't let him speak!' Whistles. Unbelievable shouting. 'Don't let him finish' followed by such noise and uproar that you can't make out anything, everyone is yelling almost to the point of coming to blows."¹⁵⁴

In the Moscow theater world, public verbal exchanges grew personal and caustic. At a debate in the Poets' Café, Tairov said the only thing revolutionary about Meyerhold was his "red fez" and gave a public lecture called "The Sunset of the Dawn."¹⁵⁵ He also likened Theatrical October to "mustard after dinner" and referred to *The Dawn* as a "vulgar lubok."¹⁵⁶

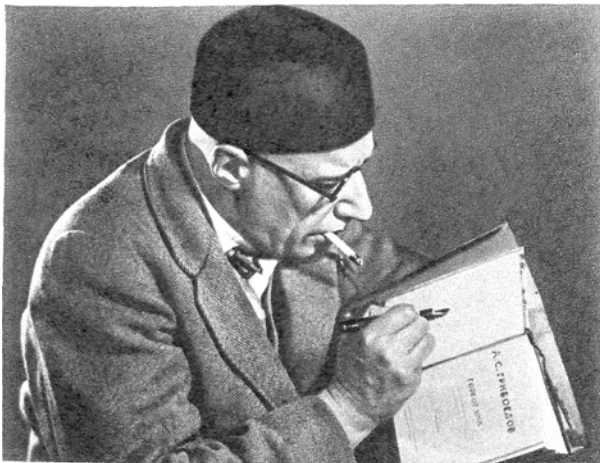


Figure 3.13. Meyerhold Wearing a Fez

On a more playful note, the theater director Nikolai Foregger parodied the different aesthetics of the Moscow Art Theater, Tairov's Chamber Theater, and the Theater RSFSR One by directing a short performance at the House of the Press using Chekhov's *The Proposal* (*Predlozhenie*).¹⁵⁷ As Garin recollected, during the dialogue when Lomov and Chubukov's daughter argue about who owns Volov Ponds, the

¹⁵³ Fevral'skii, *Zapiski rovesniki veka*, 207 and *Dokumenty i materialy*, 158, footnote 42.

¹⁵⁴ Fevral'skii. *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Also see Garin, 14 for the exchanges and repartee that he recalled between Meyerhold and Tairov at these gatherings.

¹⁵⁶ The quip meant that Meyerhold's "revolution in the theater" in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution was out of place. These comments suggest that Tairov viewed Meyerhold's new creative path as artistically weak and his political platform as posturing. Quoted in Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol'd*, 252.

¹⁵⁷ Erast Garin, 12. The title of Chekhov's piece was *Predlozhenie*.

crowd-chorus in the orchestra pit yelled, “Revolution has broken out on Volov Ponds!” caricaturing Meyerhold’s use the chorus as a co-participant in the action.¹⁵⁸ In his review, Viktor Shklovsky wryly noted that at *The Dawn*:

Out of the three groups that should perform in this play (*igrishcha*) according to the producer’s idea—the actors onstage, the Prolekult members in the orchestra, and the public on the main floor—the public is on strike. At any meeting the public is livelier than at this meeting in costumes with jodhpurs.¹⁵⁹

Sergei Radlov, who became the director of the People’s Comedy in Petrograd, blamed Verhaeren’s “rotten” play for killing Meyerhold’s creative idea.¹⁶⁰ He also thought it strange that the actors wore no makeup or wigs while their costumes were stylized (*uslovnye*), but he credited this to the idea of unifying the actors and audience. He praised the “strikingly noble dryness in the composition of the characters, the severe acting style (*statika*), and lack of any cloying sweetness in the directorial conception” in his review. He was convinced that *The Dawn* represented the “sunrise” and the Chamber Theater’s “yesterday’s brilliant sunset.”¹⁶¹

Some of those who rejected the stage sets for *The Dawn* questioned their status as sets, asserting instead that they were “signs” indicating sets rather than sets in their own right. These contrasting artistic elements and principles belonged to different systems of conventions, but *The Dawn*’s appeared altogether unconventional and seemed incomprehensible to most. Each “system” also primed audiences to respond differently. For example, a standard Art Theater production might feel intimate or poignant, but used the “fourth wall” convention of pretending no audience was present to achieve its effects. The actors in *The Dawn* directly addressed the audience expecting it to participate by applauding or whistling. For the most part was not forthcoming: this role was not acceptable to the audience.

In the mass press, *The Dawn* fared badly: its fate was likely sealed as soon as Krupskaya published her review in *Pravda* immediately following the premiere. The reviews in workers’ newspapers such as *Trud* and *Gudok* did not pursue new lines of criticism about the production, but confined themselves to providing more examples of workers’ dissatisfaction with it. For instance, in an article entitled “Thoughtlessness or Helplessness? (Dedicated to the Theatrical Department of the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Viktor Shklovskii, “Papa—eto budil’nik,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva* (December 10-12, 1920) quoted in Trabsky, 158, fn. 45.

¹⁶⁰ Sergei Radlov, “O Moskve,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, nos. 637-39 (December 21-23, 1920): 2.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. In a fascinating aside, Radlov noted that he entered the Chamber Theater with some trepidation because people’s routine praise of it suggested “the philistinism of canonization.” By definition, “canonization” means academic “consecration,” which indicates that the artist no longer belongs to the avant-garde. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, chapter 3, “The Market of Symbolic Goods.”

People's Commissariat of Enlightenment)" a reporter contrasted the rapture of the delegates to the Women's Conference to *The Death of "The Hope"* with *The Dawn*.¹⁶² "Why are we playing tricks with cubes, circles, and pyramids when our spectator demands the simplicity and accessibility of *The Death of "The Hope,"* she asked?¹⁶³ She scathingly referred to the production as "a heroic mockery of the heart and mind of the proletarian spectator (*proletariia-zritel'*)."¹⁶⁴

A Powerful Critique

Krupskaya's review began and ended with a discussion of Verhaeren's play, recalling its charm and demanding the restoration of the original at the Theater RSFSR One. She even likened the October Revolution itself to "the most splendid, enchanting fairy tale" and in this connection—most curiously—made the observation that "children dislike it when you rearrange or change a single word in the tales they love the most."¹⁶⁵ The directors had merely changed a few words and phrases in the play, but that spoiled the effect: "In the real revolutionary tale [with its] profound depths and untold beauty [i.e., in present-day Soviet Russia], it is unpleasant to hear the wordy blather of Verhaeren's hero turned Russian revolutionary."¹⁶⁶

In other words, Krupskaya viewed Meyerhold as an iconoclast who ruined Verhaeren's canonic text, which she greatly enjoyed, and considered his modernization of the script, the "unnatural" stage sets, the "deliberately ugly" costumes, and the iconic acting to be heterodox.¹⁶⁷ The perspective that Lunacharsky articulated just a week and a half later at the first "Monday" employed the very same terms: "story," "tale" and "novel" to describe what truly attracted spectators to the theater in his view.

Embracing the aesthetics of such artists of the nineteenth century as the Itinerants painters (*Peredvizhniki*), the Moscow Art Theater, and Russia's literary classics from Pushkin to Gorky, Krupskaya, Lunacharsky, and other leading cultural authorities of the regime within the Bolshevik elite insisted that revolutionary art should strive to be realistic in formal terms, but most importantly emotionally moving for its working-class public.

Clearly, Meyerhold committed a critical blunder when he decided to modernize the play because the Bolshevik Party and its Adult Education Division, the agency directly involved in vetting artistic matters that Krupskaya headed, placed the performance under its powerful political and ideological microscope.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² The women's conference was for "non-Party members".

¹⁶³ V. Val', "Nedomyslie ili bespomoshchnost'?" *Gudok*, February 16, 1921 quoted in *Dokumenty i materialy*, fn. 49.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Krupskaya, "Postanovska Zor' Verkharna."

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Zolotnitskii, 110. Krupskaya remained the director when the agency later became *Glavpolitprosvet*, the Political Enlightenment Division.

The politically progressive message of Verhaeren's play pertained to an unspecified place and time. A Communist Party member himself, Meyerhold made the mistake of leaving open the question of who the political authorities were within the "fictional" world of the adapted play and left the traits of the play's hero unchanged.

Mayakovsky claimed that the adaptation removed the Menshevik "lacquer" from the original script with "Bolshevik spirits"—but the adaptation was too cursory.¹⁶⁹ By interlarding a report from the front, inserting real Soviet slogans, and ending with the Soviet anthem, it made the inner world of the play pertain to contemporary Russia. This completely changed the interpretive frame: the resulting implications of the characters' actions had serious political ramifications from a Bolshevik perspective.

For instance, in Verhaeren's play, Krupskaya argued, Hérénien's deal with the Regents showed "insufficient circumspection," but when seen within the context of the present day class struggle in Russia he was nothing less than a "traitor, a traitor who took the bait of flattery."¹⁷⁰ Then, she continued, "the Russian proletariat in the role of a Shakespearian crowd, whom any egotistical fool can lead wherever he gets it into his mind to, is an insult."¹⁷¹

Surely more than a few spectators saw Hérénien as a figure like Kerensky, the popular leader of the Provisional Government in 1917.¹⁷² In one plausible reading of the original production, the Regents represent the old regime (the tsarist autocracy), Hérénien, the leader of the revolutionary movement, perhaps Kerensky due to his great popularity with the people, Le Breux, a Menshevik, and Haineau, a Bolshevik. Le Breux injects his moderate voice into the debates on the Aventine, which contrasts with Haineau's rancorous calls to arms. Hérénien was not averse to achieving compromises between the people and the politicians in the interest of significant change and progress.

This flew in the face of Leninist doctrine. In Russia, according to Bolshevik dogma, the Party leaders were people of revolutionary principles and action. The people were not sheep, but class-conscious supporters of the Bolshevik Party and its political platform. In Verhaeren's play, Haineau best exemplified the Marxist worldview and the political ethos of Bolshevism, with its insistence on revolutionary insurrection and destruction of the corrupt regime. Although Haineau spearheads the rebellion of workers and soldiers that holds the Aventine, they abandon him when Hérénien arrives announcing the concessions he has negotiated with the regime. In Verhaeren's original this was suspect; in the production at the Theater RSFSR One it was odious from a political perspective.

It followed that the adaptation of the play profaned the Soviet regime and Bolshevism. Set in revolutionary Russia it trounced the sacred narrative of the

¹⁶⁹ Mayakovsky's pun involved Bolshevik "enthusiasm" and "mineral spirits," which removed the play's Menshevik political "varnish."

¹⁷⁰ Krupskaya, 2.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² At the first "Monday" discussion, Comrade Brik observed that Verhaeren's play "glorified Menshevism not Bolshevism" and therefore he held the opinion that the directors had the right to adapt the play. See "Besedy o Zoriakh," 12.

Bolshevik Party enlightening the proletariat and leading it to victory. In the adaptation, the Russian masses were ignorant and venal. The directors had not transformed the “leader” into a Bolshevik. To complicate matters, Zakushniak, who played Hérénien, was best known for playing Figaro in Mozart’s comic opera. In a heroic drama, the choice might have been acceptable, but in a revolutionary tragedy adapted to the Soviet era it was a decidedly poor choice.

In Kerzhentsev’s opinion, Aleksandr Zakushniak in the lead was too “gallant,” too “rosy” and too “smooth” instead of “sharp, coarse, rough, even uncouth,” that is, the attributes of a true proletarian leader.¹⁷³ To succeed as a tragic hero, an actor must convince the audience that he can contain the emotions his character is feeling, but in this case it seemed doubtful. Hence, Meyerhold staged a sacred requiem, a public service, for the fallen hero, but seen through Bolshevik eyes, the entire play was a glorification of individualism and hero worship. From this perspective, the finale was not the celebration of the life of a revolutionary leader who died in the service of the people.¹⁷⁴

This particular interpretation became canonic. The first volume of *Sketches of the History of Russian Soviet Dramatic Theater* published the year after Stalin’s death provides a thumbnail sketch of *The Dawn*. It describes Hérénien as “the bearer of mighty otherworldly forces [who] appeared in the production primarily alone and delivered long pompous monologues.”¹⁷⁵ The authors add that “the people were depicted in a completely Proletkult-like manner: a faceless, gray mass.”¹⁷⁶

Hérénien’s obsequious wife Klara also deeply disturbed Krupskaya. She found this depiction to be just as much of an “insult” in revolutionary Russia as the supposed hero Hérénien.¹⁷⁷ The image of Klara was repugnant to her as a representation of women in light of the principle of the equality of women and men and the real historical role of women in the revolutionary Social Democratic Party.

The Dawn’s subterranean meanings seemed to invite spectators to reflect on disturbing, politically heretical lines of thought. Was Haineau justified in pressing for complete barbarism, in effect civil war, in dealing with the Regents or did Le Breux’s moderate voice in the discussions of strategy make sense? Even raising such questions, however submerged in the politically confusing script, would have been blasphemous with Bolshevik troops dying in defense of the revolution and the ongoing “class struggle.”

Support from official quarters for Theatrical October did not materialize. Lunacharsky dismissed Meyerhold in late 1920 as the head of the Theatrical Department. Krupskaya was livid. Overall, the public reception of *The Dawn* was lukewarm. Yet, the event riveted attention on the theatrical “left,” as Meyerhold

¹⁷³ Kerzhentsev, “Zori,” 4. See also Figure 1 in this chapter.

¹⁷⁴ Lunacharsky’s play *Oliver Cromwell* was faulted in 1920 for presenting history as the acts of heroic individuals.

¹⁷⁵ N. Zograf, Iu. Kalashnikov, P. Markov and B. Rostotskii, ed. *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra* (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSR, 1954), 134-35.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁷⁷ Krupskaya, 2.

anticipated. Meyerhold may have lost the battle, but Theatrical October succeeded in starting the war. In the critical exchanges, in defining the opposition between the aesthetics of the “right” and the “left,” in the confrontations between Meyerholdites and Tairovites, it transformed the theater world in Moscow from top to bottom. Meyerhold was true to Leninism in employing the essential political opposition between the “left” and the “right” (the Reds and Whites, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, and so forth) and transposing onto the theatrical field. He used the transformative moment of the Bolshevik Revolution to provide momentum for the revolution in the theater, which represented the theatrical left’s vision for the theater and its ideological dominance.

Now many viewed the theater world as split between the “left” and the “right.” Meyerhold’s revolutionary strategy of symbolic violence mobilized support for the theatrical left. He helped to actualize the political division in the theater by virtue of his charismatic power and performative actions as the visionary behind Theatrical October, on the one hand, and his authority and institutional decisions as the head of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros, on the other. Both conditioned the public reception of Theatrical October.

Like a true Bolshevik, Meyerhold militarized the situation in the Moscow theater world and assumed authority on the basis of the battle against the “right.”¹⁷⁸ However, without the social forces that the revolution in the theater presupposed, no mobilization could have occurred. It succeeded because many were inspired by the new vision for theater. Many took up the cause of revolutionary theater, especially the young, because of the ideals of Theatrical October. The traditional theaters held little interest for them.

It also attracted many with creative aspirations and revolutionary dreams who were employed as journalists, cultural workers, propagandists, and the like—the “proletaroid intelligentsia. Many aspiring actors, directors, and designers studied under Meyerhold at GEKTEMAS, the State Experimental Theater Workshop, and later at GITIS, the State Institute of Theater Art. Sergei Eisenstein, who is best known as a film director, was a pupil and began his career as a theater director. Another student, Nikolai Okhlopkov, went on to become the director of the Realistic Theater during 1930s. Meyerhold’s influence on stage design and staging proved to be enduring.

By naming the new revolutionary theater the Theater RSFSR One, Meyerhold inserted it into the grand narrative of history and claimed a preeminent cultural role in Soviet Russia. But he strayed into the minefield where art and politics meet. The production of *The Dawn* lent itself to a reading as a representation of politics in Soviet Russia. Apparently he did not recognize that he had usurped the Party’s prerogative to represent its interests as the interests of the people through its own representations of the People in ideology and propaganda. These struggles had already begun in the overlapping spheres of politics and culture under Soviet rule. In these ways, the first production of the Theater RSFSR One thoroughly offended the first family of the first communist regime in history.

¹⁷⁸ On this point, see Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 201.

The production of *The Dawn* to which Meyerhold invited Lenin was thoroughly revised. No longer was the spectator's sympathies split between Hérénien and his opponent—his brother-in-law—Haineau during the episode of the workers' rebellion on the Aventine. Hérénien now delivered many of Haineau's lines and speeches, transforming him into an unquestioned revolutionary leader acceptable to the Bolshevik mentalité. Hérénien and Haineau became comrades-in-arms. Platon Kerzhentsev had recommended transforming Hérénien into a true leader of the masses: "firm, bold, decisive, uncompromising, and of course, without a single iota of willingness to negotiate."¹⁷⁹ Hérénien angrily exposed the Prime Minister who tried to bribe him.

In lieu of a report from the front in the Civil War, the Emissary now delivered a speech commemorating Bloody Sunday, the peaceful protest led by Father Gapon that led to a massacre and the start of the 1905 Revolution. Then the cast sang the hymn "Eternal Memory."¹⁸⁰ The message of Verhaeren's play is anti-war. After all, Hérénien negotiates a peace treaty with the enemy and dies a hero because of it. After the revision, the theme of the invading army and truce were omitted. At Krupskaya's urging, they wrote a speech for Klara, the hero's widow, about the active role of women in the Bolshevik Revolution, and Klara dedicated her son to the cause. The audience rightly honored Hérénien as a martyr of the Revolution.

¹⁷⁹ Platon Kerzhentsev, "Zori," *Vestnik teatra*, no. 74 (November 20, 1920): 4.

¹⁸⁰ Zolotnitskii, 112-13.

FOUR

The Bolshevik Party, Proletkult and the Direction of the Audience

Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible.
Antonin Artaud

Sergei Tretyakov's play *Are You Listening, Moscow?* subtitled an "agit-guignol in four acts," premiered in the Hall of Columns at the House of Unions on November 7, 1923 marking the sixth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. This was the evening before the "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich led by Adolph Hitler and Hermann Goring of the National Socialist German Workers' Party.¹ The tumultuous events of 1923 in Weimar Germany inspired the writing of the play—yet ironically cast a pall over it. Two weeks before the premiere, the communist-led Hamburg Uprising failed.

The First Workers' Theater of Moscow Proletkult performed the play under the direction of Sergei Eisenstein. He employed his method of the "montage of attractions" to build the production. The exchanges among theater critics about the premiere of *Are You Listening, Moscow?* remain somewhat opaque without an understanding of the history of Proletkult. It began as a proletarian movement that antedated the Bolshevik Revolution.

PROLETKULT AS A SOCIOCULTURAL MOVEMENT

Proletkult's collectivist ideology originated with Aleksandr Bogdanov, who established the Vpered Circle in Capri after his expulsion from the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1908 following an ideological battle with Lenin. The Vpered Circle, a pre-revolutionary Bolshevik oppositional group of which Lunacharsky was a member, sought to cultivate proletarian leaders.² In its schools on the island of Capri, where Gorky lived, and Bologna, Italy, Vpered trained leaders believing that they would ensure proletarian hegemony in revolutionary Russia.

The Vperedists agreed that a vanguard party had to revolutionize the proletariat and lead the revolution, but they also maintained that a cultural revolution also had an essential role to play in the transformation of society. They were convinced that an organization within the working-class movement would ensure that culture became a primary focus of revolutionary change.³ Bogdanov and Lunacharsky became prime movers in organizing Proletkult upon their return to Russia in 1917.⁴

¹ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider As Insider* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 155.

² Maxim Gorky and Alexandra Kollontai were also well-known members of the group.

³ Mally, 25.

⁴ Scores of emigrés and groups returned to Russia in 1917 to join the revolutionary activism, including Bogdanov, the founder of the Vpered Circle and Lunacharsky's

In April 1917 Lenin returned from exile to Russia in a sealed diplomatic train from Switzerland bound for Petrograd, followed by Lunacharsky, the soon-to-be Commissar of Enlightenment, in a second sealed train.⁵ Regarded as metaphor, the first and primary engine of the revolution speeding toward Russia represented the Bolshevik Party fueled by political strategy, the second, the vehicle of culture in the form of propaganda, literacy, education, and the arts.

When Lunacharsky arrived in Petrograd, he embarked on his mission of enlightening and revolutionizing workers through his publicist writings for Gorky's newspaper *New Life*.⁶ The "Appeal" published in the newspaper just two months before the storming of the Winter Palace asserted:

The proletariat believes that true art ennobles and elevates the individual, making him capable of great emotions and deeds. Unlike any other force, [art] organizes the masses into a unified collective. Knowledge and beauty cultivate the individual and the class... Education and creation in science and art are an integral part of every powerful social movement, every revolution.⁷

The voice and vision are Lunacharsky's. He placed art and culture at the heart of the revolutionary cause.

The Appeal trumpeted "true" art's value by asserting its significance for the cultivation of the individual just as Stanislavsky and Gorky did at the turn of the century. It also echoed Bogdanov's overarching belief in art's capacity to merge the proletariat into a sociopolitical collective.⁸ These thoughts in turn related to Lunacharsky's and Gorky's idea of *bogostroitel'stvo*, or God-building, which viewed science, art and humanistic values as the foundation of communist morality, unifying individuals into a whole, as religion.⁹ They asserted that art is a force that

brother-in-law. He did not rejoin the Bolshevik Party. His philosophy was the focus of Lenin's ideological attack in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* published in 1909. Lenin's book was republished in late 1920, just prior to the First National Congress of Proletkult.

⁵ Mally, 25.

⁶ Ibid. The situation was complex: a mix of parties, factions, movements and alliances filled the political landscape when Kerensky's Provisional Government fell. Lunacharskii was a Bolshevik but used the Menshevik internationalist newspaper as a platform for his idea. On Lunacharsky see Timothy O'Connor, *The Politics of Soviet Culture: Anatolii Lunacharskii* (Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan Press, 1983), 13-14.

⁷ "Vozzvanie," *Novaia zhizn'*, September 15, 1917. Quoted in Mally, 27. See also Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 11.

⁸ The term for the individual is *lichnost'*.

⁹ For a discussion of left Bolshevism and God-building, see Mally, 4-5 and Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), chapter 5 "Godless Religion."

makes the collective capable of the great emotions and deeds central to any social movement or revolution.

When Proletkult¹⁰ arose, revolutionary zeal was at its peak. In his two-volume memoirs, *A Life in the Theater*, Mgrebov referred to the verse of the contemporary worker-poet Ilya Sadofiev, giddily recalling the boundless spirit unleashed among workers after the Revolution:

The triumphal pathos of resonant, deeply sincere, and inspired poetic convictions immersed our entire country at the time like an ocean. This pathos was not for an instant akin to a Bacchanalia or narcissism, which was hardly foreign to the poetry of individualists. No this was an entirely different pathos, a true expression of joy, aspirations, and hopes, hidden in the depths of the human souls that beat together.... How would it have been possible *not* to sing the most daring hymns about “the radiant faces of the workers” and *not* affirm their most unrealizable dreams?¹¹

As one of the Old Bolshevik founders of Proletkult, Mgrebov likened the passionate discussions and disagreements among Proletkultists to the members of the revolutionary groups and social movements of the mid-1880s who “smashed chairs during their arguments with one another” but remained united in their struggle.¹²

The first founding conference just two weeks before the Bolshevik Revolution unanimously approved Bogdanov’s resolution:

Art by means of living images organizes social experience not only in the sphere of knowledge but also in that of the emotions and aspirations. Consequently, it is one of the most powerful implements for the organization of collective and class forces in a class society. A class-art of its own is indispensable to the proletariat for the organization of its forces for social work, struggle, and construction. Labor collectivism—this is the spirit of this art, which ought to reflect the world from the point of view of the labor collective, expressing the complex of its sentiments and its militant and creative will.¹³

¹⁰ Proletkult was the acronym for Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations.

¹¹ Aleksandr Mgrebov, *Zhizn v teatre*, vol. 1 (Moscow-Leningrad: Academia, 1929), 382-83. Mgrebov uses a phrase from Il’ia Sadof’ev’s verse, which sings of “solntselikie kuznetsy.” This poetic image combines the contemporary icon of the blacksmith-worker from Soviet posters with the radiant representation of the face (“sun-like”) in traditional Russian iconography to distill the transcendent joy of the revolutionary moment. On the image of the worker in Soviet political art see Bonnell, especially chapter 1.

¹² Mgrebov, 401.

¹³ Aleksandr Bogdanov [pseudonym of Aleksandr Malinovskii], quoted in Marc Slonim, *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers and Problems, 1917-1977*, 2nd revised

Of course, the similarity between the “Appeal” and this Resolution in singling out art’s effect on the emotions and aspirations is striking. Both also identify the importance of art in organizing “social experience,” which suggests its importance as a form of propaganda in shaping public consciousness. Moreover, the notion of “living images” implied theater’s prominent place in revolutionary art.

In contrast to the Appeal, the Resolution specifically identified the “labor collective” as the inspiration for “class-art,” expressing its emotions and creative will. The idea of culture as collective creativity imbued the participants’ notion of art in Moscow’s Proletkult studios. Whereas Proletkult local “organizations” were typically informal, the studios established in the large working-class districts of Moscow and Petrograd were highly organized. By 1918, at the time of the First City Conference of Moscow Proletkult, there were theatrical studios at the largest industrial clubs in the predominantly working-class districts of Zamoskvoretsky, Presnensky, Sokolnichesky, to name a few.¹⁴ As the Civil War raged, Proletkult burgeoned as a cultural and artistic movement with the broad-based participation of workers. Consequently, their interests and activities varied greatly.

In the capitals, the participation of professionals who acted as instructors and directors in the major organizations of Proletkult directly shaped theatrical performances, which were the most popular activity among participants. Elsewhere, the members themselves collectively defined their projects. Therefore Proletkult served as an umbrella for theater studios and workshops in its branches in cities and towns across Russia.

After its founding conference in mid-October 1917 it grew precipitously. According to Proletkult estimates, there were roughly half a million participants in 80,000 organizations by 1920.¹⁵ The 80,000 proletarian “organizations” represented clubs whose members were involved in amateur theater, music, and the arts. In some, art professionals and cultural workers offered instruction.

Perhaps the most important factor in the meteoric rise of Proletkult as sociocultural movement was the structure of cultural opportunity that the era afforded it. In addition to the revolutionary zeal of its participants, it had the backing of the Commissar of Enlightenment himself and extravagant funding by contemporary measures. In the first half of 1918 the Commissariat provided it with a budget of over nine million rubles, compared with sixteen million for higher education, and thirty-two and a half million rubles for the entire Adult Education Division, which was headed by Krupskaya.¹⁶ In addition, many Old Bolsheviks, including Platon Kerzhentsev, a theater expert, and Pavel Lebedev-Poliansky, an

ediiton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 35. On Lunacharsky, Vperëd, and the early history of Proletkult, see Mally, 25-30.

¹⁴ A. Ignatov, “Teatr Proletkul’ta,” *Rabochii zritel’*, no. 25-26 (November 14-18, 1924): 15.

¹⁵ Kleberg, 19, and Brady and McCormick, 45.

¹⁶ Mally, 44. Kleberg reports a budget of 16 million for higher education.

eminent theater historian, sat on the Proletkult Central Committee.¹⁷ Alongside Lunacharsky, these “claims-making” experts supplied Proletkult with high-level support.¹⁸

From an organizational perspective, the many branches of Proletkult operated relatively free from control by Proletkult’s central agencies, state bureaucracies, and Party or Trade Union organizations. Proletkult activities flourished as “autonomous club work” in independent clubs or in the cultural sections of unions, factories, cooperatives, the Komsomol, or Communist Youth League,¹⁹ and the Red Army.²⁰ In other words, Proletkult operated within a full array of social and economic institutions but especially in factories. The first move to curtail its reach came from the directors of the latter on the eve of its First National Congress. It was forbidden to start new clubs at factories and enterprises.²¹

During the Civil War, Proletkult dramatic troupes were mobilized to perform for the military troops. This naturally legitimized the organization and the ample funding that it received at the time. By the same token, the top political leaders were intensely focused on the war, not cultural matters. Lunacharsky was the new regime’s authority and plenipotentiary regarding culture. Although Lenin was highly skeptical of Proletkult’s principles and aims, during the Civil War Proletkult essentially served the regime through its great appeal to the proletariat and its support of wartime efforts.

In addition, Proletkult theater circles in Moscow were filled with enthusiastic amateurs who profited from the expertise of established artists in the Moscow theater world. Some circles received training from artists associated with the academic theaters, such as Valentin Smyshlyaev, an actor of the Moscow Art Theater, and others from avant-garde theater artists like Nikolai Foregger, the director of the Sidelnikov Studio when the Ton-Plas Studio split. However, as groups of amateurs essentially bereft of cultural capital, Proletkult did not enter into the politics of Moscow’s professional theater world.

As a collective art form, drama was favored as the foremost Proletkult activity. Even the reading of poems was transformed into a dramatic collective activity through mass declamation. For instance, Vasily Ignatov’s *Dawn of the Proletkult*, an early Proletkult dramatic production, was a collection of popular

¹⁷ Kerzhentsev’s book, *The Creative Theater* saw five editions published between 1918 and 1923.

¹⁸ On the concepts of cultural opportunity structure, claimsmakers, and audiences, see Joel Best, *Social Problems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 40-46; 51-59; and 79-83.

¹⁹ The organization was known by its acronym *Komsomol*. It served as a feeder organization for membership in the Communist Party.

²⁰ Mally, 33 and 37. On the issue of autonomy and independence, initially endorsed by Lunacharsky, see Mgrebov, 390-92. Mally states that the workers assumed both the independence of Proletkult from the state as well as the autonomy of individual Proletkult organizations from the Proletkult central leadership.

²¹ Kleberg, 21.

poems. In this respect, Vasily Ignatov and Valery Pletnev, both founding members of Proletkult, were justified to some degree in claiming the innovation of the “chorus” later used by Meyerhold in *The Dawn* as their own. Drama was and remains perfectly suited for agitprop, especially for non-literate audiences.²²

Just as the “working class” was the protagonist in Russia’s unfolding revolutionary history, the “collective hero” took center stage in Proletkult’s earliest theatrical productions. This was the dramatic expression of the “labor collectivism” to which Bogdanov’s Resolution referred. Eisenstein would later take up the themes of the workers’ struggle and the revolutionary movement in Russia, which formed the basis for Pletnev’s most popular Proletkult plays, including *Strikes*, about labor protest in prerevolutionary Russia, and his renowned *Lena*, about the strike that led up to the Lena massacre.²³

Eisenstein singled out these Proletkult productions for criticism in his 1923 manifesto about the “montage of attractions.” He did not object to the plays, but the form in which they were presented at the First Workers’ Theater under Ignatov’s direction. Although the creation of a new proletarian art was the foundational idea of Proletkult, in actuality the production of innovative work was minimal. As N.I. Lvov, an instructor at the Moscow studios wrote, proletarian theater created nothing new for the most part but “simply imitated the clichés of the professional theaters.”²⁴

The end of the war quickly altered the situation for Proletkult as the new regime consolidated power and increased its control over the cultural sphere. The question of its status as a proletarian cultural organization independent from yet parallel to the state’s Adult Education Division and the cultural sections of the Trade Unions and other institutions emerged as key issue. It assumed major political significance within the context of the regime’s centralization of power in the post-war era. In the area of ideology, the Bolshevik Party created an Agitprop division to direct political education. The People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment also organized a new political enlightenment section, Glavpolitprosvet, under Krupskaya’s direction. The institutionalization of political education demonstrated the importance of consolidating the social order to the regime.²⁵

In the economic sphere, top Party leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky directed their attention to the policy concerning the trade unions. Trotsky declared, “In a workers’ state the trade-unions cannot carry on class economic struggle.”²⁶ Lenin

²² For example, see James Peacock, *Rites of Modernization: Symbols and Social Aspects of Indonesian Proletarian Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), especially Part 2, chapter 4, “Politics and Art.”

²³ On Proletkult theatrical productions in these years, see Ignatov: 15 and Mally, 142.

²⁴ Zolotnitskii, 292.

²⁵ On Glavpolitprosvet and the Agitprop Department of the Party Central Committee, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 243-255.

²⁶ William Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution: From the Civil War to the Consolidation of Power 1918-1921*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 434.

envisioned them as Soviet state institutions: “schools of communism” with an educational and propagandist purpose. The Workers’ Opposition proposed that the trade unions should control the entire management of economic life. They believed that worker committees should control factory production, not managers.²⁷ Other issues rankled those in the ranks of the Workers’ Opposition, from the large non-proletarian contingent in the Communist Party to woefully inadequate food rations. Social and political tensions sharpened in 1920.

Against this background, Proletkult represented an organization with a large working-class membership whose calls for complete autonomy in 1920 made it a potential source of opposition and resistance to the regime. From Lenin’s point of view, its size and the scope of its activities posed a potential political threat. As early as 1918, Krupskaya worried that Proletkult’s autonomy could make it a haven for anti-Soviet forces.²⁸ Also, Bogdanov, an ex-Bolshevik and Lenin’s former rival, was a member of the Proletkult Central Committee. Perhaps more troubling, Alexandra Kollontai, a former member of the Vpered Circle, wrote the major theoretical statement of the Workers’ Opposition. The statement accorded with Proletkult’s vision of the Soviet order on many levels.²⁹

The regime’s response—and the beginning of the end of Proletkult autonomy—came at Proletkult’s First National Congress in October 1920. After Lunacharsky failed to announce that the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment would absorb Proletkult, Lenin himself met with representatives from Proletkult. The delegates remained unconvinced. They did not see how Proletkult could represent a threat. But Lenin was resolved: he would not countenance an autonomous mass cultural organization with an overwhelming working-class membership. From his perspective, it not only represented a threat as an autonomous organization, but the functions of other Soviet institutions also obviated its existence. Its great popular appeal probably hardened his decision.

Since two-thirds of the conference delegates and all the members of the national leadership, which was a formal executive committee, were communists, with the notable exception of Bogdanov, the tried and true communist method of appealing to “Party discipline” ensured the approval of the Five Point Statement drafted by the Communist Party Central Committee. Proletkult became a division of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment subject to the Party’s oversight.³⁰ In an era of rapid centralization and fiscal constraint, Proletkult depended on substantial state funding to support its far-flung network of local organizations.

²⁷ For a concise description of the platform of the Workers’ Opposition see *Ibid*, 368, 373, 434-5 and Mally, 194-95, 208-9, and 214.

²⁸ Mally, 41. For a detailed account of the clashes over the future of Proletkult in 1920, see chapter 7, “The Proletkult in Crisis.”

²⁹ Mally, 195. That is, its critique of the emerging Soviet order coincided with the Workers’ Opposition’s in basic respects.

³⁰ Stourac, 26 and Mally, 203.

A ferocious letter in *Pravda* methodically discredited Proletkult on the grounds of its roots in Machism and God-Building.³¹ The dismantling of Proletkult followed when its budget was slashed and local Party organizations closed down its operations. In effect, it was reorganized out of existence although the theatrical circles in Moscow remained. A leader of Proletkult since its inception, Ignatov witnessed the precipitous decline of the membership. Two years later, the central organization lacked funds to cover heating costs for local organizations.³² This exemplified the Bolshevik cultural realpolitik of the period.

Amidst these rumblings, just a month before the Proletkult National Conference in 1920, Lunacharsky appointed Meyerhold head of the Theatrical Section of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. Both Meyerhold's "Theatrical October" and Proletkult's program consigned the academic theaters to the proverbial dustbin of history. As the head of the Theatrical Section, Meyerhold provided Moscow Proletkult with theater buildings and operating resources.

However, Meyerhold, Mayakovsky and other left theater artists, like Meyerhold's pupil Eisenstein, did not share Proletkult's ideas about art. For example, the notion that only "genuine" proletarians, those who worked in plants and factories, could produce proletarian art was a basic premise of Proletkult. Members imagined that their class origins and revolutionary exuberance would overcome their lack of training. Ignatov wrote that many scoffed at Proletkult at the time.³³ The notion of dismissing Russia's rich theatrical heritage naturally struck many as preposterous. The various reorganizations of the Proletkult theatrical circles by Meyerhold in Moscow gradually marginalized Ignatov, Tikhonovich, and Bersenev, putting Eisenstein at the helm of the First Workers' Theater of Moscow Proletkult by 1922.

Vasily Ignatov's private letters to Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1920 provide a personal glimpse into the incipient split between the avant-garde left represented by Meyerhold, Mayakovsky and Eisenstein, on the one hand, and the proletarian movement in the theater represented by Ignatov, Tikhonovich, and Kerzhentsev, on the other. As a revolutionary theater movement opposed to the "right," which stood for the established theaters such as the Maly Theater (it soon came under Lunacharsky's direction), the Moscow Art Theater under the direction of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, and the Chamber Theater directed by Tairov, Proletkult also belonged to the theatrical "left."

The demise of Proletkult as a mass sociocultural movement and the rise of the avant-garde left under the aegis of Theatrical October precipitated the split within the theatrical left between the two. The avant-garde left claimed the mantle

³¹ See "Teatral'naia deiatel'nost' Proletkul'ta," with introduction and notes by N. B. Volkova in *Russkii sovietskii teatr 1917-1921*, 328-29 for a listing of its "errors" from the theory of collective action to its "faceless" (*bezlikoi*) mass heroes. On Machism, also see Lynn Mally, 203.

³² Mally, 226.

³³ I. Smirnov, "Publikatsiia: Tsennoe priznanie (Pis'ma proletkultsovtza V.V. Ignatov K. S. Stanislavskomu, S. M. Eizenshteinu, V. E. Meierkol'du), *Teatr*, no. 12 (December) 1976: 48.

of the “left” by aggressively criticizing the “right” in the press and in public speeches. In addition, the journal that Mayakovsky—a member of the Artistic Council of the Theater RSFSR One—edited was named *Lef*, or *Left*, an abbreviation for the “leftist” movement in the arts.

Although Western historians have referred to the proletarians in the arts as the “right” to denote their conservative artistic practices, such as their penchant for realism, and their growing intolerance of the avant-garde, in 1920 Proletkult was a radical leftist organization that shared the leftist view of the theatrical establishment as the status quo, a conservative force that had to overcome by a revolution in the theater. Both the avant-garde and Proletkult were *levye*, or “left” theaters, to use the indigenous term. Both were called *revoliutsionnye teatry*, or revolutionary theaters. However, the Proletkult position differed from the position of the avant-garde in a fundamental way. The leaders of the movement believed that workers themselves must create theater and forge the cultural revolution. The avant-garde regarded itself as a vanguard that would take the Moscow theater world by storm. Proletkult represented theater made by proletarians; the avant-garde represented theater made for proletarians.

Ignatov’s letters to Meyerhold document the personal side of the politics of theater art at a pivotal moment in the history of Soviet culture. Ignatov was a founding member of Proletkult in Petrograd and the author of the first programmatic statement of Proletkult Theater. In Moscow, he worked at Proletkult headquarters and became the director of the First Workers’ Theater in the summer of 1921, after the merging of Proletkult’s Second Studio and the Central Arena.

He wrote to Meyerhold on the very day that Lunacharsky appointed Meyerhold to head the Theatrical Department of Narkompros (September 16, 1920). Ignatov asked him to join the Central Committee of the All-Russian Council of Proletkult and to assist with establishing the Central Arena of Moscow Proletkult. In the postscript to his letter he wrote, “Speaking not just for myself, but for the entire worker-Proletkult contingent, you are one of us, and we are with you and everything that needs to be done, we will do.”³⁴ Presumably, this referred to supporting Meyerhold’s “Theatrical October” and the attack on the old professional theaters to which the Proletkultists wholeheartedly subscribed.³⁵

Meyerhold responded to Ignatov on the very same day with a note that read: “I am yours!”³⁶ He appeared to underwrite Moscow Proletkult by providing three theater buildings of the Hermitage Garden for its use, despite the opposition to Proletkult within the Communist Party. Ignatov’s letter to Meyerhold on November 11, 1920, written four days after the premiere of *The Dawn*, invited Meyerhold to

³⁴ Vasilii Ignatov, letter to Vsevolod Meyerhold dated September 16, 1920 quoted in I. Smirnov: 45.

³⁵ On the first anniversary of the October Revolution, Kerzhentsev’s call to “expropriate” the old theaters appeared in the newspaper *Izvestiia* on the first anniversary of the October Revolution. On the wrangling over theatrical organization see David Zolotnitskii, *Zori teatral’nogo oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), 44-60.

³⁶ Smirnov: 46.

take part in previewing the studio work of local Proletkult organizations and participating in a debate there.³⁷ As already seen, the premiere at the Theater RSFSR One caused a whirlwind of public debate initiated by Nadezhda Krupskaya. Meyerhold defended avant-garde theater and announced that futurism embodied the future of revolutionary theater. Ignatov did not take part in the public discussions at the time. Neither he nor others at Proletkult openly criticized Meyerhold. As we recall, the actors of the chorus in the orchestra pit and the soldiers onstage in Meyerhold's production were Proletkult members.

In mid-December of 1920, shortly before the revised version of *The Dawn* opened at the Theater One RSFSR, Ignatov penned a long letter to Meyerhold in which he recalled the history of Proletkult, described his relationship with Meyerhold, and revealed his own thoughts and feelings. Ignatov wrote that Meyerhold's declaration of dedication to Proletkult in 1920, filled him with joy but he remained suspicious—no longer seeing him as a “wolf” but as a “half-wolf.”³⁸ He disregarded the “futurism” and the “needless impishness” in *The Dawn*, instead seeing the commonalities between Petrograd Proletkult's production of the same play two years earlier in its “dawning period” under the leadership of Ignatov, Chekan and Mgrebov.

As he put it, he “patiently and passionately” awaited the opportunity to collaborate with Meyerhold while keeping “shadows of confusion and doubt” about the great artist's interest in futurism at bay. He wrote that Meyerhold's “official announcement” that he was a futurist came like a “blow from a whip” to him. Might it be, he wondered, that “rotten bohemia, the degenerate, spasmodic salon company had closed around you like a ring and temporarily crucified your name?” Then he unleashed his anger, explaining that communist Proletkultists could not accept his futurism or protection of futurists. Although no one in the ranks opposed him publicly, if it came to a vote a Party meeting, they would vote against futurism.

He frankly revealed that he “hated” Mayakovsky and Bebutov (the co-director of *The Dawn*) as futurists and Gan as a person, whom described as “a haughty and unprincipled creep.”³⁹ He accused Meyerhold directly: “You see, you have *betrayed Proletkult*, yes, betrayed. You *fed it a crumb* and left with a pair or a troika of flaccid little intellectual futurists adding to it a pair or a troika of creeps and scoundrels.”

Ignatov predicted: “Theatrical October will not succeed because futurism is evil and will hinder you, and neither Bebutov nor Gan are communists or they are communists of a different sort. It is a small group and crowning futurism will force you to reject healthy influences.” He concluded the letter with a veiled threat: “This will be discussed in the future at Party meetings and in Party organs.” He signed the

³⁷ The first meeting of Glavpolitprosvet, still part of Narkompros, took place on November 11, 1920. The organization was under the chairmanship of Preobrazhenskii, but N.K. Krupskaya became its permanent head. See Peter Kenez, 123-28 for a discussion of Glavpolitprosvet.

³⁸ Smirnov, p. 48.

³⁹ Ibid: 49. A.M. Gan and Bebutov were members of the Artistic Council at the Meyerhold Theater. See *Sovetskii teatry: dokumenty i materialy*, 140.

letter “Loving the part of you that has not been stricken by futurism, V. Ignatov.” Ignatov was at pains to state his case in terms of “principles,” but the legacy of conflicts over power and the clashes of personalities percolated throughout his missives to Meyerhold.

As seen, his prediction proved correct. Futurism had already come under serious criticism the previous month with Krupskaya’s withering review of *The Dawn*. While Meyerhold was on holiday the following September in 1921, Valerii Pletnev, the former Proletkult playwright who was now an official at Glavpolitprosvet, issued an order closing the Theater One RSFSR. This effectively ended “Theatrical October,” but Meyerhold’s and Eisenstein’s ongoing theatrical experiments with forms of popular spectacle—circus, fairground, and attraction—paved the way for the satirical revolutionary theater that took Moscow by storm in the early mid-1920s. Meyerhold’s State Theater became its epicenter.

The regime also responded to conflagrations in the political and economic spheres. As the regime’s bureaucratic centralization proceeded in 1920-1921, labor and hunger strikes broke out. The sudden rebellion of sailors at the island fortress of Kronstadt in March 1921, a stronghold of Bolshevism in 1917, arrived unexpectedly. The leaders of the Kronstadt uprising felt that the dictatorship of the Communist Party had been substituted for the dictatorship of the proletariat, betraying the original ideals of the revolution. The Bolshevik military assault on the garrison began on March 8 and finally succeeded in crushing the revolt ten days later.⁴⁰

Ignatov’s letters might give the impression that such attitudes and feelings were root causes of the split between the right and left, whereas they were actually symptomatic of the clash of structural forces—a clash of which Ignatov was merely an agent. Prior to the First Proletkult National Congress in 1920, he was a leading member of this flourishing working-class sociocultural movement. Its claims in the cultural sphere paralleled those of the workers in other spheres of Soviet life.

Lunacharsky and Proletkult’s Old Bolshevik brain trust viewed Proletkult as a cultural organization designed to educate and cultivate workers: a way to empower the working class in the ongoing cultural transformation of Soviet society. However, for Ignatov, Pletnev, Tikhanovich, and other like-minded comrades in the leading ranks of Proletkult, their projects and plans represented a response through which they attempted to resolve the contradictions of working-class experience in Soviet Russia. As leading members of a proletarian subculture, they themselves acutely observed and experienced these contradictions.

The focal concerns of Proletkult underpinned the collective identity of its membership. For instance, the experience of workers in the post-revolutionary period confirmed Bogdanov’s early prognosis regarding proletarian leadership: “intellectuals” and “specialists” were promoted within Party, state, and other institutions of Soviet power, while those of working-class background generally

⁴⁰ See Chamberlin, 439-45 for a concise history of Kronstadt from the Revolutions in 1917 to the uprising in 1921.

remained within low-status occupations among the rank-and-file.⁴¹ In Proletkult, “non-proletarians” were barred from holding leadership positions in Proletkult, however, this rule was observed in the breach.

When Ignatov accused Meyerhold of “betraying” Proletkult, it personified the conflict. At the personal level, the overtures that Ignatov anticipated from Meyerhold were naïve and self-aggrandizing. Meyerhold belonged to a completely different artistic subculture, albeit he headed the Theatrical Section and fostered the growth of Proletkult Theater. Ignatov’s observations also cast the conflict at the level of institutional power. But he was also an agent of Proletkult’s defensive working-class cultural response to Bolshevik rule. Proletkult’s group style was based on working-class chauvinism and revolutionary romanticism. The social force that underlay the formation and growth of Proletkult was Russia’s 4.6 million strong “proletariat”—in particular, the two million industrial workers.⁴² It was Party opposition to the existence of Proletkult that precipitated the clash in 1920.

Ignatov accused Meyerhold of “betraying” Proletkult. It should be recalled that the soldiers and sailors at Kronstadt also accused the Bolshevik regime of “betraying” the Revolution. From their perspective they were not mutineers but the true revolutionaries upholding the sacred principles for which the Revolution was waged and won. Ignatov’s criticism was analogous because Meyerhold, who was a Communist Party member (surrounded by “flaccid intellectuals” not genuine proletarians), betrayed Moscow Proletkult and its true principles, as he saw it. There was a significant difference between Proletkult and Theatrical October.

The former was a mass working-class cultural organization with potential ramifications for political stability in Soviet Russia in the view of Lenin and Krupskaya. The latter was the politicized artistic movement spearheaded by Meyerhold to transform theater culture in Soviet Russia. Proletkult had extensive popular appeal; “Theatrical October” was a popular appeal without an extensive popular base. Proletkult’s decline and the concurrent ascendancy of Meyerhold’s theater movement precipitated the hard ideological split between the avant-garde left and the proletarian movement in the theater.

With Proletkult cut down to size, future power struggles in the cultural arena could only take the form of factional bickering. Henceforth, Proletkult became a limited “artistic-cultural” organization—no longer a potential hotbed of working-class protest, of which Kronstadt served as a terrifying reminder to the regime. Not coincidentally, the Communist Party would not seriously intervene to reshape the cultural arena for another decade, during the collectivization drive, at which time it would be involved once again in ruthlessly crushing potential popular resistance. Despite his failure to carry out Lenin’s bidding at the Proletkult National Congress, the Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky—“soft-hearted Anatoly” as he was known in Party circles—was still entrusted to oversee cultural matters. Of course,

⁴¹ Ironically, the “Lenin Levy,” the institution of mass recruitments of workers into the Communist Youth League and Communist Party, was named in honor of its chief opponent.

⁴² Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 19.

any forthcoming battles in the world of Moscow theater would be manageable tempests in a teapot.

Disagreements are the life-blood of politics, including the politics of art, because power is at stake. The institution of face-to-face debates, topical discussions, and exchanges between theater people, critics, and other cultural authorities in the public forum constituted the contexts where the ideological divide between the right and left sharpened.⁴³ It was there that the ongoing struggles for dominance in the Moscow theater world played out in the early 1920s. This ideological contest constituted the background for Eisenstein's production at the First Worker's Theater of Moscow Proletkult.

ARE YOU LISTENING, MOSCOW? AN ANALYSIS OF EISENSTEIN'S PRODUCTION AND ITS RECEPTION



Figure 4.1. Sergei Tretyakov.

Are You Listening, Moscow? was written by Sergei Tretyakov, who was best known for his play *D.E., or Give Us Europe*, a production of the Meyerhold Theater. Tretyakov worked with Varvara Stepanova, a fellow constructivist and textile designer, and her husband Alexander Rodchenko, the artist and photographer. He knew Mayakovsky, the poet and playwright, and El Lissitzsky, the suprematist artist.

⁴³ On the importance of contexts for giving ideas cultural power and shaping social action see Swidler, 317-318. See also, Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review*, no. 51: 273-86, in which she argues that "unsettled" historical periods give rise to systematic worldviews that can powerfully influence their adherents.

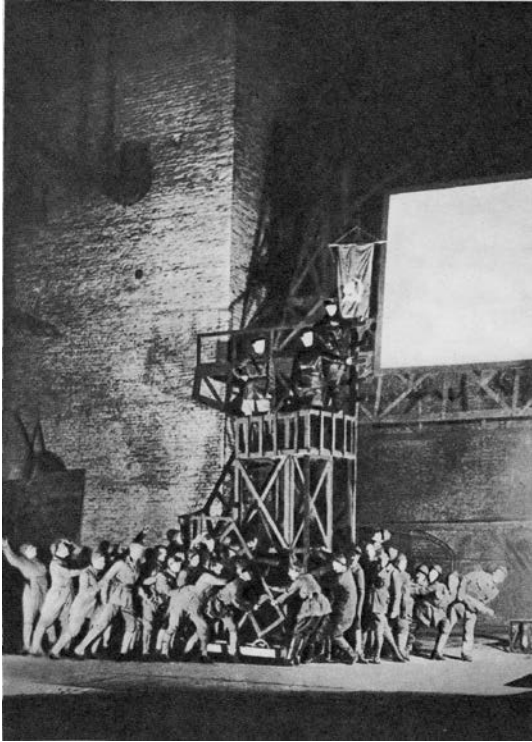


Figure 4.2. Tretyakov's *D.E.* at the Meyerhold Theater. The screen on the right was used for projecting film footage.

More than a few critics regarded Tretyakov's piece as a theatrical "sketch" rather than a proper play, but also acknowledged the production's extraordinary precision and power.⁴⁴ The lively dialogue, the Count's grotesque retinue and the unsettling guignol contributed to its originality and popularity.⁴⁵ Grubbe,⁴⁶ the Court Painter, and Grabbe,⁴⁷ the Court Poet, are classic sycophants. In the production they were

⁴⁴ See, for example, Sadko [Vladimir Blium], "Slyshish', Moskva? 1-i Rabochii Teatr Proletkul'ta," *Izvestiia*, 2 December 1923.

⁴⁵ It played for sixty-one performances in the course of two seasons to a total of 5,764 spectators. A.I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Fillipov, A.M. Rodionov, *Teatry Moskvyy 1917-1927* (Moscow: Gosurdarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, 1928), 185. Although these were modest numbers, the production garnered the attention of the theater world and like *The Dawn* earned a parody performed by MastFor at the House of the Press. The play premiered at the Hall of Columns at the Trade Union Building but most performances were given at Proletkult headquarters at the former Morozov Mansion (later named the House of Friendship). On May 2, 1924, during the May Day festivities in Moscow, a performance was given at the Bolshoi Theater.

⁴⁶ In Russian, *grubyi* means "gross."

⁴⁷ In Russian, *grabit'* means "to steal."

exceedingly fat in keeping with the grotesque caricature of the Count and his coterie.⁴⁸

Another member of the Count's contemptible court is the courtesan Marga, a caricature of the seductive Western woman who loves bending men to her whims. She insists that her foot be kissed on two separate occasions in the course of Act I. The first time, the Count goes down on his knees, wheezing to fulfill her desire—and Marga must help him to get back on his feet. The second time, she sees a strapping young man walk past (unbeknownst to her it is Curt, the leader of the Strike Committee) and orders him to stop. She insists that he kiss her foot. Curt thinks she is joking but she persists.

The exchange turns ugly and then lewd as Grabbe asserts that "a woman's desire is law" and the Police Chief swears that Curt will fulfill her demand—or else. Marga wonders why Curt will not kiss her foot: after all, everyone says she has very beautiful legs! "Is it possible that you don't like them? It can't be. Higher perhaps? What about *here*? Listen now, I've had it with you!" she screams.⁴⁹ In one of the defining sequences of the play's guignol, after the Chief of Police menacingly threatens Curt with an ultimatum, the communist leader disgustedly spits on the courtesan's leg and shouts, "There you are you bitch!"⁵⁰ Marga shrieks for a police baton and beats Curt herself. They seize him and cart him off to jail.

In contrast to the caricatures of the Court members, the portrayals of Curt and the other communists were in a realistic vein. Their speech and actions bespoke a resolute and principled collective, presumably in order to foster the feeling of steadfast commitment to the communist cause in the audience. Curt does not demean himself and bend to fulfill Marga's desire, but proudly chooses to face the brutal consequences of his refusal.

The play is set in a province where Count Steel, who is simultaneously the governor, the chief landowner, and the captain of industry, welcomes Mister Pound, the representative of the American banks. The Count is courting him to secure investment and assures him that there will be no demonstrations on November 7 despite popular rumblings in the province. To this end, the Count has hatched a plan to employ a "bread and circus" tactic by unveiling a monument in honor of his ancestor the Iron Count on that very day to ensure calm and dispel Mister Pound's lingering concerns about political stability.

The situation in the province is grim: poverty is widespread and hunger rampant. An agent provocateur has penetrated the ranks of the Communist Action Committee. To make matters worse, Curt, the Secretary of the Strike Committee, is arrested after a confrontation with the Count and his mistress. Nevertheless, the members of the Action Committee are resolved to stage some kind of protest on November 7th in honor of the Bolshevik Revolution and ultimately succeed.

⁴⁸ *Istoriia russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra. Kniga I (1917-1945)* ed. by Iu. A. Dmitriev (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1984), 87.

⁴⁹ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Slyshish' Moskva?! Agit-ginol' v chetyrekh deistviakh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Act I, 12.

The rebellion develops in Act IV as a play-within-a-play. The onstage crowd watches the theatrical pantomime at the Count's celebration, which illustrates the history of the dynasty. During the pantomime, the actors subvert the dynasty's official history in various ways and eventually cross the peasant sickle with the workers' hammer at one point, as if by chance.⁵¹ When the onstage "audience" starts to add its own subversive commentary to the pantomimed official history and heckles the speaker, the insurrection explodes (Figure 4.1).

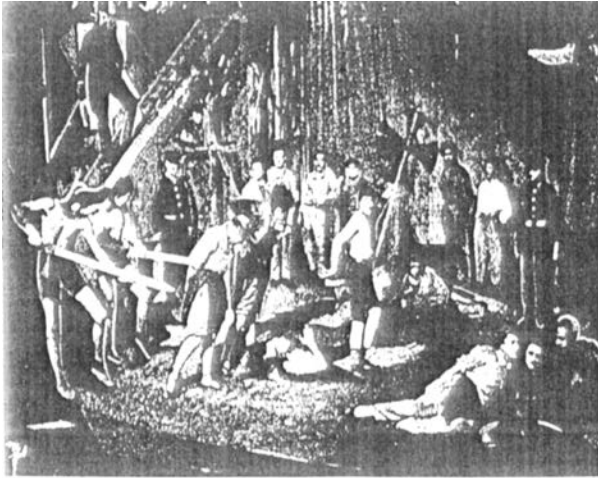


Figure 4.2. Sketch of the Pantomime Scene in Act IV. The "worker-actors" are enacting the history of the dynasty. They represent the "savages" who are civilized by the Count. In this figure they are in chains and carry hammers and scythes. Source: Samuil Margolin, *Pervyi rabochii teatr Proletkul'ta*.

At the finale, the onstage crowd storms the podium when a huge portrait of Lenin is unveiled instead of the monument to the Iron Count. The Communists and the crowd lynch the Count and his clique chanting "Lenin!" "Smash the fascists!" and finally "Moscow! Are You Listening, Moscow?" According to eyewitness accounts, this prompted the members of the theater audience at the First Workers' Theater of Moscow Proletkult to respond with a resounding, "I am listening!"

⁵¹ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Slyshish, Moskva?! Agit-ginol' v chetyrekh deistiviakh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), Act IV, p. 27. The First Workers' Theater of Proletkult commissioned Tret'yakov's play.

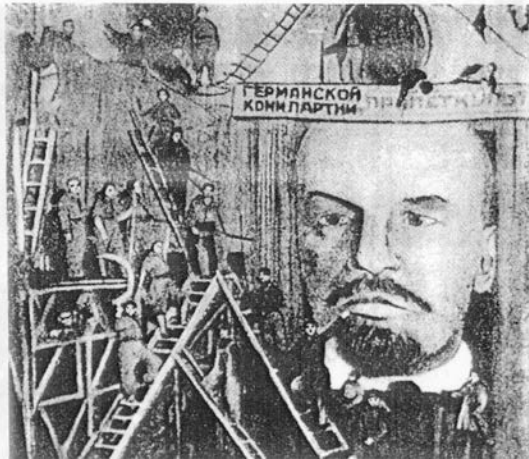


Figure 3.4. Sketch of Act IV. The portrait of Lenin is unveiled instead of the monument to the Iron Count. The onstage crowd attacks the Count and his retinue. The banner hanging above the portrait reads "To the German Communist Party." Source: Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre 1917-1924*.

In this production, framing effects worked like a hall of mirrors. Within the world of the play, the trade union strike committee leads the workers in their fight against the Count's dictatorship, which the theater audience understood to be Hindenburg's Germany. Before the performance, a film showed people connected to the Communist Party of Germany (Ernst Thaelman, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Karl Radek and others), framing the production's nameless province and theatrical caricatures in real time and space.⁵² The action in the play paralleled events in Germany in a rudimentary way, with the notable exception of the failure of the insurrection by the German Communist Party in 1923.

On stage, it is the seventh of November and a working-class revolt is underway in honor of the Bolshevik Revolution, while in real time it is November 7, 1923 and the audience at the Trade Union Building is cheering on the German rebels during the actual revolutionary celebrations in Moscow. At this point, the staged melee reportedly spilled over into the auditorium, as members of the audience vociferously took part, blurring the lines between the actors and the audience members.⁵³

In order to understand how Sergei Eisenstein staged the play, his theory of the "montage of attractions" must be clarified. The method was grounded in contemporary ideas about audience reactions. Sergei Tretyakov, the playwright, explained that an attraction is a "pressure"⁵⁴ aimed at grabbing the spectator's attention and charging the audience's emotions. He explained that the First Workers' Theater of Moscow Proletkult was the first theater to use attractions in a

⁵² Sergei Prokof'ev, "Slyshish', Moskva?" *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 2 (January 8, 1924): 12.

⁵³ S., "Slyshish', Moskva?" *Lef*, no. 4, 1924: 217.

⁵⁴ *Nazhim*.

conscious and deliberate way to structure the entire performance.⁵⁵ Using scientific terms to great effect, he added that an attraction depended upon a “determinate” audience—one that was uniform in class composition—otherwise the effect would be “false and unequilibrated.”⁵⁶ Referencing his own play, the playwright described the intended effect of the attractions:

Moscow was created and adjusted to the [given] tasks in the period of the unfolding of the German Revolution. Its function was to condense the revolutionary striving for victory and the energy in the masses from which the front [in Russia] should have arisen and provided armed support for Germany, or in any case [served as] an active rear-guard of this revolution. Just as in *Wiseman*, it acted upon, in the sense of accumulated, emotions of class sympathy and class hatred. It was a precise, active tool or weapon of this accumulation in the audience.⁵⁷

This accorded with Lenin’s understanding of agitation. Agitation was tied to some concrete goal.⁵⁸ Tretyakov’s description of the attraction is also consonant with Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Teatr attraktsionov: Postanovskii *Na vsiakogo mudtretsia dovol’no prostoty i Moskva, slyshish’?* v 1-m rabochem teatre Proletkul’ta,” *Oktiabr’ mysli*, no. 1 (January 1924): 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid and S.M. Eizenshtein, “Montazh attraktsionov.”

⁵⁷ Tret’iakov, Ibid, 55. The title of the play can be read as a slogan, a call to action.

⁵⁸ On agitprop see Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Chapter 6, “Political Education,” especially 123-26; David Bradby and John McCormick, *People’s Theatre* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 45-46. For a concise description of the agitprop in Soviet theater see “Plan khudozhestvennoi i politicheskoi raboty Terevsata na 1921 g. (Vypiska iz protokola zasedaniia politsoвета i mestkoma teatra 1 dekabria 1920)” *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy*, 184.

⁵⁹ The article appeared in *Oktiabr’ mysli*, no. 1 (January) 1924: 53-56.



Figure 4.4. Sergei Eisenstein.

Eisenstein’s self-described role in the production was “montage specialist.”⁶⁰ In the theater program next to his name it reads “Montage of attractions and tasks involved with the arrangement,” which suggested the experimental yet well-defined nature of this theatrical work (Figure 4.3). His definition of an “attraction” and the montage method was more categorical than Tretyakov’s. In his words, any “aggressive moment” in theater that was “verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator” constituted an attraction.⁶¹



Figure 4.5. The theater program for *Are You Listening, Moscow?* Eisenstein is listed as the montageur. Source: “Programmy i libretto teatrov, Rabochii zritel’,” no. 22, December 1923.

⁶⁰ Montageur (*montazher*) means one responsible for the arrangement in music, the editor in film, or the producer in theater.

⁶¹ Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Attractions: On the production of A.N. Ostrovsky’s *Enough Simplicity for Every Wiseman* at the Moscow Proletkult Theater” in *S.M. Eisenstein: Selected Works*, vol. 1, ed. and tr. Richard Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 34.

By “mathematically” calculated, he meant precisely designed and refined to produce the intended effect. The recording of the audience’s response to each episode by means of *khronometrazh* was also practiced at the First Workers’ Theater of Proletkult. In his view, these shocks constituted the only opportunity for the audience “to grasp the play’s ideological aspect and arrive at the final ideological conclusion.” Hence, the attraction was the instrument—it delivered the shock—and the audience represented the theater’s basic “material.” Eisenstein stipulated “the molding of the audience in the desired direction (or mood) is the task of every utilitarian theater (agitation, advertising, health education, etc.).”⁶² In his view, this approach also unfettered the director from representing any particular event or narrative, to which the naturalistic theater was chained.⁶³

Like contemporary cinematographers and graphic artists, Eisenstein held that the montage approach was a general framework for combining elements to precipitate emotions in the audience. An effectively structured montage “reworked” the audience. As he explained it, the approach took into consideration the audience’s state of mind as well as “concrete, socially pressing tasks of the moment” in order to shape the “scenic material.” It drew upon “all means that expressly acted upon the spectator” to create theatrical attractions.⁶⁴

There is a dual presumption here. First, the audience’s state of mind corresponds to a “uniform” audience. The idea here is that the audience is “uniform” in terms of social class: it is working-class. Moreover, it is assumed that the thinking and perceptions of the working-class are uniform. Second, the director presumably knows this state of mind. Formulated in this way, cultural producers ascertain the “the concrete, pressing tasks of the moment.” This implies a third component of the process. The political moment and its demands determine the direction in which the audience is “reworked.” As Tretyakov simply put it: “Montage is a means for acting upon the psyche of the auditorium.”⁶⁵ Both artists imagined that an attraction could elicit a specific reaction in the audience.

The attraction in Act I is the scene where Marga tries to entice Curt to kiss her, he responds by spitting on her leg, and Marga and the police beat him before arresting him. Here, it seems the attraction is less a science of “mathematical” calculation than the art of indignation. The core attraction in Act II consists of the Communist Strike Committee’s entrapment of the agent provocateur. Elli

⁶² Ibid., 34. Eisenstein also referred to the Theater of Attractions as an “agit-reklam” theater, that is, “a theater of agitation and advertisement.”

⁶³ Ibid., 35. See also Sergei Tret’iakov, 55 for a further discussion and contrast between montage based on “contiguity” such as variety shows and more thematically based ones. *Are You Listening, Moscow?* is a good example of the latter.

⁶⁴ On the montage of attractions also see Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1994), 151.

⁶⁵ Tret’iakov, *Teatr attraktsionov*, 56. The term *psikha* can be rendered as psyche, state of mind, or psychology depending on the context. Tret’iakov used the terms “chargings” (*zariadki*) and “dischargings” (*razriadki*) to explain how montage worked upon the audience.

announces that both Curt and Tsorn are dead—murdered in jail—but before dying, Curt managed to write down the name of the traitor.⁶⁶ They ask Shtumm to read the letter containing the name of the traitor, but he stammers and shakes in response: he cannot bring himself to open the envelope. Dick stabs him in the back in retribution for his foul betrayal. It turns out that the paper inside the envelope was blank.

According to Mironova, an expert on directing, the fight between Curt and Shtumm demonstrated “amazing physical preparation” that reflected the actors’ training in biomechanics.⁶⁷ Eisenstein staged it as a bit of acrobatics. Knowing that popular tastes including the circus and music hall, he incorporated bits of these acts into his theatrical productions because they made for a “good show.”⁶⁸

In Act III, after his escape from jail, Curt puts his life on the line when the guards challenge him: he urges them to shoot him and see for themselves that the bullets are merely blanks. Part of this “attraction” was the use of stage blood after Curt takes a bullet in the gut. Like Hérénien in *The Dawn*, Curt becomes a martyr for the cause. This scene surely shocked the audience and may have provoked feelings of sadness, sympathy and pride. Perhaps it strengthened the audience’s sense of solidarity with the Communists onstage.

The play’s crowning moment and main “attraction” is the unveiling of Lenin’s portrait in the Act IV. This accompanied the total annihilation of the “fascist” regime. As the communists fired their rifles, firecrackers were set off in the auditorium to heighten the effect.⁶⁹ Seen as a whole, these contrapuntal actions, which pitted the workers against the dictatorship onstage, reflected the class struggle in Germany. Apparently the production was effective in moving the audience at the visceral level as intended by the playwright and director. It resulted in the explosion of class hatred not only onstage but in the audience too. It is also possible that nationalist anti-German feelings heightened these emotions. At the play’s conclusion, the audience’s anger gave way to exhilaration.

Eisenstein conceived the montage of attractions to be an instrument of “class action.” It would work like agitprop, depending on memorable images and brief exchanges, but aimed to transform of the working-class public as a whole. Hence, one contemporary viewed the creation of “the organized person” to be a chief task of Eisenstein’s agitational theater: “This is achieved through the great mastery of the one acting, his maximal physical preparedness.”⁷⁰ The actor was to *be* strong, not *appear* strong. The First Theater of Moscow Proletkult would act directly upon the minds and bodies of its actors—but also upon the public-at-large.

⁶⁶ Ibid, Act II, 16-17.

⁶⁷ V. Mironova, “Montazh attrakcionov: S.M. Eizenshtein v Teatre Proletkul’ta,” *Studiinye techeniia v sovetskoi rezhissure 1920—1930-kh godov: sbornik nauchnykh trudov* (Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1983), 96.

⁶⁸ S. M. Eizenshtein, “Montazh attrakcionov,” *Lef*, no. 3 (June/July). Similarly, *The Mexican* combined realism and balagan (fairground booth) with futurist sets. See A. Ivanov, “Teatr Proletkul’ta,” *Rabochii zritel’*, no. 25-26 (November 4-18, 1924): 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Pervyi rabochii teatr Proletkul’ta,” TsGALI, f. 1230, op. 1, d. 496, l. 6.

The relationship between theater and its audience was implicitly analogous to the one between the Communist Party and society. Each used agitprop in its mission to mold the mentality and movement of the “masses.” Likewise, both the First Theater of Moscow Proletkult and the Communist Party projected an image of the working class as a uniform collective body. Finally, each assumed its vanguard position in the name of the working class. When expanded on the scale that Eisenstein envisioned, his calibrated system of directed culture would transmute Soviet society in its entirety.

As the organizer of the proletariat, the First Theater of Moscow Proletkult embedded vivid images of class enemies, revolutionary heroes, and class struggle in its productions. In both theater and film, Eisenstein created masterful narratives of the working-class struggle with mythical overtones. In living images, Eisenstein’s theatrical work prompted the audience to see the world as a clash of class forces. Emotionally, montage inflamed audiences and made them blaze with elation.

As part of the growing system of communist agitprop in Soviet Russia, which included speeches, slogans, posters, and parades, revolutionary theater deliberately shaped public consciousness. But unlike the everyday forms of agitprop, theater delivered a charged collective experience packed with sociopolitical meanings and emotional wallop. Under Eisenstein’s direction, the First Theater of Moscow Proletkult intended to make a major contribution to the ideological construction of reality in Soviet Russia.

At the turn of the century, Stanislavsky’s dramatic theater had sanctified naturalism on stage. At the dawn of the Soviet era, Meyerhold sacralized the communist collective in advancing his idea of revolutionary theater. Now Eisenstein put proletarian consciousness and collective action at the sacred center of his agitational theater. In effect, his theater provided a new formula, different from either the Moscow Art Theater or the Meyerhold, for moving the audience emotionally. Of course, Eisenstein forged his distinct style of montage working within the politically charged field of the avant-garde problematics of his day.

His manifesto about the montage of attractions was a bold declaration about the aesthetics and politics of his theater art. It begins by distancing his direction from the “figurative-narrative theater” of the right wing in Proletkult: the direction taken by the former Workers’ Theater of the Proletkult Central Committee. His montage approach shared much in common with the aesthetics of the left, especially in cinema, but Eisenstein also distinguished it from the approaches of other left artists in theater, such as his teacher, Meyerhold.

For example, the stage sets in *Moscow, Are You Listening?* were spare, inspired by constructivism; the acting, stylized in keeping with avant-garde conventions. Yet his stage productions were less text-based: the contrast with Mayakovsky’s early theatrical work was conspicuous. Instead of “scenes” or “episodes,” he conceived a theatrical production in terms of combining elemental “attractions.” This approach emphasized the visual impact of discrete moments, such as the fight between Curt and Shtumm.

On the stage, Eisenstein precisely choreographed the attractions to propel attention toward the culminating moment of the stabbing or the unveiling of the portrait of Lenin. The medium of film suited his method much better because he

could heighten the effect of the attractions by focusing the viewer's attention through the lens of the camera with tightly framed close-up shots and multiple camera angles. The editing process was a literal montage of sequences shot. In the theater, an analogous effect could be achieved through kinesis: slow motion, acrobatics, and slapstick. His novel approach encouraged new habits of viewing and new expectations on the part of the audience. Eisenstein's productions were "revolutionary" but they also represented montages of theatrical conventions with which the spectator was thoroughly familiar: the circus, vaudeville, and the music hall. Eisenstein "mathematically" engineered them with the interpretive skills and tastes of the audience in mind. The audience was his medium. Contemporary psychological theories provided the scientific basis for approach.

The Science of the Audience in Eisenstein's Theater

According to Tretyakov, who put a number on it, the premiere of *Are You Listening, Moscow?* proved "seventy percent" effective according to a "preliminary estimate"⁷¹ He cited two reasons why it fell short of 100 percent. First, the events in the play did not coincide with the historical events: the anticipated revolution in Germany had not occurred. Second—just as Meyerhold had argued several years earlier about *The Dawn*—the audience was mixed, whereas attractions only yielded their "maximal productive effect" upon the audience for which they were designed.

This portrayal of the theater audience divided in class terms reinforced public discourse about class divisions in Soviet society. Indeed, it derived from and reproduced contemporary political discourse. In addition, it provided "proof" of the production's effectiveness. It also underscored through implication the significance of proletarian theater in shaping class-consciousness. Unlike Meyerhold, Eisenstein conceived the "agitational-dynamic" theater as part of a broader project aimed at eliminating the institution of theater as such—not just the academic theaters. As he conceived it, theater had a temporary role in the transformation of Soviet culture and society.

To this end, Eisenstein assigned the Scientific Department of Proletkult and the Directors' Workshops of the Proletkult Central Committee to develop a scientific system for "raising the level of the everyday skills of the masses and organizing forms of social life, including presentations, mass-meetings, carnivals and holidays."⁷² Initially, the Proletkult Theater would showcase achievements in the area of theater. Given his steadfast interest in activating the spectator and using science to attain this goal, Eisenstein's theory of montage drew upon contemporary currents of "objective psychology" such as Vladimir Bekhterev's theory of reflexology.⁷³

Like his competitor Pavlov, Bekhterev, a neurologist, was best known for his work on conditioned reflexes. For Bekhterev, a "normal" or unconditioned response

⁷¹ Tret'iakov, "Teatr attraktsionov," 56.

⁷² Eisenstein, 33 and "Pervyi rabochii teatr Proletkul'ta," TsGALI, f. 1230, op. 1, ed. kr. 496, l. 6.

⁷³ Tamara Selezneva, *Kinomysl' 1902-kh godov* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1972), 106.

to external stimuli lay at the root of all complex psychological responses, which he called “associated” reflexes.⁷⁴ Objective psychology was based on the principle that all behavior could be explained through the study of human reflexes.

These fundamental assumptions led to his sociological formulation of the development of the individual personality.⁷⁵ The formation of the individual was both the product of biological influences and social conditions. However, since each individual’s experiences and associated reflexes were in turn generalized in the collective through imitation, they also shaped collective experience.⁷⁶ Consequently, collective action and collective reactions could be explained as collective or social reflexes and studied “objectively” with the methods of “collective reflexology.”⁷⁷

It is not difficult to see how he derived a collective reflexology of art, which logically followed from these premises. As Bekhterev wrote:

“The unity of the theater public contemplating this or that show, or the public listening to this or that concert, is established thanks to the general influence of the show or concert that stimulates the one and same reactions owing to the general influence of the show or concert.... There is no doubt that these assemblies are also material for collective reflexology.”⁷⁸

However elementary and mechanistic his conceptualization, it provided a promising alternative to subjective psychology for revolutionary artists like Eisenstein who sought a materialistic, scientific foundation for their art.

The sociologically framed psycho-physiological theories of the day, such as Bekhterev’s reflexology, provided the scientific basis for Eisenstein’s theory of attractions.⁷⁹ The materialistic sciences of objective psychology and reflexology were well known to contemporary intellectuals. In addition, the journals of the theatrical left, such as the *New Spectator* featured articles describing various

⁷⁴ Ibid. Thus, an “associated” reflex was the equivalent of Pavlov’s “conditioned” reflex. Bekhterev’s eclectic theory explained many types of complex behavior.

⁷⁵ *Lichnost’*, meaning an individual.

⁷⁶ That is, a collective (*kollektiv*).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Ibid, 106. Originally published in V. M. Bekhterev, *Kollektivnaia refleksologiya* (Petrograd: Kolos, 1921), 91.

⁷⁹ For example, in the theater journal *The New Spectator*, E. Konstantinovskii summarized the biological and sociological assumptions of a Pavlovian approach to the study of theater. The terms he used, such as the “mutual interaction of organic collectives of spectators and complexes of artistic phenomena” were almost identical to those of Bekhterev. He recommended using questionnaires, direct recordings of reactions in the auditorium, as well as oral and written surveys of spectators to examine the collective psychological processes both before and after a performance. See E. Konstantinovskii, “Zrelishche kak biosotsial’noe iavlenie (“The Show as a Biosocial Phenomenon”), *Novyi zritel’*, no. 28, 1925: 33-37.

methods for studying audience response and theoretical articles about the “science” of audience reactions.

Eisenstein’s method of crafting attractions to build emotional pressure in the audience represented the equivalent of using discrete stimuli to produce “normal” and “associated” reflexes in Bekhterev’s terms.⁸⁰ These two basic types of reflexes can be seen as the building blocks of the agitational-theatrical production. For instance, the use of firecrackers in the final scene triggered an immediate “normal reflex” in the audience. In terms of “reflexology,” the three auditory neurons hot-wired to the human brain induced an instantaneous adrenaline rush and consequently the state of physical and mental “excitement” in the theater spectators.

The complex “associated” reflexes of the play’s main attractions began with the introduction of the repellent members of the Court and climaxed with the brutalization of Curt in Act I. This attraction was designed to spark the working-class audience’s loathing of the fascists. Eisenstein’s overall montage composition was designed to inspire devotion to the struggle for communism. If this was the theory and science undergirding the production, did the audience respond to the production as anticipated?

The Audience Response

Prokofiev, who sharply criticized the Theater and the production for its “formalism” nevertheless acknowledged, “Certain moments called forth explosions of applause. Revolutionary enthusiasm seized the auditorium.”⁸¹ A. Ivanov agreed, explaining it issued from the enthusiasm that the Russian proletariat had felt in connection with the anticipated working-class revolution in Germany in October 1923.⁸² However, Prokofiev added, “During the performance this enthusiasm waned and by the end completely vanished.”⁸³ Vladimir Blium, a great supporter of the Proletkult Theater who reveled in criticizing the work of the Theater MGSPS, agreed.

Writing shortly after the premiere, Blium called the “overly gay” armed uprising that concluded the show a “major error”:

The finale of the presentation suddenly disturbs the basic tone that was established and fails...with a kind of vaudeville thing of naively realistic nonsense and noise that is long, tedious and so deflates the heightened mood of the spectator up to this moment that the call “Are You Listening, Moscow” remains without a response [from the audience]. The finale, of course, must be rethought and redone.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ The term he employed for pressure was *napriazhenie*.

⁸¹ Prokofiev: 12.

⁸² A. Ivanov, “Teatr Proletkul’ta,” *Rabochii zritel’*, no. 25-26 (4-18 November 1924): 15

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁸⁴ Sadko, [Blium], “Slyshish’, Moskva?”

His review suggests that Eisenstein broke the principle of methodically “charging” and “discharging” the emotional tension in the audience with this extended, merry finale. Judging by later reviews, it appears that Eisenstein reworked the production to heighten the emotional impact of the final episode.

The author of an article in the journal *Lef* cited a wealth of evidence in the form of newspaper reviews as well as questionnaires to argue that the montage of attractions in *Are You Listening, Moscow?* succeeded in creating “a tight fist of the spectator’s dispersed emotions.”⁸⁵ He reported that it excited “the maximal nervous tension in the direction of anxiety, suspicion, anger and other active emotions.” The account is noteworthy for its unusual mix of seemingly scientific terms to describe the production’s impact, on the one hand, and the colloquial terms to characterize the audience, on the other. He estimated that fifty percent of the audience consisted of Soviet white-collar workers⁸⁶ or young Soviet ladies⁸⁷ while forty percent were workers and student youth. The remaining ten percent was an “obviously NEP public, like ladies wearing chinchilla.”⁸⁸ “NEP” refers to the New Economic Policy that was introduced in March 1921 to revive the economy and enriched some segments of society.

His account describes the episode of the storming of the tribune by the onstage “public” at the Count’s ceremony:

The public leapt up from its seats. Shouts rang out: “There, there! The Count’s getting away! Seize him!” Some oversized worker from a technical school⁸⁹ jumped up and shouted in the direction of the coquette, “Don’t stand on ceremony, grab her,” using a foul word, and when they killed the coquette in the play and threw her off the staircase, he swore with relief and added, “she had it coming”—so forcefully that the lady in furs who was sitting next to him could not take it, jumped up frightened, and blurted out, “For heaven’s sake! Why! So even here they begin [it all over] again”—and fled for the exit. Applause and shouts showered down upon each fascist killed.... This enthusiasm even applied to the stage: the students from the studio of IZO Proletkult⁹⁰ who took part in the onstage crowd as extras could not restrain themselves and climbed onto the tribune. They had to be called back

⁸⁵ S., “Slyshish’, Moskva?” *Lef*, no. 4, 1924: 217.

⁸⁶ *Sluzhashchie* included many different occupations, including clerks, office workers, managers, and employees of state and Party organizations.

⁸⁷ This term appears to be an acronym of new coinage combining “Soviet” with the word “ladies.” It is used pejoratively, which implies that these women were members of the privileged public that arose during the era of the New Economic Policy.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸⁹ The worker was a *rabfakovets*, or a student at a school that allowed full-time workers to study part-time.

⁹⁰ The Graphic Art Studio of Moscow Proletkult.

otherwise the volunteers ran the risk of messing up the entire [theatrical] arrangement.⁹¹

The author strengthened his claim that reactions like these were typical by referring to questionnaires completed by spectators at subsequent performances. He maintained that the questionnaires demonstrated that the emotions “accumulated” during Acts II and III burst forth in the finale because he frequently came across the phrase “You wanted to rush onto the stage and take part in the battle.”⁹² It is possible that the author “S” was the playwright himself—Sergei Tretyakov—since the article was published in *Lef*, the author is familiar with the questionnaires filled out by spectators at the Theater, and he describes the “accumulation” of emotions using the scientific idiom of reflexology and the method of montage.

Even Vasily Ignatov agreed that the “proletarian masses met the production with enthusiasm.”⁹³ It appears that emotions crested during the finale according to plan when the public onstage and in the auditorium join together to celebrate the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. According to “S,” the reaction of “the ladies wearing chinchilla” was the exact opposite of the “workers” and “students”: they fled the scene on account of the audience reaction to the rebellion enacted onstage. The author describes them as members of the “NEP public”: a mildly pejorative term for the better-to-do ranks of Soviet society. The account encourages a reading of the action both onstage and in the auditorium as symbolic reenactments of October 1917.

Significantly, it is a huge worker-spectator—his monumental proportions suggests his revolutionary stature—who blurts out “She had it coming” when Marga is dispatched, provoking an intimate scene of confrontation in the auditorium. The woman dressed in furs says, “So even here they begin [it all over] again,” which implies that even in the theater they stage the class warfare that exploded in 1917 and it even spills over into the theater auditorium. She bolts for the exit. Still,

Although Eisenstein left Proletkult at the end of 1924 to work in the cinema, the cinematization of the theater was a general trend in the 1920s. Meyerhold incorporated film projection in *The Earth in Turmoil*⁹⁴ and *The Forest*.⁹⁵ He divided scripts into “episodes”—a filmic approach—as already seen in *The Dawn*. Both directors chose scripts or reworked plays to emphasize the theme of class struggle and always used striking visual devices to grab the spectator’s attention.

⁹¹ S., “Slyshish’, Moskva?” 218.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ignatov: 15.

⁹⁴ *Zemlia dybom* is also translated as *The World Turned Upside Down*. Tretyakov’s script was based on the French communist Marcel Martinet’s play *Night*. It premiered at the Meyerhold Theater on March 3, 1923. See Meyerhold, *Stat’i. pis’ma. rechi. besedy*, 605.

⁹⁵ The Russian title of the play is *Les*. Meyerhold’s staging was a “composition” based on the classic play by Nikolai Ostrovsky. It premiered on January 19, 1924.

Eisenstein's "aggressive" method of montage pushed emotional buttons relentlessly to jolt, shake and stun the spectator.⁹⁶ In practice this proved to be much more the case with his films than his theatrical productions. His two previous theatrical productions, *The Mexican* and *Enough Simplicity for Every Wiseman*, were packed with comic bits, satire, and parody. The latter, described as a "polit-buffonade," drew upon circus and music hall routines as well as fairground entertainment.⁹⁷ It presumed the audience's familiarity with Ostrovsky's classic play, mooring the montage more closely in narrative. In contrast, *Are You Listening, Moscow?* reduced the number of attractions to intensify their shock value, anticipating the method and tone of his first films: *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*.

THE CRITICAL DIVISION

In his review of the premiere, Prokofiev found a fatal flaw in the production. He viewed the production skeptically since agitation should convincingly and concisely elicit a specific feeling or attitude in one's audience, as he put it.⁹⁸ This production, he noted, continually reminded the audience that it was just watching a play. He discovered other problems. The Count's retinue spoke their lines in whining falsettos. He reasoned, "agitation depends upon the word, yet half of them were lost with this unnatural delivery." Moreover, the actors were not "living people" but "acting mechanisms." Why was this so, he wondered, when "theater like all the other arts appeals to the spectator's feelings?"

In light of our discussion of the avant-garde left, the director's choice of falsetto and "eccentric" acting becomes clear. They had become conventions in the revolutionary theater, which used satire and caricature to deride class enemies. It was befitting that Count Steel, a name of menacing gravitas, should deliver his lines in a high-pitched squeak to produce a ridiculous and grotesque image of the "bourgeois" tyrant. As in the early form of French guignol, the dialogue moved quickly and even included some amusing if "unintentional" wit. The cast of characters inspired revulsion and hatred, especially in connection with the first "attraction" already described when Curt spat on Marga's leg and she responded by whipping him.⁹⁹

The Bishop, a caricature of hypocrisy, is altogether mercenary, displaying acumen in allaying Mr. Pound's worries and encouraging the banks' investment, while showering Count Steel with reverential epithets such as "your excellency" and "your highness." These social masks were the walking-and-talking equivalents of

⁹⁶ See Selezneva, 105 who contrasts Eisenstein's methods with those of Dziga Vertov and Lev Kuleshov, two contemporary cinematographers.

⁹⁷ Ignatov: 15.

⁹⁸ Prokof'ev: 12.

⁹⁹ Margolin claimed that in this production there was not even a hint of sadism as in the intimate theater of guignol. He argued that the spectator saw "horror" in the gross inequality between the fascist forces represented by Count and his minions and the Communists.

the caricatures of political figures, capitalists, and clergy seen in Soviet posters of the Civil War era. In performance, they presented a gross buffonade reminiscent of Petrushka plays in Russian folklore.¹⁰⁰

Audiences enjoyed the gross caricatures, not because they were simple or “avant-garde,” but familiar and comical. What Prokofiev believed to be a fatal flaw only pertains to realistic plays. Audiences at the *balagan* and the circus were continually reminded that they were just watching a show. Furthermore, his appeal to the “spectator’s feelings” is reminiscent of Lunacharsky’s critique of *The Dawn*. But here it is beside the point. The aim was to entertain the audience while building a sense of indignation. What Prokofiev called “unnatural” movement highlighted their repellent nature. The adjective “unnatural” often appeared in polemics against “futurism,” echoing Krupskaya’s aversion to the sets in *The Dawn*.¹⁰¹ Obviously, Prokofiev was either unfamiliar with the conventions at play or willing obtuse.

Understood within the context of Eisenstein’s theatrical experiment and Tretyakov’s script, the mechanical movements and shrill voices not only inspired disgust. They worked in combination with the emotional counterforce of the Communists’ words and deeds. Indeed, the intonation, modulation, and tone of the lines delivered by the court members were more important than their words. Their exchanges operated as a superficial and phatic sort of communication—just what one would expect at the court. For example, the first word that the Count speaks is the greeting “hello” delivered with a lisp:

Count. Gweetings! Mr. Pound! Glad to meet you. Let me introduce my friend, the most enchanting Marga, the artist Grubbe, the poet Grabbe.

Grubbe (to Marga). An amazing place! The color of the horizon! Only the color of your eyes is purer than it.

Grabbe. The tribune will be here. Like at a tournament I, your devoted troubadour, will sing stanzas in honor of the rose blossoming on the dying vine.

This contrasted with the deliberate dutifulness of the Communists. Throughout the play, the vulgarity and complacency of the characters in the court are contrasted with the seriousness and urgency of the communists.

Marga’s bare thighs in Act I and Act IV were an issue of serious contention for Sergei Prokofiev, the communist theater reviewer for the *Worker Spectator*, the theater arts weekly of the Moscow City Soviet of Professional Unions, known by its acronym MGSPS (*Moskovskii gorodskoi sovet professional’nykh soiuzov*).¹⁰² In his

¹⁰⁰ Petrushka was a common figure in folklore and represented the worker in the agitational Theater of Revolutionary Satire (*Terevsat*), the forerunner of the Theater of the Revolution. Actors performed in the lubok-balagan manner like live puppets, enacting simple, poster-like scenes. See *Russkii sovetskii teatr 1917-1921*, 188.

¹⁰¹ Prokofiev repeatedly used the adjective “unnatural” to describe aspects of the production.

¹⁰² This “mass” journal was targeted to a broader “proletarian” readership. The content was highly politicized. For example, the synopsis of Maeterlinck’s magical

view, the production deliberately concentrated the spectator's attention on Marga throughout the play. This was distracting for the spectator and unseemly in a play about the class struggle. As he described it, when the theater audience joined the victorious proletariat onstage in singing the *International* during the finale, Marga was swinging from the gallows with her naked thighs shining in the lights. This shattered the revolutionary spirit and occasioned snickering and disbelief among the spectators.¹⁰³

To support his claim, he reported that one of the workers who was present at the performance could not answer the simple question of whether he liked Act I or not, admitting, "I don't know, all I remember is naked thighs." In fact, Marga did figure prominently in the production, but Prokofiev used her legs as fodder in his criticism of the Theater's aesthetics, which he regarded as "formalism."

Those who criticized the avant-garde and its growing dominance in the early 1920s commonly applied this label to denigrate theatrical experiments and nonfigurative compositions in general. The pejorative term "formalism" implied several criticisms of avant-garde art. It supposedly lacked revolutionary "content." It was "incomprehensible" to the proletariat. Moreover, in the opinion of communist critics representing the views of the proletarian left, avant-garde art was "bourgeois" owing to its roots in prerevolutionary culture. As Ilya Trainin instructively wrote, "First and foremost, as the positive sum of collective sensibilities, feelings, and experiences, proletarian art is clear and understandable to everyone."¹⁰⁴

The "mechanical acting" that Prokofiev criticized also indicates little appreciation of the aesthetics of Proletkult. For the communist-heroes, the theater employed a different approach to acting. As N.B. Volkova noted about the theatrical circles of Proletkult, many rejected the realistic traditions of the old theaters and embraced a theory of "collective action."¹⁰⁵

When Meyerhold took the helm of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros, he transferred the "Tonal-Plastic Division" to Proletkult. Tonplaso rejected Stanislavsky's method acting by embracing Platon Kerzhentsev's anti-psychologism, the Swiss choreographer Emile Jacques-Dalcroze's ideas of musical awareness through physical movement, and Vyacheslav Ivanov's advocacy of Greek choric song and dance.¹⁰⁶ The Proletkult performance of *Labor*, which premiered on December 16, 1920, included a dance-drama with tableaux prefiguring the pantomime scene in Tretyakov's *Moscow, Are You Listening?*¹⁰⁷

Proletkult actors were versed in this type of choreographed dramatic movement. It telegraphed the idea of the collective energy of workers to the

Blue Bird at the Moscow Art Theater was characterized as "an excellent example of how the bourgeoisie resorts to sophisticated means to distract workers from the class struggle." See "Siniiaia ptitsa," *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 1 (December 22, 1923): 45.

¹⁰³ Prokof'ev: 13.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Mally, 145-46.

¹⁰⁵ *Russkii sovetskii teatr 1921-1926*, 328.

¹⁰⁶ Leach, 155.

¹⁰⁷ *Russkii sovetskii teatr 1921-1926*, 329.

audience. Tretyakov describes the choreography of the movement in the theatrical production:

The entire construction of the movement depended on the simplest organic movement, spreading out and once again collecting in an elementary way, some times into complex figures (as during the murder of the agent provocateur). The construction of the movement based not on inner experience,¹⁰⁸ but the opposite, on studying the mechanism of movement in reality, yielded the expected result: the typical remarks of spectators...made it clear that the nature of the performance built upon calculated movement, tempo and emotional tension was completely identical with that collectedness and plasticity familiar to anyone who seriously carries out any kind of work.¹⁰⁹

In response to Prokofiev, Samuil Margolin defended the production in a review published in the *New Spectator*. He explained that antipathy toward the Proletkult Theater blinded Prokofiev and his colleagues to the rhythm of revolutionary theater. He explained that Prokofiev had not grasped the inner essence of the performance. He posed a rhetorical question, "What is the essence here?" and responded: "THE RHYTHM, RHYTHM, RHYTHM—OF SOCIAL STRUGGLE!" He continued, "The MGSPS superbly noted 'The coquette Margo with little bare thighs,' but altogether missed the miraculous and immediate enthusiasm of revolutionary theater, the rhythm of *Are You Listening, Moscow?*"¹¹⁰ Dmitriev also reports that during the intermission, as the public watched, stagehands put together the tribune to the rhythmic ticking sound coming from backstage.¹¹¹

Samuil Margolin also responded Prokofiev's review of the premiere. His observations suggest that these aesthetic disputes were actually rooted in the contest for ideological dominance. Margolin frankly stated that Proletkult "called forth the blind hatred and enmity" of MGSPS.¹¹² He noted that MGSPS had been loath to grant Proletkult the right to perform in the Hall of Columns at the House of Trade Unions and only decided in favor of Proletkult's request after a long debate. He reasoned that for two organizations that should be so close to one another by all rights, this seemed strange. After all, he added, Proletkult's "entire audience consisted of the industrial proletariat."

His characterized MGSPS as unreasonable, incapable of understanding the artistic essence of the Theater's work, and culpable for the lamentable relationship

¹⁰⁸ The term used here is *perezhivanie*.

¹⁰⁹ Tret'iakov, 56.

¹¹⁰ Samuil Margolin, "Proletkul't: K MGSPS i obratno," *Novyi zritel'*, no. 3 (January 22, 1924): 8.

¹¹¹ Iu. A. Dmitriev (ed.), *Istoriia russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1984), 87. The rhythmic device was added after the premiere performance.

¹¹² Margolin, "Proletkul't: K MGSPS i obratno": 8. He implicated the Presidium, the Cultural Department and Theatrical-Artistic Bureau of MGSPS.

between the two organizations. He hoped that Proletkult would become the artistic center for the members of the Trade Unions and eventually direct MGSPS's artistic work among the masses—a comment that would not fail to further aggravate the situation. In his monograph on the First Workers' Theater of Proletkult published in 1930, Margolin distinguished between the aesthetic tastes of working-class audiences who really enjoyed *Are You Listening, Moscow?* and those of the “conservative bosses” in Proletkult and MGSPS.¹¹³

In his theatrical review published in 1924, Margolin launched a blistering critique of *Caligula* at the MGSPS Theater. Picking up the thread of commentary about exposed flesh, he admitted that he liked neither Messalina in *Caligula* nor Marga in *Moskva* despite the fact that the former wore a “modest low dress” and the latter offered the “offensive seduction of her bare thighs.” He proceeded to pose a series of rhetorical questions: Was Proletkult's revolutionary form not preferable to the “counter-revolutionary or at best apolitical content” of the MGSPS production? Was the self-love of a tyrant in ancient Rome closer to the proletariat than Tretyakov's play about the contemporary working class in Germany? More to the point, he prodded his reader, what was the revolutionary element in *Caligula* since it lacked rhythm altogether? With apparent exasperation he demanded to know “to what degree does this entire conglomeration of tastelessness, provinciality and petty bourgeois spirit in *Caligula* outweigh the sharp contemporaneity of the work by *Proletkult*???”

The review crescendoed asking, “Is the perfectly oiled MGSPS ticket distribution apparatus guilty of not only hospitably providing tickets to the play, but also A TRIP TO ANCIENT ROME FROM REVOLUTIONARY MOSCOW???”¹¹⁴ The cheeky review concluded: “No, comrade-members of the trade unions, even if all roads lead to Rome, refrain from taking this one.”¹¹⁵

These reviewers might seem surprisingly disputatious, but the caustic tone of their exchanges is understandable when set within the contemporary context of theater politics. Margolin wrote that the “grounds for the ideological disagreements” between MGSPS and Proletkult might seem strange given that the two organizations were so close in theory. But the ideological disagreements underpinned their aesthetic differences and both were symptomatic of competition for power and resources. This explains why the ideological divide crystallized and further widened despite the fact that the organizations should be so close, presumably in serving the industrial proletariat. But as organizations, they first served themselves. It is no accident that Margolin ended his tirade by mentioning “the perfectly oiled MGSPS ticket distribution apparatus.”

In the early 1920s, a four-tiered system of dramatic theater emerged. At the top, the academic theaters under Lunacharsky's direct purview received state funding. As noted, this included the premier institutions of the Bolshoi Opera, the

¹¹³ He used the term *verkhushki*, or “higher-ups,” to describe the “trade union bosses.” See Samuil Margolin, *Pervyi rabochii teatr Proletkul'ta* (Moscow: Teakinopechat', 1930), 42.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Maly Dramatic Theater, the Moscow Art Theater, and the Chamber Theater. The second rung consisted of other theaters funded by the Commissariat of Enlightenment, such as Proletkult, the State Jewish Theater, and the Children's Theater. Third, there were theaters funded at the municipal level. For instance, the Moscow Department of People's Education supported the Theater of the Revolution. Finally, major Soviet institutions also funded theaters. The MGSPS Theater received its operating budget from the Moscow City Trade Union Council.¹¹⁶

Margolin's arch question asked the reader to deplore the fact that the MGSPS Theater presented "revolutionary" fare such as *Caligula* and MGSPS had the resources to fund a ticket distribution system and subsidize the cost of tickets, presumably filling the auditorium of the Theater.¹¹⁷ Tickets to Proletkult performances could be sold as at a discount under NEP, but they were not distributed for free. His argument is as follows: Proletkult's aesthetics were revolutionary as the rhythm and theme of *Are You Listening, Moscow?* demonstrated. Proletarian audiences really enjoyed it: it appealed to the working-class public, whom it served. Therefore, it had a legitimate claim to become the artistic center the trade union members, even to direct the MGSPS Theater—that is, to greater power.

Moreover, its relative lack of resources in comparison with the MGSPS Theater was unfair. In contrast, the MGSPS, which supposedly served the working-class public, presented conservative fare that was of poor quality: clearly the artistic directors lacked the necessary cultural capital. Moreover, its popularity with the union members was based on the distribution of free tickets.

At its foundation, Proletkult was neither counter-cultural nor oppositional: it was a subculture.¹¹⁸ It represented a theoretical and practical attempt to empower workers to become leaders in Soviet society and in the new regime. Following the Revolution, working class origins provided advantages for promotions and Party membership. But in the period of reconstruction following the Civil War, specialists were sought after to fill positions in industry and bureaucratic posts; the Party ranks filled with those possessing higher degrees as the apparatus grew. The worker still occupied a place of pride in propaganda, but his status in everyday life declined throughout the 1920s.

When Proletkult withered away as a mass movement, only the major clubs survived and they operated under the auspices of large enterprises. Party members and specialists ran the organizations. Theater professionals managed the First Workers' Theater of Moscow Proletkult and the Proletkult studios. Founding

¹¹⁶ On the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment and organizational issues in the theatrical field from 1918 through 1920, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and Arts under Lunacharsky, 1917-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 139-161.

¹¹⁷ This accounts for the fact that 11,429 spectators saw the fifteen performances of *Caligula*, roughly twice as many as *Are You Listening, Moscow?* See A. I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Filippov and A. Rodionov, 172.

¹¹⁸ On the concepts of subculture and dominant culture, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

members of Proletkult directed the Proletkult Theater and studios before Eisenstein. Eisenstein directed avant-garde productions of plays that projected and reproduced the dominant system of political narratives. In *Are You Listening, Moscow?* the tale was the heroic working class as a revolutionary martyr. After his departure, the Proletkult Theater began to produce the realistic plays of young proletarian playwrights, most notably Alexander Afinogenov.

In broader historical perspective, the nineteenth-century movement of the people's theater was the precursor of Proletkult. Similarly, the explosion of avant-garde groups was a continuation of the artistic revolution underway before 1917. This fostered the sectarian politics into Moscow theater culture during the early Soviet era. The leaders of the avant-garde were accomplished artists with reputations dating from the pre-revolutionary period. Many came from intelligentsia, middle-class, or wealthy families. Excepting the theorists of the movement and top officials in the Executive Committee, the social origins of the leaders of the proletarian movement were provincial intelligentsia or working-class. Prokofiev characterized the cultural clash between the avant-garde and Proletkult as a struggle to attract the most valuable and ideologically strong artistic forces to revolutionary-proletarian theater and to expose the petty-bourgeois essence of so-called "revolutionary" theaters to workers.¹¹⁹

Of course, the revolution radically transformed the public. The pre-revolutionary social roots of Moscow theater culture were in large part eradicated by the October Revolution. But certainly none of the Soviet theaters had a "uniform" audience in class terms—definitely not the dramatic theaters located in the center of Soviet Moscow. Surely, some succeeded in developing core working-class audiences in the 1920s, but the premier "revolutionary" theaters drew "mixed" audiences due to the quality of their productions.

Plays like *Are You Listening, Moscow?* represented powerful political fictions. Strictly speaking, the play was a fantasy of proletarian revolutionary ethos. Yet this melodrama of communist heroes and collectives acting together to achieve a political goal played a role in creating and reproducing the moral community of the Soviet "community." The working-class was a political fiction: the product of tremendous amounts of "mental and manual labor." Like it, "Soviet Russia" was a collective representation in the true Durkheimian sense.

Eisenstein contributed to establishing the institution of Soviet era revolutionary theater, which reproduced popular belief in such foundational communist sociopolitical ideas as "the working class" and "Soviet Russia." But unlike propaganda and posters, theater provided the emotional and habitual correlates for these conceptual structures. Geertz writes that "ideologies transform sentiment into significance" through a process of interworking in the public world.¹²⁰ Theater moves in the opposite direction, transforming significance into sentiment.

¹¹⁹ Sergei Prokof'ev, "Teatr kak agitator," *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 2 (January 1, 1924): 6.

¹²⁰ Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System" *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 207 and 213.

Following Kronstadt, the limits of public discourse drastically narrowed in Soviet Russia. The Bolshevik Party and police apparatus radically reduced the potential for collective action. Ironically, *Are You Listening, Moscow?* symbolically presented the working-class audience with an illusion of what it lacked in reality: power. Its mighty narrative of working-class revolutionary history deeply resonated with the political construction of reality in an era that saw the political disempowerment of the Russian working class in actuality.

FIVE

Theater During the Era of the New Economic Policy

Taste has no system and no proofs.

Susan Sontag

The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in March 1921 launched post-war reconstruction. The limited privatization under the NEP revived the growth of commercial industries and agricultural markets, but the regime remained in control of the “commanding heights” of big industry, banking, and foreign trade. Yet, the state-sanctioned enterprises of businessmen darkened the dreams of socialism for many. From private traders to criminal gangs, the so-called Nepmen were thought to be corrupting society and officialdom, a belief that was not without basis, however exaggerated in popular consciousness. The conspicuous consumption of the nouveaux riches was viewed by many as a blatant insult to the “toiling masses” in a land rife with poverty and hunger.

In 1923, the “Scissors Crisis” developed when the prices of manufactured goods sharply rose while the prices of agricultural goods declined and farmers temporarily withdrew from the market. Lenin’s death in 1924 finally unleashed the power struggle brewing in the Communist Party leadership. Leon Trotsky, the commander of the Red Army during the Civil War, led the Left Opposition against the political rise of Joseph Stalin.

Between 1897 and 1926, urbanization saw the population of Moscow double to over two million. The growth of the educated population in Moscow underlay the expansion of the potential audience for theater and the numbers working in the field of theater. Russian society and the theater public changed abruptly in 1917, but social change continued unabated. Soviet Russia was still a revolutionary society undergoing major social change in the 1920s. Theater remained central to cultural life in Moscow. To be sure, attendance had dropped from a high of 97.3% of the seats in the theater auditoriums filled during the 1920/21 season, when the distribution and sale of tickets totaled 1,612,993 seats.¹ Four years later, attendance was down almost forty percent overall because the introduction of the New Economic Policy dictated an increase in the prices of theater tickets, but the number of tickets sold remained roughly the same at 1,607, 260 because the number of performances had significantly increased.² Yet statistics do not tell the whole story.

¹ A. I. Mogilevskii, “Moskovskie teatry v tsifrakh: staticheskii obzor gg. 1919/20-1926/27),” *Teatry Moskvy 1917-1927: stat'i i materialy*, ed. A. I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Filippov, and A. M. Rodionov (Moscow: GAKhN, 1928), 17, table 5. This is based upon the twenty-two dramatic theaters that supplied data.

² *Ibid*, 18, table 5 (continued). The total number of performances was 2,348 and 3,551, respectively. The figures for the 1924/25 season were based on the data supplied by twenty-five theaters.

THE TASTES OF THE THEATERGOING PUBLIC

Bourdieu argues that homologies between the field of cultural production and the habitus of consumers magically orchestrate the provision of works that satisfy the tastes of each segment of the public. Consequently, people have a taste for things that they can afford.³ However, the social dislocations that revolution brings upset the dynamics of art worlds. As we have seen, discounted tickets, free performances and organized excursions accounted for the large presence of workers at the Theater RSFSR-I at performances of *The Dawn*. These same policies accounted for the arrival of the “new public” in the Moscow Art Theater immediately following the October Revolution. The New Economic Policy had direct consequences for theater. Narkompros still funded the state theaters, but the policy of *khozrashchet*, or cost accounting, meant that budgets were slashed and the theaters lacked sufficient funds to cover all their operating costs, including building repairs. Therefore, the dramatic theaters examined their repertoires with an eye towards the box-office and the public who paid for full-priced tickets in mind.

The Box Office

With the introduction of NEP, several mechanisms were introduced to keep the cost of tickets down for workers. The “workers’ belt” system sold discounted tickets to the trade unions. Essentially, it was a system of sales contracted between the central theaters and the trade unions.⁴ The Theater Arts Bureau of MGSPS distributed the tickets to the many different trade union organizations.⁵ MGSPS stood for the Moscow City Soviet of Trade Unions (*Moskovskii gorodskoi sovet professional’nykh soiuzov*). The discounts ranged from forty to fifty percent off the face value of the ticket. While the workers’ belt ensured the availability of cheaper seats to workers for performances at the central theaters, it rarely offered tickets to the most popular theaters and shows.⁶

The “special” performance was another institution that increased the presence of workers in the central theaters. Beginning in 1923/24 season, trade unions could purchase special performances. A special performance was the sale of

³ See Bourdieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, chapter 7, “The Choice of the Necessary.”

⁴ The number of tickets commanded by a particular trade union depended on its size. For instance, the number of members in the Metal Workers Trade Union (*Soiuz metallistov*) far exceeded the number in the Union of Workers in Food Industries (*Soiuz pishchevikov*).

⁵ Later, the Central Theater Box-Office and the Theater Distribution Bureau also sold discounted tickets. See Vl. Filippov, “Repertuar Oktia’brskogo desiatiletia,” *Teatry Moskvy 1921-1927*, ed. A. I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Filippov, and A. Rodionov, 71.

⁶ On the “workers’ belt” (*rabochaia poloska*), see A. I. Mogilevskii, “Moskovskie teatry v tsifrakh,” *Ibid*, 31-34.

the entire house for a given performance at a discount to a particular trade union.⁷ In the 1926/27 season, the Theater of the Revolution sold eighteen performances.⁸ In contrast, the MGSPS Theater sold twelve special performances during the 1923/24 season; thirty during the 1924/25 season; and thirty-seven during 1926/27 season.⁹

Clearly, the MGSPS Theater depended more on special performances to meet its revenue obligations to the Moscow City Soviet than the Theater of the Revolution. Since the sale of performances was instituted to increase revenue, it follows that theaters sold few hit shows in order to maximize revenue from the sale of full-priced tickets.

Finally, theaters gave free performances. During the 1920/21 season over seventeen percent of the performances at the state theaters were free.¹⁰ Under the NEP, during the following two seasons the percentage fell to seven percent and, during the subsequent two seasons, to four percent. In the next two years it dropped by another percentage point. However, both the Theater of the Revolution and the MGSPS Theater fell under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Department of People's Education (MONO).¹¹ During the 1922/23 season, when the percentage of free performances at the state theaters fell to seven percent, at the theaters under the jurisdiction of MONO over one-fifth of the performances were free.¹²

Free performances differed from special performances. Tickets to the former were distributed by theaters to scores of different institutions, whereas tickets to the latter were distributed by the organization that purchased the performance.¹³ Based upon evidence for 129 out of the 159 performances given at the Theater of the Revolution during the 1922/23 season, 24 were free.¹⁴ This amounts to 18.6% of the performances.

The "average" ticket for a performance at a dramatic theater in Moscow cost 63 kopeeks during the 1924/25 season.¹⁵ For state theaters, prices were set by the

⁷ On "special performances" (*tselevye spektakli*), see *Ibid*, 12-16 and Filippov, "Repertuar Oktia'brskogo desiatiletia, *Ibid*, 71-73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-73.

¹⁰ Mogilevskii, "Moskovskie teatry v tsifrakh," *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ The Moscow Education Department was known by its acronym, MONO (*Moskovskii otdel narodnogo obrazovaniia*).

¹² Filippov, "Repertuar Oktia'brskogo desiatiletia," *Ibid.*, 65. The Korsh Theater, a privately run enterprise established in the prerevolutionary period, was also under the jurisdiction of MONO. The Moscow City Soviet used its licensing of private theaters to leverage a fixed number of free performances from the Theater.

¹³ Narkompros covered the costs of free performances in the budgets of the academic theaters.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92, fn. 100.

¹⁵ Mogilevskii, "Moskovskie teatry v tsifrakh," *Ibid.*, 31. He reports that average cost of a discounted ticket during the 1923/24 season was fifty-one kopeeks and rose by 22.8 percent in the 1924/25 season which equals sixty-three kopeeks (for all theaters including the Bolshoi). Filippov does not report the average price of a ticket

Theatrical Department of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, and for theaters under the jurisdiction of MONO, by the Artistic Section of the Moscow City Soviet. Of course, this average combined the widely varying prices of tickets at different theaters and also mixed the prices of tickets on the main floor with those in the upper balcony. For example, the "average" price for a ticket to the Moscow Art Theater was 2 rubles 81 kopeeks and one to the Maly Theater just less than 2 rubles during the 1926/27 season.¹⁶ The average ticket to the Meyerhold Theater cost 1 ruble 41 kopeeks during this same season.

Certainly, tickets to performances at the Theater of the Revolution and the MGSPS were relatively cheap in comparison with the state theaters. The average price of a ticket to a performance at Proletkult was only 54 kopeeks.¹⁷ In 1928, the average cost of a ticket at the Theater of the Revolution was 1 ruble 12 kopeeks with a 40 percent discount.¹⁸

In an indignant response to Nikolai Semashko, the Commissar of Public Health who attended a performance of *The Empress's Conspiracy*, X. Diament methodically explained why it might indeed have been the case that there was not a single worker in the auditorium as Comrade Semashko had lamented in his published article.¹⁹ Diament reported that the Art Section of MGSPS received one hundred and thirty tickets daily through the workers' belt, of which thirty were main floor seats ranging in price from one ruble twenty-five kopeeks to one ruble seventy kopeeks. Since the average worker earned just fifty rubles or less each month, these discounted ticket prices were still expensive. The price of tickets at the theaters in worker districts was only fifteen to twenty kopeeks.²⁰

Grigorii Avlov adds further detail to the picture. He explains that the theater spectator was mistaken if he believed the price of the ticket bought him an evening of entertainment at one of the theaters in downtown Moscow. Upon arriving he incurred an additional expense at the coat-check. Moreover, this expense was not charged by the hanger but per person.²¹ The cost per person could range from ten to twenty kopeeks per person—a substantial amount. Facing this obstacle, those

for the Theater of the Revolution in 1925, but the average price of a ticket for a dramatic theater cost one ruble, forty-six kopeeks during that season. Discounts on tickets ranged from forty to fifty percent, hence a forty percent discount would equal 87 kopeeks and a fifty percent would equal 73 kopeeks. This roughly accords with Mogilevskii's data.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. On the "workers' belt" and the increase of revenue to the state theaters for the 1925/26 season see U., "K itogam sezona: eshche raz o rabochem zritele i gosakteatrov," *Programma gosakteatrov*, no. 40 (June 23-28, 1926): 4.

¹⁸ RGALI, f. 655, op. 1, d. 156, l. 113.

¹⁹ X. Diament, "O poseshchaemosti rabochimi teatrov," *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 15 (April 15, 1925): 1. The Korsh Theater mounted the production of Alexei Tolstoy's play. Diament cites Semashko's article in *Iskusstvo trudiashchimsia*.

²⁰ Ibid: 2.

²¹ Gr. Avlov, "Nedostatki mekhanizma v teatral'nom bytu zritel'ia," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 51 (December 21, 1926): 6.

with insufficient funds were obliged to return home. Some theaters also charged for the use of the restroom.

Performances at the central theaters ended late in the evening. In the case of a long performance like *The Soufflé*, after midnight, long after the streetcars stopped running. Those living in working-class districts were obliged to walk for an hour to make it home. The implication of Avlov's article is that ticket prices and proximity alone deterred workers from attending performances at the central theaters.

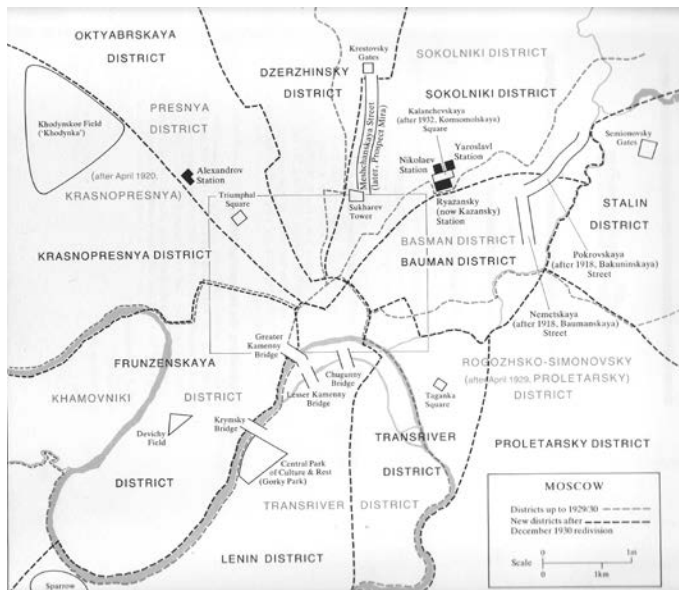


Figure 5.1. Map of Moscow's Working-Class Districts. The small rectangle at the center represents the location of the central theaters. Triumphal Square is on the northwest corner of the rectangle where the Meyerhold Theater stood. Source: *Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33*.

But tickets were often unavailable due to high demand. For the most popular shows, tickets could be virtually unobtainable.²² Beginning in the 1926/27 season, the sale of special performances by the academic theaters alleviated the situation to some degree. During the following season, charitable organizations such as the “Down with Literacy” Society began buying tickets to hit plays at the academic theaters and organizing ticket lotteries to raise money for their causes. For a few kopeeks one could buy a lottery ticket and win prized tickets. But the plan backfired because after all the middlemen—including genuine Nepmen—took their percentages on the sales of lottery tickets, little or no profit remained.

According to a directive dating from 1920, the first two rows on the main floor were reserved.²³ At the last moment, high-ranking officials or members of the

²² “V Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov,” RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 59, l. 134.

²³ A. Rodionov, “Materialy k istorii teatral'nogo zakonodatel'stva (1917-1927 gg.),” *Teatry Moskvy 1917-1927: stat'i i materialy*, ed. A. I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Filippov, and A. M. Rodionov (Moscow: GAKhN, 1928. Prior to 1917, the Imperial theaters were

creative intelligentsia might sit in these seats alongside the censors and agents of the GPU. This display of status sometimes competed with the performance for the spectator's attention and naturally increased as the ranks of the Party and state bureaucracies grew. Of course, class and status stratification were more evident at the Bolshoi Theater and the musical theaters where the privileged sat in the box seats.

Therefore, it seems that ticket prices were a determining factor in theatergoing. Tastes aside, the academic dramatic theaters were the most expensive, the revolutionary dramatic theaters were comparatively less expensive, and tickets to performances at the Proletkult Theater were relatively cheap. Also, tickets to performances at the Safonov Theater, a branch of the Maly Theater that performed in the outerlying working-class districts, were relatively cheap. Discounted tickets to the academic theaters were hard to come by whereas discounted tickets to the revolutionary theaters were not. Finally, the theaters under the jurisdiction of MONO provided free performances and even special performances of hit shows purchased by the trade unions.

On May 8, 1926, the Theater Research Workshop (*Teatral'naiia isslevodatel'skaia masterskaia*) under the jurisdiction of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) conducted a one-day general survey of the central Moscow theaters to determine the preferences and social profile of the Moscow theatergoing public. It provides intriguing data about the tastes of the theatergoing public.²⁴ However, in order to interpret these data, we must briefly profile each theater surveyed.

funded by the Court; all the other theaters were within the sphere of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' control.

²⁴ "Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov: Ankentyi odnodnevnik po moskovskim teatram," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 27 (July 6, 1926): 12-13 and the continuation in no. 28, (July 13, 1926): 13-14. These two journal articles cursorily summarized the data preserved in RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312. The Central Commission for the Study of the Spectator of the Political Education Directorate (Glavpolitprosvet) carried out a second survey two years later. To my knowledge, data from the 1928 survey were never published. These data are preserved in RGALI, fond 645, op. 1, d. 321. See chapter 6 for a discussion of this survey.

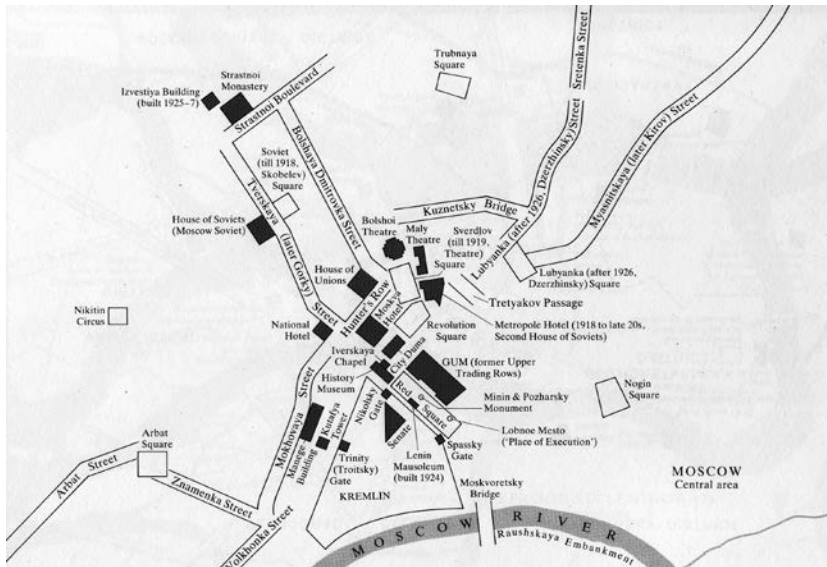


Figure 5.2. The downtown area demarcating the location of the central theaters. The Maly Theater on Theater Square is at the center of the map. Source: *Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33*.

There were four revolutionary theaters, all of which were established after the Revolution: the Theater of the RSFSR One founded in 1920, known as the Meyerhold Theater beginning in 1923; the First Worker’s Theater of Moscow Proletkult; the Theater of the Revolution; and the MGSPS Theater, all founded in 1922. Together they represented the “theatrical left.” However, as suggested in the previous chapter, a split was underway within the theatrical left between the avant-garde artists and their proletarian critics in the early 1920s. This ideological split is the topic of discussion in the final section of this chapter.

Name	Established	Repertory	Funding	Style
Maly	1806	Classics	Narkompros	Realistic
Moscow Art	1898	Russian drama	Narkompros	Realistic
Chamber	1914	Western drama	Narkompros	Avantgarde
Vakhtangov	1920	Comedy	Narkompros	Realistic
Meyerhold	1920	Contemporary	Narkompros	Avantgarde
Proletkult	1922	Soviet plays	Narkompros	Realistic
MGSPS	1922	Soviet drama	Trade Union	Realistic
Revolution	1922	Contemporary	Moscow Soviet	Realistic

Table 1. Moscow Dramatic Theaters, 1925

What the theatrical left called the “right” also consisted of four theaters: the Maly Theater, the Moscow Art Theater, the Chamber Theater, and the Vakhtangov Theater. When Lunacharsky removed them from Meyerhold’s jurisdiction in 1920, he renamed the “academic” theaters. Hence, the theatrical left also disparagingly referred to them as the “akies” (*aky*). The Maly Theater was the oldest theatrical institution in Russia. It was established in the early nineteenth century as the

Imperial dramatic theater in Moscow. As seen, the Moscow Art Theater was founded at the turn of the century with a social mission and upended the conventions of the Maly Theater.

In turn, the prerevolutionary avant-garde director Aleksandr Tairov founded the Chamber Theater as an anti-realist theater on the eve of World War I during the Silver Age of modernism. The Vakhtangov Theater was originally the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theater. Its director, Evgenii Vakhtangov, was Stanislavsky's pupil. His staging of the Carlo Gozzi's *Princess Turandot* was a brilliant synthesis of avant-garde technique and realism. He died from tuberculosis in 1922.

Actually, the "politics" of the theaters became confused during the 1920s owing to the box office. For instance, the new plays at the "revolutionary" Theater of the Revolution were not unlike those at the "academic" Vakhtangov Theater by 1925. Nevertheless, each theater had its own distinct character and differentiating on the basis of their repertoires is useful for understanding the survey results.

When the Moscow Art Theater returned from its extended tour abroad in 1924, the Meyerhold Theater had reached the heights of popularity. The gravity of *The Dawn* was uncharacteristic of his Soviet era productions. Most were satirical. For example, Meyerhold's reworking of Ostrovsky's nineteenth century classic, *The Forest*, was the sensation of 1924. Igor Ilinsky in the role of the comic actor Shchastlivtsev weaved vaudevillian bits and hilarious delivery into his performance. He played the accordion. There was dancing and singing. The audience roared with laughter and delight. But it was also a malicious satire on the Russia of landowners. Like Stanislavsky, his teacher, Meyerhold focused on exquisitely crafting every aspect of the theatrical production. Consequently, his theater added only a couple of new plays to its repertoire each season.

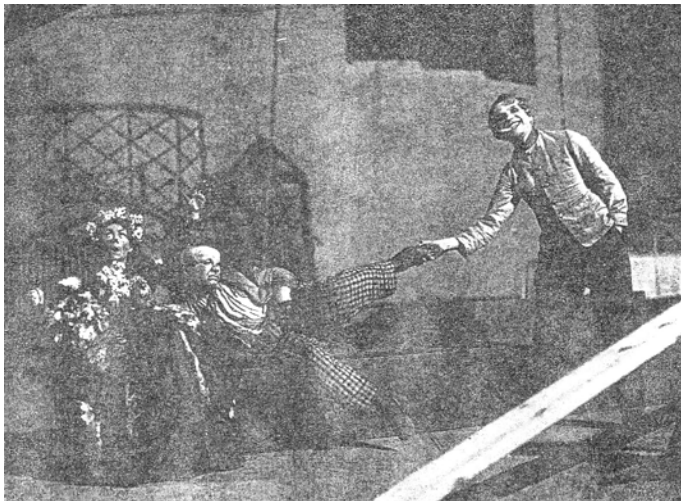


Figure 5.3. *The Forest* at the Meyerhold Theater. The photo illustrates the acrobatic clowning of Ilinsky in the role of the Comedian. Source: René Fülöp-Miller and Joseph Gregor. *The Russian Theatre: Its Character and History with Especial Reference to the Revolutionary Period*.

Besides reworking Russian classics in order to modernize them and sharpen their satirical edge, like his famous staging of Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General*, he staged contemporary satires, like Nikolai Erdman's *The Warrant*, which is essentially a Soviet version of Gogol's masterwork. The hero is a rogue who people fawn over, imagining him to be an important official. His "warrant" turns out to be a worthless slip of paper from a government office.

Meyerhold's involvement with the Theater of the Revolution shaped both its repertoire and its productions. The director Aleksandr Gripič trained under Meyerhold. The repertoire included satirical comedies like *Lake Liul* by Aleksandr Faiko and *A Profitable Post* by Nikolai Ostrovsky, but also new plays on historical "revolutionary" themes. For example, in 1925 the theater staged *Stenka Razin* by the futurist poet Vasily Kamensky. The seventeenth-century Stenka Razin was actually executed at the block in Red Square. In this play, the peasant masses are Bolsheviks and crowd the stage with red banners. One shouts, "Each of us is a Stenka Razin. We shall go with him to the sunlit expanses of a universal brotherhood for all mankind."²⁵ This chapter discusses its production of Faiko's *The Soufflé* in 1925.

As we have seen, under Eisenstein the First Worker's Theater of Moscow Proletkult staged contemporary plays on political themes using avant-garde devices and his "montage" approach. After his departure, the staging became more realistic as the theater mounted a play by Fyodor Gladkov and several plays by Aleksandr Afinogenov, a young journalist, whose first works were rudimentary, but the themes had appeal for the theater's young audience. This was an expression of its mission to serve working-class youth, as the clubs of Proletkult did earlier. The repertoire consisted solely of contemporary plays on Soviet themes.

Finally, the MGSPS Theater belonged to the theatrical left with its vocal opposition to the academic theaters, but until 1925, its repertoire consisted of Russian classics (Ostrovsky and Gogol), *Caligula* by Alexandre Dumas, and an historical play, *Herzog*, by Lunacharsky. It appears that it functioned as the equivalent of the academic Maly Theater for the working class public. It offered serious dramatic fare like the Maly, but tickets were considerably cheaper because the Theater Arts Bureau of MGSPS afforded trade union members the benefit of free performances, special performances, and discount tickets.

Its repertoire changed completely in 1926 with productions of Bill-Belotserkovsky's *The Raid*, a stage adaptation of Gladkov's *Cement*, and Shapovalenko's *In Our Days*. *The Raid* became a classic of Soviet drama. It is set in a provincial town during the Civil War. The protagonist is a vigilant and iron-willed Bolshevik whose soldiers defend the town against a raid by White Guardsmen. He dies a hero when a bullet finds him.²⁶ The MGSPS Theater staged the first two plays of Vladimir Kirshon, the proletarian playwright, in 1927: *Rust* and *Konstantin Terëkhin*. Therefore, beginning in 1926, the repertoire consisted solely of contemporary plays on Soviet themes.

²⁵ Gorchakov, 171.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.



Figure 5.4. *The Raid at the MGSPS Theater.* Source: N. Zograf et al. *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra.*

The Academic Maly Theater, known as the House of Ostrovsky, specialized in the classics of Russian and Western dramaturgy: Ostrovsky, Gogol, Beaumarchais, Moliere, and Shakespeare. Usually, it added five new plays to the repertoire every season.²⁷ The branch of the Maly Theater, the A. Safonov Theater, which performed at two locations in working class districts, opened in 1922. The troupe performed plays in the repertoire of the Maly Theater.

Upon its return to Soviet Russia, the Moscow Art Theater's first new production was Konstantin Trenev's *Pugachev's Rebellion* (*Pugachëvshchina*) based on the historical event in 1770s, during the reign of Catherine II. As Konstantin Trenev's tragedy begins, Emil Pugachëv is seen to be a braggart and liar. By the end, he has become the wise leader of the rebellion with dreams of a socialist paradise.²⁸ The tragedy made for good theater. Trenev painted Pugachëv and the Cossacks in living colors: ideal material for a Moscow Art Theater production.

In 1926, its repertoire included *The Lower Depths* by Gorky, *Woe from Wit* by Aleksandr Griboyedov, *A Burning Heart* and *Enough Simplicity for Every Wiseman* by Ostrovsky, *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich* by Alexei Tolstoy, *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov, *The Blue Bird* by Maurice Maeterlinck, *Nicholas I and the Decembrists* by Aleksandr Kugel, and Mikhail Chekhov's stage adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *The Tale of Ivan the Fool and His Brothers*.

Days of the Turbins by Mikhail Bulgakov premiered on October 5, 1926. It was a sensation. It depicted the Turbin family against the sweeping backdrop of the Civil War in the Ukraine. The eldest son, Alexei, is a colonel in the White Guard. Nikolka, the youngest, is a soldier. Bulgakov captured them as living Russian with

²⁷ See A. G. Movshenson, *Repertuar moskovskikh teatrov za sovetskii period: spisok prem'er za 1917-1936*, undated manuscript, Rossiiskaia teatral'naia biblioteka imeni A. V. Lunacharskogo, (St. Petersburg, Russia), 5-7.

²⁸ Gorchakov, 178.

their contradictions, with their awareness that they were in a blind alley, and with their death. He also showed their bright, human side as well. Its resonance with the Moscow public was profound, especially the members of the old intelligentsia.

After Vakhtangov's untimely death in 1922, the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theater, now renamed in his honor remained dormant until 1924 when it staged four comedies by Prosper Mérimée. In 1925, The Vakhtangov Theater staged *Virineya* by L. Seifulina. It was one of the first plays that dealt with the countryside and became the first Soviet play in the Theater's repertoire. It is set during the February Revolution. *Virineya*, the heroine, is sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause. She becomes the leader of the rural poor with the support of the revolutionary young people in the countryside.²⁹

The Chamber Theater was devoted exclusively to the Western dramaturgy: E.T.A. Hoffman, Racine, LeCocq, Shaw, and O'Neill. Its first production of a play by a Russian playwright was in 1928, when it *The Crimson Isle (Bagrovyi Ostrov)* by Mikhail Bulgakov.

Tastes

The general survey of Moscow theaters conducted on May 8, 1926 distributed 10,550 questionnaires at sixteen different theaters, but half of them were operatic, musical, or very small dramatic venues with limited repertoires. Only 1,028 questionnaires were completed, which represents a return rate of only 9.7%.³⁰ Short intermissions, impatience with questionnaires, and even illiteracy contributed to the low response rate. Nevertheless, at the dramatic theaters under consideration here, samples of surveys ranged between 100 and 400 number, although only 50 at the Chamber Theater and 40 at the Vakhtangov Theater. Fortunately, some questionnaires were partially completed, yielding a total of 2,017 with the fully completely ones.

The first question on the survey was "Which of the Moscow theaters do you like the most?" Collapsing the data received from 2,017 questionnaires, 45.3% most liked the "academic" dramatic theaters and 27.5% preferred the "revolutionary" dramatic theaters.³¹ However, the former also outnumbered the latter eleven to four. For the purposes of general comparison, the list of the top seven theaters including the Bolshoi Opera is sufficient.

19.6% named the Moscow Art Theater as their favorite; 17.7%, the Bolshoi; 15.0% the Meyerhold Theater; and 11.0% the Maly Theater.³² Seven percent of those polled most liked the Moscow Art Theater II, the former First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater. The Moscow Art specialized in staging Shakespeare—Anton

²⁹ Gorchakov, 189.

³⁰ "Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov: anketnyi odnodnevnik po moskovskim teatram," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 27 (July 6, 1921): 12. See footnote 24.

³¹ "Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov (prodolzhenie)," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 28 (July 13, 1926): 13. For example, *Goset*, the State Jewish Theater, was a small venue established in 1922 that performed plays in Yiddish. It added one or two new productions each season.

³² *Ibid.*

Chekhov's nephew, Mikhail Chekhov, starred as Hamlet in 1924. But in 1925, the Theater staged its first productions of contemporary plays: *The Flea*, a satirical play by Evgeny Zamyatin, and *Petersburg* by the symbolist Andrei Bely. The Theater of the Revolution garnered 6.0% and the MGSPS Theater 5.0%. This poll is best viewed as a general ranking of the top Moscow theaters.

Nevertheless, the response to this question is necessarily tied to repertoire and the popularity of specific plays. Therefore, the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theater was stale, but those respondents who saw *The Lower Depths*, *Woe From Wit*, *A Burning Heart*, *Blue Bird*, and *Tsar Fëdor Ioannovich* were unified in their praise. However, what is most striking about the respondents' reviews is that seven out of the ten plays most mentioned were produced at the revolutionary theaters. The top five were: *Roar, China!* by Tretyakov at the Meyerhold Theater; *The Raid* by Bill-Belotserkovsky at the MGSPS Theater; *The Warrant* by Erdman at the Meyerhold Theater; *Tsar Fëdor* at the Moscow Art Theater; and *The Forest* at the Meyerhold Theater.³³ To be sure, opinion divided over *The Warrant* and *The Forest*, but everyone saw them.

In tenth place was *Zagmuk* by Anatoly Glebov at the Maly Theater. It was the second play it ever staged by a living playwright, besides one by the Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky, and the first by a proletarian playwright. It is set in Babylon during the eighth century B.C. during the annual festival of Zagmuk when slaves are freed for eleven days. It is about an "early popular revolution: the slaves seize the city of Larak and decide to hold power permanently."³⁴ It ends in a bloodbath. The Assyro-Babylonian landowners reclaim control and behead the slave "king" Zer Siban. It must have been quite a spectacle.

Unpublished data from the general survey provide a fuller picture of the tastes of workers. Among the workers polled at the central theaters, the Meyerhold Theater came in first in terms of popularity (18%).³⁵ They preferred the Moscow Art Theater to the Bolshoi (17.0% and 16.4%, respectively). Also, the MGSPS Theater, where *The Raid* played, rated higher than the Theater of the Revolution (10.1% and 7.9%, respectively). Only 9.5% of those surveyed named the Maly Theater.

The Taste for Revolutionary Theater

Did the ideology espoused by the theatrical left actually buttress the tastes of people for revolutionary theater? Did they reinforce patterns of theatergoing among spectators? The general survey provides suggestive evidence. To review, among all spectators polled at the central theaters, the Moscow Art Theater was the favorite of almost one-fifth, followed by the Meyerhold Theater (15%), the Theater

³³ Ibid: 14. See the previous section for descriptions of these plays.

³⁴ Gorchakov, 172.

³⁵ RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 151. The sample is small, only ninety-five respondents, but this is to be expected because the overall percentage of workers in the sample of 1,028 respondents was 9%.

of the Revolution (6%), the MGSPS Theater (5%) and the Proletkult Theater, a small theater frequented by young people, only 1.5%.

But among those polled at the Meyerhold Theater, almost two-fifths of the audience (38.6%) named the Meyerhold Theater as its favorite. The Theater of the Revolution came in second (15.7%).³⁶ This does suggest that the audience at the Meyerhold Theater consisted of loyalists and that Meyerhold enthusiasts also saw his productions at the Theater of the Revolution. Also, the respondents at the Meyerhold Theater preferred the Moscow Art Theater (11.4%) to the MGSPS Theater (7.1%), which represented the proletarian left.

The revolutionary theaters also rated highly among respondents at the Proletkult Theater: more than one-quarter (28.4%) chose the Meyerhold Theater followed by the Theater of the Revolution (12.6%), but surprisingly few—only 9.5% of the respondents at the Proletkult Theater—named the Proletkult Theater itself as their favorite.³⁷ Respondents also preferred The Moscow Art Theater to the MGSPS Theater, 8.1% to 6.7%. Comparatively speaking, these respondents evinced little enthusiasm for the Proletkult Theater, the Moscow Art Theater, or the MGSPS Theater.

Conversely, those polled at the MGSPS Theater preferred the Moscow Art Theater to the Meyerhold Theater, 19.6% to 15.1% and only one percent named the Proletkult Theater. This is suggestive of the divide already traced between the avant-garde left and its audience, on the one hand, and the proletarian critics and workers with conservative tastes—that is, the majority of workers—on the other.³⁸ The repertoire and the affordability heightened the appeal of the MGSPS Theater among workers.³⁹ In addition, its ideological message continued to produce stalwart support from the ranks of the working class. In light of the standing opposition of the MGSPS leadership to the Meyerhold Theater, the measured enthusiasm for the Meyerhold Theater among the respondents is not surprising.

Moreover, the order was reversed for those polled at the Moscow Art Theater. Mirroring the responses at the Meyerhold Theater, they most liked the Moscow Art Theater (37%), which is also indicative of a core audience composed of loyalists. Ten percent named the Meyerhold Theater. None of the respondents listed the MGSPS Theater or the Proletkult Theater; only one respondent listed the Theater of the Revolution.

These data hint at a fundamental bifurcation in the public's patterns of theatergoing as well as its tastes, but may also evidence the influence of ideological footwork by competing actors. Also, it can be surmised that “swing” spectators,

³⁶ RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 46

³⁷ Ibid. The survey team returned to the Proletkult Theater and increased the return rate to 40.4%. See “Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov”: 12.

³⁸ RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 46. These archival data differ from the published data. Respondents at MGSPS preferred the Meyerhold Theater to the Moscow Art Theater 18.0% to 14.5% according to the latter. See “Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov (prodolzhenie)”: 13.

³⁹ The data for the percentage of respondents polled at the MGSPS Theater who chose the MGSPS Theater as their favorite was missing from the source.

probably the most avid theatergoers in Moscow from all of the main occupational groups, enjoyed performances at both the Meyerhold Theater and the Moscow Art Theater.

The theatrical productions of the academic theaters continued to define the center of gravity for tastes among the theater public in Moscow. When the Moscow Art Theater main troupe finally returned to Moscow in 1925 after a long tour abroad, the public embraced the realism and intimate emotional experience that defined drama at the Moscow Art Theater. The routine grandeur of Moscow's premier theatrical institutions—the Maly Theater and the Moscow Art Theater—helped to constitute the special experience of attending them, virtually guaranteeing satisfaction. Their capacity to command respect was undeniable because the Soviet public observed a ritual deference towards them. The Soviet state funded them in the name of the Soviet people and Russian culture. Performances at the academic theaters were also a special solace to the members of the traditional intelligentsia who sat in the auditorium during these unsettling times.

The data from workers surveyed at the Lenin Palace of Culture in a working-class district sheds further light on this question of taste. Most likely a former tsarist-era “People’s House,” the Palace of Culture was large. It contained an auditorium for theater, cinema, and lectures as well as rooms for recreational activities such as amateur “theater circles.”

The respondents liked the Bolshoi the most (16.2%) followed by the Moscow Art Theater (11.3%).⁴⁰ Only 9.7% of the respondents named the Meyerhold Theater, that is, roughly half as many as polled at the central theaters. The Theater of the Revolution and the MGSPS Theater both rated 3.2%. No respondent named the Proletkult Theater. In other words, the revolutionary theaters were the favorites of only 16.2% of the workers at the Lenin Palace of Culture compared with 39.2% of the workers surveyed at the central theaters. The tastes of the workers at the Palace of Culture appear to be quite conservative: they inclined towards the Bolshoi Opera and the top two “academic” dramatic theaters.⁴¹

However, a confounding factor is that fact that over one-third (35.5%) of those at the Palace of Culture named the “Maly Theater” as their favorite—much more than the Bolshoi and Moscow Art Theater combined. This turns out to be less an index of “taste” than evidence of the importance of cost and convenience in theatergoing. The “Maly Theater” actually refers to the Safonov Theater, the branch

⁴⁰ “Svodka otzyvov rabochei chasti dvortsa um. Lenina i tsentral’nykh teatrov v sravnenii s obshchim otzyvom zritel’ia dvortsa 8 maia 1926 [A Summary of the Responses of the Working Class Part of the Lenin Palace and the Central Theaters in Comparison with the General Response of Spectators at the Palace on May 8, 1926],” RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 151.

⁴¹ This also applied to Red Army soldiers. The overwhelming majority of respondents to a survey conducted by the Moscow District Commission on Cultural Instruction (*shefstvo*) named the Bolshoi and Moscow Art Theater as theaters where they would most like to see a performance. *Moskovskii Gubrabis, Gubernaiia komissiiia po kul’turnomu shefstvu nad Krasnoi Armiei. Ankety zritelei spektaklia “Nikolai I i dekabristy (Mai 1926-28) i “Pugachëvshchina” (1925-26).*

of the Maly Theater that gave performances in the Lenin Palace of Culture and other working class districts.⁴² Indirect confirmation of this is the fact that a full seven percent of those polled at the Safonov Theater were unemployed in comparison with three percent at the Maly Theater located on Theater Square adjacent to the Bolshoi.⁴³

Unfortunately, any interpretation of the data is missing from the 1926 theater survey, which only provides statistical summaries. Surveys ask individuals to respond to questions, but individuals belong to families, social groups, and communities: this was especially true of those polled at the Palace of Culture. The data from the Palace of Culture hints at theatergoing as a collective cultural activity more tied to bonds based on family, residence and workplace in the lives of these respondents.⁴⁴

The data from workers polled at the Palace of Culture also reveals a striking contrast with the workers surveyed at the central theaters. Why were the latter so enthusiastic about the revolutionary theaters? First, the category of “worker” did not distinguish between educated, industrial proletariat, and semi-skilled, illiterate worker. The Meyerhold Theater remained the banner bearer for revolutionary theater in Moscow. We do know that students and young workers, especially those who were members of the Communist Youth League, were staunch supporters of the Theater. Its formal innovations, social satire, and ideological message appealed to their revolutionary ethos.⁴⁵ The general survey conducted two years later asked respondents to use the backside of the questionnaire to write in greater detail about contemporary theater.⁴⁶ A twenty-six year old student and Party member praised the Meyerhold Theater as “our near and dear, kindred theater.”⁴⁷

Owing to their continual ideological work and propagandizing, the theatrical left represented the revolutionary alternative to the status quo of the “right” in the minds of young people, especially Komsomol members, whether students, workers, or soldiers. Hence, the tastes of workers polled in the central theaters, who were

⁴² “Iz dokladnoi zapiski upravliaiushchego filialom Malogo Teatra (Teatra imeni A. Safonova) Z.G. Dal'tseva v direktsiiu Malogo Teatra” and “Proizvodstvennyi plan Malogo Teatra na sezon 1925/26 sezon [aprel'-mai 1925 g.],” *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1967. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1921-1926*, ed. A. Ia. Trabskii (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1975), 135-37. The branch also performed in the Rogozhsko-Simonovsky, Sokolniki, and Transriver (*Zamoskvoretskii*) districts of Moscow. See figure 5.1.

⁴³ “Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov”: 12. The May 8, 1926 survey shows that workers constituted eleven percent of the audience at the Safonov Theater.

⁴⁴ On the connection between class habitus as a form of conditioning (a “structuring structure”) and life-style as a set of tastes (a “system of classifying practices and distinctive signs”), see Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 169-75.

⁴⁵ See footnote 156 below.

⁴⁶ See footnote 24 about the 1928 survey.

⁴⁷ RGALI, f. 645, op. 321, l. 123.

perhaps younger and more politicized, inclined much more towards the revolutionary dramatic theaters (39.2%).

Echoing views heard in the 1920 survey of the Theater RSFSR-I, a twenty-three year-old worker respondent to the 1928 survey wrote, “contemporary plays do not properly illuminate contemporary life” and “the productions of the Meyerhold Theater and the Jewish Theater are incomprehensible to the spectator.”⁴⁸ This was the view of the proletarian left. He added that the Bolshoi, Maly, and Moscow Art Theaters were “inaccessible to workers,” that is, tickets were too expensive or impossible to find. A large contingent of workers at the Palace of Culture liked the academic theaters most: 26.5% named the Moscow Art Theater or the Maly Theater as their favorites.

Consequently, the explanation for the difference between the workers polled at the Palace of Culture and the workers polled at the central theaters rests in part on “tastes” generally construed. Yet additional data from the general survey make it clear that tastes did not necessarily translate into attendance figures. For instance, whereas eighteen percent of workers polled at the central theaters named the Meyerhold Theater as their favorite, workers constituted only eleven percent of the audience, at least on the day of the survey.⁴⁹

People who had the desire to attend dramatic theater, who had the means, and who lived closer to downtown where the central theaters were located were more likely to frequent them, including the revolutionary ones. Overall, at the major central dramatic theaters polled, workers constituted less than one tenth of the theater audience (9%) whereas “employees” accounted for almost half of the audience (48%).⁵⁰

In fact, “employees” ranged between forty-eight percent of the audience at the Meyerhold Theater and sixty-three percent of the audience at the Moscow Art Theater, at least on the day of the survey.⁵¹ What was an “employee?” This broad category referred to many different occupational groups, but in particular the lower ranks of the various state and Party *apparaty*, or agencies and bureaucracies. They were the officials involved in clerical and administrative work in the trade unions, the military, governmental offices, Party organizations, and various sectors of the economy. Synonymous with “white-collar” workers, “employees” also included typists, stenographers, store clerks, and teachers.

The Social Composition of the Sample

Survey question nine asked for the respondent’s occupation, but this data was not published.⁵² Presumably, artists, writers, actors and other members of the creative intelligentsia: professors, engineers, technical specialists, and other occupations were collapsed into the category “employees.” Therefore, the tastes of

⁴⁸ Ibid, l. 27.

⁴⁹ RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, 312, d. 151 and “Zritel’ moskovskikh teatrov,”: 12.

⁵⁰ “Zritel’ moskovskikh teatrov”: 12.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The archival materials do not describe these findings either.

“employees” in theater undoubtedly varied widely, but what employees obviously shared in common was the taste for theater.

“Students” represented over a quarter of the audience (26%). Other occupational categories included the “Red Army” (1% overall⁵³; 3.5% at the Moscow Art Theater); “professionals”⁵⁴ (6% overall; 9% at the Moscow Art Theater); “craftsmen”⁵⁵ (1% overall; 4% at the Maly Theater); “businessmen” (1% overall; 2% at the Bolshoi Theater); and the “unemployed” (3% overall; 7% at the Safonova Theater). The percentage of “employees” was highest at the Moscow Art Theater (63%).

In contrast, at the MGSPS Theater, the percentage of workers rose to sixteen percent. Indeed, the percentages of workers in the audiences at the revolutionary theaters were higher than elsewhere.⁵⁶ At the Meyerhold Theater and the Proletkult Theater, workers constituted eleven percent in both cases, a relatively high figure. Students predominated in the audience of the Proletkult Theater at sixty-three percent. Still, it is clear that however small the overall percentage of workers in the audiences of the central theaters, a large share of workers who attended dramatic performances saw them at the many academic theaters.

As would be expected, a combination of student status and age also influenced theater attendance. In the survey at MGSPS Theater, 70.1% of those polled were nineteen to thirty years old and 19.2% were thirty-one to forty-four years old.⁵⁷ At the Proletkult Theater, spectators aged 13 to 18 years represented sixteen percent of the audience, twice as much as other theaters.⁵⁸ This distinguished its public from all the other theaters. Students outnumbered workers almost six to one at the Proletkult Theater and two to one at the Meyerhold Theater.⁵⁹ Yet students also outnumbered workers by seven to one at the Maly Theater and almost four to one at the Bolshoi.

Like the differences between spectators in the broad occupational categories of “workers,” and “employees,” “student” status did not distinguish between those from intelligentsia backgrounds enrolled at institutions of higher education such as Moscow University who enjoyed the avant-garde Chamber Theater and students from peasant backgrounds enrolled at “Worker Faculties” who most liked the Proletkult Theater. The reduced admissions prices for students and student lifestyles help to account for the high percentage of students at theatrical performances and the lopsided ratios between workers and students. It also highlights the difficulty of disentangling the proclivity to attend theater as well as

⁵³ I have paired the overall average for each occupational group with the percentage at the theater where the group constituted the highest percentage of the audience.

⁵⁴ *Svobodnye professiia*.

⁵⁵ *Kustary*.

⁵⁶ The occupational composition of the audience at the Theater of the Revolution was not published.

⁵⁷ RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 202.

⁵⁸ “Zritel’ moskovskikh teatrov”: 12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Students also outnumbered workers at the MGSPS Theater.

preferences in theater from the price of theater tickets and the proximity of the theaters.

THE SOUFFLÉ AT THE THEATER OF THE REVOLUTION

Boris Romashov's play *The Soufflé* premiered at the Theater of the Revolution on February 19, 1925. The public flocked to see it: it was what contemporaries called a *boevoi spektakl'* or "hit show." The best-known plays at other theaters remained popular, but *The Soufflé* was one of the first new plays of the Soviet era about a contemporary issue.⁶⁰ The title of the play, *Vozdushnyi Pirog*, conjured up an exotic dessert for theatergoers. A pirog is a full-sized pie: the name derives from the ancient Slavonic word for a festivity or feast.⁶¹ But an "airy" pie is foreign to Russian cuisine. Some read it as a symbol of the tastes of the moneyed class in NEP society. Others saw in it a decadent image of capitalism and the corruption that was laying waste to revolutionary optimism in Russia. The play encouraged such readings.



Figure 5.5 Boris Romashov, the playwright. Source: *The New Spectator*, March 3, 1925.

A Synopsis of the Play and the Production

The plot of the comedy involves a small band of rogues that encircles the "red director" of a bank, Iliia Koromyslov. Although Koromyslov is a Communist Party member, he gets swept up in the whirlwind of deception and "bourgeois" diversions that arrives with the mendacious ringleader Semën Rak and consequently fails to notice what is happening right under his nose at the bank. The communist "cell" at the bank convenes a meeting of all parties involved to discuss the problems, but nothing is resolved. In the end, Koromyslov and the gang are arrested at their celebratory banquet just as the dessert is about to be unveiled.

⁶⁰ The play's title has been translated as *The Soufflé* or *The Meringue*. Rak's specifications to the cook and its "huge, pyramidal shape" in the final scene, indicate that it is a multi-layered confection.

⁶¹ The Russian title of Aleksandr Pushkin's play *Feast during Plague Times* is *Pir vo vremia chumy*.

Several reviewers agreed that the play in five acts and fifteen scenes dragged on too long at four hours in length. Perhaps audiences did not mind owing to the play's non-stop humor and absurdity. Rak's joking and gesticulations engrossed the audience. Rak claims to be the director of a commercial firm.⁶² He draws Koromyslov into his grand scheme of founding a new company that will enjoy international renown. Rak explodes onto the scene in Act I, "A Café on Tverskaya."⁶³



Figure 5.6. Tverskaya Street. The Triumphal Arch is seen in the distance. Source: Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*.

He orders pistachio ice cream and then changes his mind to crème brûlée. "Time is money," he says, looking around the audience to see if his truism has fallen on sympathetic ears.⁶⁴ He asks for the proprietor. Upon meeting Aesop Philistinovich, he displays the rapid-fire prolixity that enthralled the audience. He requires a "miracle" of confectionary art: It will be "an emblem of our enterprise. You understand, a pie-memorial. A pie-idea. A NEP pie, understand? Not a simple ornament. A monument, dammit! A monument made of confections. Crème that is light as air. Puff pastry like a cloud. Sugar sculpture and chocolate figurines. A

⁶² His surname means "crab" or "cancer" in Russian, which becomes the basis for endless puns and jokes. In Scene 3, Rak runs into a shady acquaintance at an ice cream stand. They argue about past dealings and Rak runs off. His ex-partner muses aloud, "Well, you just wait! You'll see what's what!" In Russian, the folk saying he literally translates: "You'll find out where the crabs spend the winter!" (Boris Romashov, *Vozdushnyi Pirog: Komediia v 5 deistviakh (15 tsenakh)*. *Repertuar Teatra Revoliutsii* (Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral'noe izdatel'stvo, 1925), 22.

⁶³ Lined with theaters, restaurants, and cafes, this famous cosmopolitan street runs northwest from Red Square at the city's center to the Garden Ring Road.

⁶⁴ Romashov, *Vozdushnyi pirog*, 11.

confectionery embodiment of our grandiose business!"⁶⁵ Mixing up the proprietor's name, he takes leave of "Philistine Aesopovich" and flies out the door.

The director of the production, Aleksandr Gripich tells us that Rak's appearance bore the signs of the NEP "renaissance." He had a small moustache and curly hair. He wore elegant suits, bowties, and a hat and gloves. At times, for more gravitas, he put on "American" eyeglasses.⁶⁶ He also played with a little cane. In a gesture to Soviet rule, he wore a red handkerchief in the pocket of his suit-jacket. The actor Dmitrii Orlov animated Rak's entire body when he spoke, bending his torso backwards from the waist and gesturing with his hands, elbows pressed firmly against his body.⁶⁷ At times he would smile endearingly and at others, triumphantly throw back his head, flaring his nostrils.

The play is filled with references to official and popular forms of contemporary culture. According to the theater program the action was set in 1922. For some reviewers, with its slices from everyday life, *The Soufflé* depicted Moscow in the full throes of the NEP. The many little scenes detailing the criminal element seemed to chronicle law breaking and abuses in the Soviet system. In Scene 2, at the Management Office in the Bank, they are discussing irregularities and forgeries in the accounts: funds are being diverted for personal use. The Manager, a communist, confronts the Bank Secretary and warns him about the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate.⁶⁸ This institution of "control from below" exposed abuses of power and red tape in the Soviet civil service. The Secretary calls him a "formalist" and a "pedant." In Scene 3, Rak's former associate asks him about the newspaper reports that the Cheka, the security police, in the past had arrested him. The Cheka was the forerunner of the KGB.⁶⁹

Scene 5 pulses with energy and introduces Rita Kern, the dancer. She is in league with Rak. Their con game is to get Koromyslov to loan them as much money as possible. She confides, "Oh, Ilya, I miss theater so much!" Koromyslov promises to open one, but she wonders when exactly it will happen. She wants to show him the "shimmy," the dance of the flappers during the Roaring Twenties. The shimmy and the foxtrot were the embodiment of "degenerate" Western urban culture. The clientele at exclusive nightclubs and restaurants in Moscow where the bands played "hot jazz" actually danced these steps. She asks for a loan of ten thousand rubles to pay the advance on a small theater.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁶ Zolotnitskii, *Budny i pradniki teatral'nogo Oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1978), 136-37.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 136.

⁶⁸ In was known by its acronym *Rabkrin* (*Raboche-kres'tianskaia inspektsiia*).

⁶⁹ The acronym "Cheka" stood for *Chrezvychainaia kommissiia*, the Extraordinary Commission in charge of arrests and summary executions during the Revolution and Civil War. The GPU (Main Political Administration) and the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) succeeded it.



Figure 5.7. Drawing of Anna Babanova as Rita Kern. Zolotnitskii, *Budni i prazdniki teatral'nogo Oktiabria*

The big con takes place in Scene 6. It is set in Koromyslov's living room. As the curtain rises, Koromyslov's sister-in-law Anna is complaining that "life in Soviet Russia is almost intolerable for us people accustomed to higher society."⁷⁰ The guests are engaged in pleasant conversation. With a wink to the theater audience, Melkin asks Kizyakovsky, the Chairman of the Cooperative Partnership "Pill": "May I ask if you have been to the theater here in Moscow?" Yes he has: "On my third day here I looked in at the Conservatory and they were showing naked women there." Anna is taken aback. Melkin urges him to continue. He continues, "Well almost naked: little wide-open skirts on the dancers with stockings on their legs. They called it the "left front" of ballet. The place was packed to the gills."⁷¹ In this case, the joke is about how the avant-garde "formal experiment" that packs the auditorium is related to the amount of flesh exposed.

Then Rak delivers his visionary business pitch: "The New Economic Policy has opened unlimited opportunities for commercial development."⁷² He explains that the profits of the company "ARP" will soon reach 150,000 in the gold equivalent of rubles. "ARP" stands for the American-Russian Industrial Association. Thirty-five percent of ARP stocks will be sold in America, the "the land of Morgan and Edison." Rak's speech entrances Koromyslov who pledges his support. In Scene 8, the representatives of the "Red Dawn" factory visit the bank concerning their loan request, but no one knows anything about it. In Scene 9, the whole business starts to unravel when the Manager Gusakov confronts Koromyslov about sacking

⁷⁰ Romashov, *Vozdushnyi pirog*, 34.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 36.

⁷² *Ibid*, 38.

workers, telling the latter that the Head Accountant and others have him tight in their claws.⁷³

With its slapstick hilarity, Scene 10 “The Theater Opening” surely had many in the audience rolling in the aisles. A group of theater critics were particularly negative about this scene and another slapstick sequence when Koromyslov is thrown out of a third floor window. It is set in Rita Kern’s dressing room before her performance. Koromyslov’s wife Sofia falls into a jealous rage. He ends up almost smothering her with a pillow. Following their hysterical argument, Miron Zont, the editor of the theatrical journal “Red Coulisse” enters the room with a stack of the most recent issue in hand. He is beaming with pride: “Do you care to take a look?” he asks. “It’s two and a half printed pages. Sixty illustrations! And such fine paper! Read the editorial. We advance the principles of a healthy aesthetic in theater in place of the degenerate bourgeois forms. What do you say?”⁷⁴ This is another wink to the audience, in this case parodying a conservative Marxist view of art that uses the contemporary buzzwords “healthy” and “degenerate.”

Scene 13 at the Restaurant “Alpine Arrow” gave the audience an imaginary picture of the lifestyle enjoyed by Nepmen. Rak, Rita Kern, and a fellow crook order caviar, “holy water,” that is, vodka, and some choice dishes. They joke about swindling, religion and love. Then the dancing begins: first the tango, then the shimmy. The scene ends in a frenzy of inebriated excitement: “Dollars, pounds, banknotes! The shimmy, the foxtrot, dancing! Carpe diem. Millions! Trillions! Bravo! Bravissimo!”⁷⁵ Certainly the scene invited the audience to experience a strange vicarious thrill.

Koromyslov comes to his senses too late. At the banquet in the Restaurant “Moderne” he gets word that he has been removed from his post at the bank. “What a disgrace” he says to the gathering as he buries his face in his hands.⁷⁶ “But, enough,” he continues: “Better late than never. Ilya Koromyslov’s story will serve as a good lesson for many.”

The Soufflé as Satirical Melodrama

At first glance, *The Soufflé* might seem to be a farce: it is stuffed with buffoonery. Its fast pace, light tone, complicated plot, absurd situations, and admixture of slapstick are defining features of the form. The characters constantly played to the audience. The play’s boisterous tone and never-ending word play contributed to its popularity if not critical acclaim: spectators certainly enjoyed it on this level. Yet, however improbable the situations in the play, the plot also raised the question of the corruption and chaos unleashed in Russia by the NEP. As the playwright averred, “The aim of the comedy is to provide a satirical portrayal of the dark sides of everyday commercial business” and its “dramatic core is the battle of

⁷³ Ibid., 64.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 120.

Nepmen and entrepreneurs with the new social order.”⁷⁷ Its director, Aleksandr Gripič, said that the Theater of the Revolution’s staging of the play was “designed to have a propagandistic effect on the spectator.”⁷⁸

The critics were correct to say that *The Soufflé* was not social satire. It did not employ heavy-handed grotesque or militant irony like Eisenstein’s *Are You Listening, Moscow?* and the many Meyerhold productions of those years, but instead satirical jest and wit. In its many forms, satire represents a lens through which society’s collective life is scrutinized. Comedy occasions laughter and may be satirical, whereas satire may be comical—but not necessarily. Since *The Soufflé* was artistically, emotionally, and ideologically zesty but not arrestingly sharp, the spectator easily enjoyed it as a zany, satirical comedy.

Like a comedy of manners, the plot revolves around a scandal. Some characters have label-like names similar to the stock characters of such comedies: Mr. Umbrella, Flop, and Snout. Fat Mouth was the original name for the Bank Director Koromyslov.⁷⁹ The play also mocks the polite behavior of the refined in Soviet society to some extent. But a comedy of manners amusingly shames the codes and conduct of a particular social group: the audience who is watching the performance. The playwright crafts his script with them in mind. Hence, hypocrisy is a favorite theme. Wit is the fashionable weapon for ridiculing the audience’s manners and highlighting their deviation from moral norms. Despite the ostensibly borrowings from this genre, *The Soufflé* did not lampoon the audience’s own attitudes and conduct because the auditorium held a broad cross-section of Soviet society. Nevertheless, the play could hold up a mirror to society to good effect. Actually, the interplay between the stage and the audience derived from several artistic, social and political registers.

Although a major departure from the avant-garde formula, *The Soufflé* retained the standard clash between the forces of good and evil. In classic fashion, the honest bank employees and the Communist Party cell are engaged in a just struggle against the corrupt members of the bank who are emboldened by Semën Rak’s gang. The essential divide lies between the socialist mores of the Soviet community, on the one hand, and profit motives of “bourgeois” society, on the other. But what might have been a clichéd battle is much more engaging here, not simply because of the humor. Romashov turns it into a suspenseful contest over Koromyslov’s soul. Now the fate of an individual is at stake. Will he be ensnared in the lures set by Rak or will he resolutely safeguard his integrity as the Red Director of the bank?

The formula decisively shifts with this production: it is a return to the popular genre of melodrama so beloved by illiterate audiences in Russia and the industrializing capitals of Europe in the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ Koromyslov is the

⁷⁷ B. S. Romashev, “Vozdushnyi pirog,” *Rabochii teatr*, no. 18 (May 1, 1925): 7.

⁷⁸ A. L. Gripič, “Vozdushnyi pirog,” *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Tolstorotov*. “Iz protokola zasedaniia pravleniia Teatra Revoliutsii o postanovke p’esy B.S. Romashova “Vozdushnyi Pirog” 26 noiabria 1924 g.,” *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1967. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1921-1926*, 242, fn. 24.

⁸⁰ On melodrama and farce, see Swift, 126-28.

beguiled victim of this melodrama, beset by Rak, the scheming villain. The Red Director becomes the site of the struggle between vice and virtue. Gusakov, who represents the virtuous community, repeatedly tells Koromyslov that he is in the grips of a devious, dishonest group that will lead him to ruin. Scene 13 at the “Alpine Arrow” Restaurant illustrates the depths of their depravity. But there is hope that Koromyslov will grasp the extent of the fraud being perpetrated and recognize his complicity.

Kryshkin, the Secretary of the Communist Party cell convenes a general meeting of bank employees.⁸¹ The cell seeks to resolve the problems.⁸² Recently, Koromyslov has sacked Gusakov and other bank employees at Rak’s urging. Koromyslov states his position: he has replaced those employees with “specialists” in line with the new governmental policies under the NEP. Yet he also acknowledges the goal of the assembly and he too wants to strengthen the collective through mutual understanding.⁸³ Koromyslov is literally caught in the middle with his fate hanging in the balance.

When Gusakov takes the floor, he explains that the bank is caught up in “a web of shady business deals.”⁸⁴ Gusakov delivers a denunciatory speech to unmask the villain.⁸⁵ The gang of “charlatans” has failed to take into account one thing, he proclaims: “the Soviet community will not let them carry out their plan for profit. In one fine moment we will shout: Hands off the Soviet community, citizen market-sharks!” In response, Rak coldly puts all of the blame on Gusakov: He has cooked the books and forged documents. The meeting is temporarily adjourned. Koromyslov’s chance for redemption slips away through his unwitting connivance in Rak’s scheme.

The climax of the play is Koromyslov’s own belated recognition of the villains in his midst and his unintentional moral lapse. Recognizing his folly at last, Koromyslov gives a speech in which he berates himself for being played like pawn.⁸⁶ The lights dim for the long-awaited unveiling of the legendary dessert—but no one will enjoy it. When the lights come up again, a secret police agent and detachment of Red Army soldiers have surrounded the place in order to arrest all of the guests. *The Soufflé* ends like Nikolai Gogol’s *The Inspector General* with a “silent scene” the characters onstage instantly freeze and the final curtain falls.

⁸¹ In the play, the term used for “employees” is *sluzhashchie*.

⁸² Romashov, 84. The term that Kryshkin uses is a “pubic defusing” (*obshchestvennoe rasrazhenie*) of the tense atmosphere.

⁸³ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 86-87.

⁸⁵ The Slavic root of “denunciatory” (*oblichitel’nyi*) is “face” or “mask.”

⁸⁶ Ibid., 120.

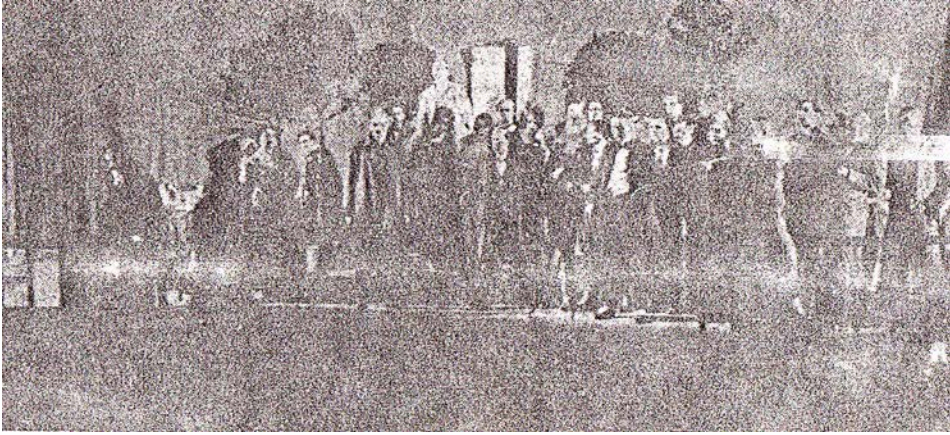


Figure 5.8. Act V. The Finale. The “Silent Scene.” The arrest of the well attired guests at the banquet. Rak, with the small mustache, stands left of center. Koromyslov stands front and center between his wife Sofia and the dancer Rita Kern. Source: *The New Spectator*, March 3, 1925.

The melodrama ends with the ruinous fall of the weak hero. The lies of silver-tongued Rak have claimed another victim: the virtuous community has lost a wavering soul to vice. But the threat to the community is contained and the culpable are cast out. The moral community is reconstituted. There was a clear lesson for those disposed to hear it. Koromyslov’s fate was lamentable, but his ruin served the greater purpose: it warned the Soviet community about machinations of the criminal and the profit-hungry in NEP Russia. Such internal “enemies” were capable of wreaking havoc, but the vigilance of upright comrades would give them no quarter. Still, equivocation about the villain and the Nepmen lurked in the play.

Koromyslov, the communist bank manager, is the victim of the insidious anti-community in NEP Russia, but Rak got the most laughs from the audience. Rak is the archetypal trickster with ancient roots Russian popular entertainment: the *skomorokh* or merry-man whose devilish pranks originally ridiculed the stupidity and greed of the boyars in Kievan Rus.⁸⁷ As the Russian Orthodox Church condemned these jesters for doing the devil’s work and spreading temptation among the faithful, one reviewer described Rak and his ilk as “the evil spirits that set in train the foxtail and wolf teeth” to destroy the Revolution.⁸⁸ The director of the production, Aleksandr Gripich called Rak a “beast.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ On the *skomorokh* see Marc Slonim, *Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 14-15. The opening scene of Andrei Tarkovsky’s epic film *Andrei Rublëv* about the fifteenth-century icon painter is “The Jester” (*Skomorokh*), which shows the merry-man’s frenetic comic routine, his shameless patter, and the brutal punishment that follows at the hands of the boyar’s henchmen. [*Andrei Rublëv: The Passion According to Andrei* (Moscow, Mosfilm Studios, 1966/The Criterion Collection, 1998)].

⁸⁸ Semën Grigor’ev, “Teatr eshchë o Vozdushnom piroge,” *Rabochii zritel’*, no. 10 (March 11, 1925): 9.

⁸⁹ “Teatr Revoliutsii. K postanovke “Vozdushnogo piroga” (Iz besed).” *Novyi zritel’*, no. 6 (February 10, 1925): 11.

The Western counterpart of the trickster developed into the stage Gallant with his “devil’s techniques.” Wendy Griswold argues that City Comedy helped to legitimate the conduct—in particular the economic acquisitiveness—of ambitious young men in early seventeenth-century London whose “devilish” calculation and cunning in commerce became social virtues.⁹⁰ *The Soufflé* did not have much popular appeal on this level nor did it serve to legitimate such behavior.

Despite the development of industry and commerce in Russia in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and its renaissance under the NEP, communist propaganda tarred the ethos of entrepreneurship and profitmaking as rapacious capitalism. Before the Revolution, the sin of avarice tainted money making in popular consciousness. Of course, Rak’s criminality also put him beyond the moral pale. Still, as a trickster, Rak had definite dramatic appeal. However outrageous his schemes, Rak’s guile and wit captivated audiences who loved stories about the criminal element and the slang of the underworld. A year later, Vladimir Vilner would film *Benya Krik*, the tale of a gang boss based on Isaac Babel’s Odessa stories.

The Soufflé was an exaggerated picture of life under NEP for most spectators. It was a farcical, satirical comedy. Yet as a powerful fiction, it also represented, reproduced, and even refined the images of the corrupt officials and Nepmen prevalent in public discourse. For others, a minority of the audience, it was not really funny. It was a reminder of the actual malfeasance bred by the NEP.



Figure 5.9. *The Assembly in the Bank*. Source: David Zolotnitskii, *Budni i prazdniki teatral'nogo Oktiabria*.

⁹⁰ Wendy Griswold, “The Devil, Social Change, and Jacobean Theatre,” *The New American Cultural Sociology*, ed. Philip Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 135-37.

The Soufflé as Show Trial

A couple of critics mentioned “krasnoshchekovism” (krasnoshchëkovshchina) in their reviews. The cautionary tale of Koromyslov recalled the high profile trial of Aleksandr M. Krasnoshchëkov, the Chairman of Prombank, which had taken place the previous year. As Robert Argenbright explains, it was a watershed in party history because Krasnoshchëkov was the first well-known, highranking Communist to stand trial: “one whose career Lenin himself had advanced, to be sacrificed theatrically at least in part to appease the nonparty public.”⁹¹ The proceedings were in part “show” since his public pillorying garnered international as well as national attention and in part “trial” because Krasnoshchëkov’s conviction for embezzlement and corruption resulted in a six-year prison term in addition to his expulsion from the Communist Party.

The term “show trial” is usually associated with the iconic Moscow Show Trials of the late 1930s that saw the top leaders of the Communist Party “confess” to taking part in elaborate conspiracies before being sentenced to death. These trials fed the mythical narrative of Soviet rule pitting the regime against the “enemies of the people.” However, there were scores of show trials in the 1920s that targeted specialists such as employees of GUM (the premier state department store) and members of a major Soviet textile trust.⁹²

With its high profile “trials,” the Russian legal system remains opaque to many Western observers because, like the Soviet administration of justice, it sacrifices legality in the interest of ritualistic displays of state power when deemed necessary. A show trial is a dramatic way to show that the Party is always right. The routine administration of justice fell to People’s Courts during the early Soviet era.

A People’s Court was a formal institution of the legal system that adjudicated at the local and regional levels.⁹³ The function of these courts often overlapped with the purposes of a show trial. The guilt of the defendants was often decided in advance: it formed the basis of their trial by the People’s Court. The primary purpose of the proceedings was to make an example of the culpable parties and instruct the entire collective by teaching them a lesson. The collective refers to the audience present in the courtroom.

⁹¹ Robert Argenbright, “Marking NEP’s Slippery Path: The Krasnoshchëkov Show Trial,” *The Russian Review* 61 (April 2002): 254. When Krasnoshchëkov was arrested, he held the post of the Director of the Bank of Industry and Trade, a key Soviet institution that he founded. It was known by the acronym of Prombank.

⁹² Ibid., 253. Argenbright uses the indigenous term *obratsovyi sud* or “demonstration trial.” The distinguishing feature of such a trial is that it was organized to maximize attendance by taking place in a large hall or city circus. Like a show trial (*pokazatel’nyi sud*), the guilt of the accused was decided in advance. See Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 256-69.

⁹³The Russian term for a People’s Court was *narodnyi sud*.

Similarly, *The Soufflé* put Nepmen, corrupt specialists, and even accomplices with Communist Party membership on trial. It illustrated how powerful men could betray the workers' interests.⁹⁴ It represented a lesson in political culture despite some reviewers' complaint that the positive characters were weak. On the side of the virtuous Soviet community, the actions of the Communist Party cell are thoroughly commendable. It keeps tabs on the worsening situation at the bank and actively seeks to ameliorate the deteriorating atmosphere by convening a General Assembly. The audience's own familiarity with People's Courts and workplace assemblies provided the grounds for the dramatic reversal that takes place in Scene 12.

As a theatrical show, *The Soufflé* represented a show trial for Moscow audiences because it narrated the criminal activities that led to the arrest of the Red Director Koromyslov. Scene 12 is a miniature show trial: a play within a play. The General Assembly takes place in a large hall at the bank. Onstage, a crowd of bank employees hears the case as the communist Kryshkin presides. Consequently, the production cast the theater audience in the role of the courtroom audience. The courtroom melodrama unfolds as Gusakov puts into evidence the bookkeeping irregularities and the forgeries. Rak firmly refutes him, lying without hesitation. The General Assembly is hastily adjourned.

Technically, within the world of the play, the show trial fails as a public demonstration of guilt. Neither Koromyslov nor Rak admits guilt, nor is contrite: the former is just naïve and the latter casts guilt on his accuser. But their guilt is known to the authorities in the play and to the audience in the theater hall. The agents that uphold public order arrive at the finale put a decisive end to the chaos and criminality: the Communist Party, Red Army, and the secret police bring them to justice.

As the Krasnoshchëkov Affair attested, there were problems in the ranks of the Communist Party. In response, a party ethics campaign was launched in late 1923, shortly after Krasnoshchekov's arrest.⁹⁵ Within the context of the reconstruction period, *The Soufflé* told audiences that economic shenanigans were going on, but it was not a dramatic exposé of high crimes. Unlike Stanislavsky's "People's Court," which aimed both to change attitudes and especially actions, the performance framed the former: it asked the audience to question its attitudes towards laissez-faire corruption and the questionable conduct of superiors. It spoke to the obligations of regular Soviet citizens to ensure that those in positions of responsibility remain accountable to those in the lower ranks.

The basic dramatic structures of *The Soufflé* generated the meanings of the production. But these meanings were not simply inscribed in the play or the staging: they derived from the audience's own experience of melodrama, satire, general assemblies at the workplace, show trials, and social life in Moscow. The

⁹⁴ Koromyslov maintains that he was cowed by "commercial illusions" and unaware of what was happening, but never betrayed the "workers' interests."

⁹⁵ The first major "purge" of the Communist Party ranks had been conducted two years earlier at the conclusion of the Civil War.

production's remarkable popularity grew from its satirical high jinks and high political valence, which in turn drew upon contemporary culture and controversy.

It was a social and cultural phenomenon as well as an artistic one: the meeting of the theater public prepared by the particular historical moment for the performance with the unique stage production mounted for the audience by the theater. Did some scoff at the play's "message"? After all, some could have viewed Koromyslov as a planner who intended to secure loans for a moneymaking enterprise instead of sinking funds into Soviet factories that operated at a loss. Surely some spectators even assumed that Aleksandr Krasnoshchëkov was the victim of a political intrigue that resulted in his ruin during a high-profile show trial.

The Audience Response

One critic objected to the play because it left the impression that those holding posts of responsibility were bad people. Applying a crude sociological reading to the play's plot as well as to life under NEP, he explained that the environment accounted for the misdeeds of those in positions of responsibility: "The NEP milieu, power, and, most importantly, alienation from the masses" were bedeviling them.⁹⁶ He congratulated the playwright for not slandering a communist, but he thought that the spectator really should feel that Koromyslov deserved punishment.

The fact that Koromyslov is a nice, good-natured guy worked at odds with this impression. The critic's word choice here is significant: "From beginning to end [the play] is a defense plea (*zashchitel'naia rech'*) on behalf of Kormomyslov."⁹⁷ In other words, in this performance that represents a show trial, Koromyslov is not only guilty of crimes but also of inexcusable conduct for a communist. Yet, given the elaborate con to which he has fallen victim, he is not really seen to be "guilty" and the public exonerates him.

As for Rak, this critic saw an awful scoundrel: an "opportunist who was feeding off Soviet Russia." Again, imagining the spectator's response, he asks, "But really, is such a feeling towards him created in the spectator?"

If he's joking, but commits a crime, what is he really guilty of? The spectator laughs with satisfaction about his escapades and waits for more and more in order to laugh some more. The spectator feels that Semën Rak is the embodiment of a joyful little joke. The theater hall sympathizes with him and when he is arrested they think, "Well, they won't condemn him: the court will see this joyful, nice little guy, laugh, and free him."

The implication is that in the court of public opinion, despite his guilt, the audience forgives Rak and regrettably acquits him too. Obedient judges and juries who understand their "proper" role in convicting the accused are essential to a successful

⁹⁶ M.D. "Teatr. Eshchë o "Vozdushnom piroge," *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 10 (March 11, 1925): 9.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

show trial. But in this case, it appeared that the audience of judges sided with the defendant against the guilty verdict.

The critics had a point. If the show trial is a farce, the audience will dismiss the culpability of the accused. Indeed, the humor and satire undercut the political message. The critics' perspective could be seen as perverse because the critics essentially blamed the comedy for being too funny. In addition, Koromyslov remains ignorant of the crimes that have taken place on his watch until the ultimate climax. This only increases the pathos of his plight and audience's sympathy for him, although he was the symbolic counterpart of the convicted embezzler Aleksandr Krasnoshchëkov and others in positions of power like him who bore responsibility for the spread of corruption in Soviet Russia under the NEP.

Unlike *The Lower Depths*, which became a vehicle for the sharing of the beliefs and sentiments of the spectators who held them, and also felt the power of the play that linked them together, actively expressing their adoration of the production in ritual unison as an audience, *The Dawn* and *Are You Listening, Moscow?* produced assemblies of a different sort. In these cases of "revolutionary" theater, the intensity in the hall derived instead from divisions in the audience, as surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest. Was this the case with *The Soufflé*?

It is difficult to gauge audience response because the reviews primarily spoke to the play's political meanings, not the audience's reactions. However, it can be inferred that the audience generally found it quite entertaining because some reviewers explained why this obscured the real import of the play, while others spoke past the point altogether. There was a basic reason for this. By the middle of the decade, theatrical criticism had shifted to analyzing plays in more detail because of there were more plays on Soviet themes. *The Soufflé*, Aleksandr Faiko's *Lake Liul*, and Bill-Belotserkovsky's *The Raid* were some of the top contemporary plays that drew the analysis of left critics as well as large crowds.

Since the general press as well as propaganda circulated the stories, ideas, and beliefs incorporated into theater, actual audiences were primed to understand performance in such terms. Sometimes the content of plays and the topics of public discourse closely intertwined, reproducing attitudes and even emotions shared by audience members. In contrast, the "specialized" press and "mass" journals served as narrower channels of communication between writers and readers who spoke the same idiom. The reader of *The Worker Spectator*, like the reader of *The New Spectator*, was more politicized and more likely to impose distinctively dogmatic interpretations on theatrical productions.

"The Soufflé" and Audience Tastes

The Soufflé was one of the most popular contemporary plays in the first decade of Soviet rule. It remained in the repertoire of the Theater of the Revolution for three seasons and saw one hundred and fifty-one performances.⁹⁸ This was a

⁹⁸ "Repertuarnyie spiski moskovskikh dramteatrov za sezony 1919/20-1926/27 gg." (Appendix II) in A. I. Mogilevskii, Vl. Filippov, and A. Rodionov, *Teatry Moskvy 1917-1927* (Moscow: GAKhN, 1928), 165. The figures published in the appendix

large number of performances for each season: prima facie evidence of the production's popularity. Moreover, it premiered in mid-February, yet saw thirty-seven performances before the end of the season, a large number of performances each week for a repertory theater.⁹⁹ But the best measure of popularity is the total number of spectators who see a production divided by the number of performances given. Of course, this figure must take into account the size of the house. In the case of *The Soufflé*, 136,128 spectators saw the production, which means that the auditorium was packed for many performances.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, among all the votes cast by respondents to the general survey for 186 different theater productions in Moscow, *The Soufflé* rated in the top ten in terms of the total number of votes cast for it, which is indicative of its general popularity.¹⁰¹ A breakdown of the votes shows that "positive" votes outnumbered "negative" ones by about three to one for *The Soufflé*. This indicates that most spectators liked the production. Nonetheless, one-quarter of the audience did not. Based on this indicator of how many "liked" or "disliked" it, it appears that the production divided the audience to some extent.

Most of the reviews of *The Soufflé* by "worker-correspondents" were highly negative. Worker-correspondents were small circles of workers organized by the "mass" theatrical journals to write a few lines about theatrical productions.¹⁰² Their

were compiled by the Moscow Statistical Department (*Moskovskii statisticheskii otdel*). Every theater maintained performance and sales statistics for its reports to the Moscow Statistical Department.

⁹⁹ Vl. Filippov, "Repertuar Oktiabr'skogo desiatiletiia," *Ibid.*, 70. That is, roughly four of the six performances given each week.

¹⁰⁰ A. Mogilevskii, *Ibid.*, 165. Olga Kameneva reports that Theater of the Revolution seated 840, but if that were the case the average attendance exceeded the size of the house by sixty. See "Zarozhdenie i pervye shagi Teatra Revoliutsii" in *Moskovskii Teatr Revoliutsii: sbornik statei*, ed. Ia. Boiarskii (Moscow: Mosoblispolkom, 1933), 3. According to production plan for the 1925/26 season dated September 15, 1925, the theater had 1,251 seats, not including those reserved for officials. See *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1967. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1921-1926*, 240. Using the larger figure, on the average the house was three-quarters full.

¹⁰¹ "Zritel' moskovskikh teatrov" (prodolzhenie)": 14. Forty-five cast votes for it compared with 135 for *The Raid*, which had just opened at the MGSPS Theater. Mikhail Zagorsky, who conducted the survey of the audience for *The Dawn* at the Theater RSFSR-I, was the first to use surveys in the Soviet era, but Ostrovsky reportedly used surveys at the Maly Theater when he became the Imperial Theater's Director in the 1880s.

¹⁰² On worker-correspondents see A. Ia. Trabskii "Sovetskaia teatral'naia zhurnalistika," *Teatral'naia kritika 1917-1927 godov: problemy razvitiia sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, ed. A. Ia. Al'tshuller (Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1987), 34-35. See also, X. Diamant, "Teatr formy i sodержaniia," *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 9 (March 4-11, 1924): 3-4, and Gaik Adonts, "O kritike, o kritikakh i rabkorakh," *Zhizn' iskusstvo*, no. 19, 1925: 2-3. A worker-correspondent was known by the acronym *rabkor* for *rabochii korrespondent*. Thus, a "theater" worker-correspondent was known as a *tearabkor*.

reviews usually described the basics of the plot and focused on the contemporary relevance of the theatrical production. This raises the question of whether workers in the audience also responded negatively to the play. To address this question, it might be useful to get a picture of who actually attended performances of *The Soufflé* at the Theater of the Revolution.

A Social Profile of the Audience

Boris Alpers, the contemporary theater critic, provides a fine-grained analysis of the audience at the Theater of Revolution. He was well positioned as the Director of the Literary Section and the Repertoire at the Theater to paint this picture. He states that group excursions from workers' clubs, plants and factories filled the auditorium of the Theater of the Revolution.¹⁰³ The mention of "group excursions" is noteworthy.

Olga Kameneva originally instituted organized theatrical excursions by distributing free tickets to groups when she headed the Artistic Section of the Moscow City Soviet.¹⁰⁴ She was also a founding member of the Theater of the Revolution, or the Theater of Revolutionary Satire (Terevsat) as it was called in 1920. Located on Bolshaya Nitkitskaya in downtown Moscow, the Theater was distant from working-class districts. Hence, group trips drew workers into theatergoing as a collective activity, but also provided an opportunity to indoctrinate them about the ideological significance of theater and to educate them about a given theatrical production.

Alpers describes other segments of the audience at *The Soufflé*. He only mentions the "typical figure of the Soviet service intelligent" (*sovetskii sluzhashchii intelligent*) that sat in the audience.¹⁰⁵ The label "civil servant" denotes an official in the lower ranks of the various state and Party bureaucracies (*apparaty*). However, "intelligent" means a member of the Soviet "intelligentsia."

Lewin explains that the millions officially classified within the "intelligentsia" during the 1930s included an "overwhelming majority" with little education and few professional skills.¹⁰⁶ The point he makes is that the label "intelligentsia" concealed as much as it disclosed. Therefore, it is difficult to interpret Alpers' observation. This "typical" figure is likely not an educated professional.

¹⁰³ Boris Alpers, *Teatr Revoliutsii* (Moscow: Teakinopechat', 1928), 11.

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Filippov, "Teatral'nye ekskursii kak metod izucheniia zriteia," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (January), 1926: 55-56. According to Filippov, a group of specialists devised the methodology for conducting these organized excursions and an All-City Conference adopted their recommendations. See also X. Diament, "Kak raspredeliat' teatral'nye bilety," *Rabochii zritel'*, no. 13 (April 1-6, 1924): 3 on "collective attendance" as a tool of "cultural enlightenment" and Andrei Shibaev, "Izuchenie zritel'ia i rabkory," *Novyi zritel'*, no. 28, 1925: 48 as a method for audience research.

¹⁰⁵ Certainly, the terms indicates a Soviet civil servant rather than the broader category of "employee" (*sluzhashchii*)

¹⁰⁶ Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 235.

In connection with another segment of the audience, he introduces the temporal dimension: “only in the first days of a sensational new production do we find the group of the “sophisticated” Nepman public—dissipated ladies and men with rings on their plump fingers.” His description of the NEP crowd draws on the imagery of the fat-bellied capitalists seen in early Soviet posters and also in the short agitational skits performed by Terevsat during the Civil War.



Figure 5.10. Drawing by D. Moor. “The Girl Sang in the Choir” depicting the NEP public. Source: *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 2, 1930.

Alpers cites “numerous surveys” which confirmed that workers constituted the “regular spectator” at the Theater of the Revolution.¹⁰⁷ He asserts that the percentage of workers varied according to the nature of the production. For instance, he contrasts *A Profitable Post* and *Echo* when the “regular spectator” constituted eighty-five to ninety percent of the audience with *The Soufflé* when it fell to seventy-five percent. He reports that it fell even lower to only sixty percent for *Lake Liul*.

The audience was definitely “mixed” at the Theater of the Revolution. The percentage of “workers”—that highly privileged category, at least in ideological terms—reportedly fell by ten percent for *The Soufflé*. As word of the production

¹⁰⁷ On surveys and audience studies during the 1920s see I. Nosova, “Stanovlenie metodov issledovaniia auditoria v sovetskoii sotsiologicheskoi iskusstve,” *Metodolicheskie problem sovremennogo iskusstvoznaniia: sbornik statei*, no. 1 (Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1975), 187-96. See also L. I. Novozhilova and I. Nosova, “Teatr i zritel’: konkretno-sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia 20-kh godov,” *Nauka o teatre* (Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1975) and E. Frolova, “Iz opyta izucheniiia zritelia v 20-kh godakh,” *Metodologicheskie problemy sovremenogo iskusstvoznaniia* (Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1975), 197-202. The primary literature is extensive.

spread in Moscow and generated interest among people who were not habitués of the Theater of the Revolution, did *The Soufflé* also generate less interest among its regular working-class crowd?

The Tastes of Workers

Word of mouth was the most important factor determining theater attendance according to the small survey conducted on May 7, 1926 at the MGSPS Theater—the day before the general survey—among those who attending the performance of *The Raid*. Forty-four percent reported that they attended the performance because their comrades liked it.¹⁰⁸ The next most important factor was reading a review (15.6%).¹⁰⁹ In connection with the Theater of the Revolution, it must be noted that Alpers tells us that the regular audience was eighty-five to ninety percent workers: he does not state that most productions played to full houses. Actually, during the 1923/24 season the house averaged eighty-three percent full at the Theater of the Revolution, a very high percentage, ranking with the figures reported for the Maly Theater (94%) and Moscow Art Theater (82%) during the previous year.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, it means that workers never actually filled more than three-quarters of the seats in the auditorium.

More significantly, Alpers distinguishes between “workers” and the “NEP crowd,” but only mentions the figure of the “Soviet service intelligent.” Despite Alpers’ apparently fine-grained analysis of the audience, there is reason to doubt his breakdown. The first reason is political. The Theater of the Revolution was founded during the depths of the Civil War when its agitational skits played to illiterate peasant-soldiers and worker-revolutionaries. It was entirely different in character during the 1920s. The repertoire included a mix of revised editions of older plays in avant-garde styles and new, full-length Soviet plays. For instance, the production of the *Man of the Masses* by Toller was expressionistic. The second reason is sociological.

¹⁰⁸ RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 202. The researchers distributed 278 questionnaires in the foyer to be filled out during the intermission. Their attempts to convert refusals were of no avail, but the response rate was high: sixty percent (167 questionnaires). Still, forty percent of the “workers” refused to complete the survey. Short intermissions and the length of the questionnaire contributed to this outcome. For an account of the trials and errors in questionnaire design and distribution at the Theater MGSPS, see “Metod anketirovaniia i rol’ ankety v izuchenii zritel, *Zhizn’ iskusstva*,” no. 9, 1926: 2-3.

¹⁰⁹ This survey tells us that women made up one-quarter of the audience. Interestingly, at this revolutionary theater, almost one-half of the entire sample (46.1%) reported that they were “Soviet white-collar workers” and a third (34.1%) identified themselves as “students.” At this performance at least, “workers” represented only 6.1% of total sample.

¹¹⁰ Filippov, “Repertuar Oktia’brskogo desiatiletia,” *Teatry Moskvvy 1917-1921*, 66 and 68.

The major shifts in Soviet society were visible in the theater hall. Only a few years had passed since the conclusion of the Civil War but the historical remove was startling. An entirely new era had arrived. No longer did women Red Army soldiers or women workers wearing triangular red kerchiefs on their heads sit in the reserved seats on the main floor. Communist Youth League choruses no longer sang during intermissions.

As seen in the data from the general survey, “employees,” the category synonymous with “white-collar workers,” predominated at theatrical performances in the central theaters.¹¹¹ Although tickets prices were strictly regulated, the theater box-office accommodated theatergoers who were willing and able to pay full price for their seats, adjusting the number of tickets available through the “workers’ belt” accordingly. Discount tickets earmarked for the workers even ended up in the hands of middlemen in various “gray” market and black-market transactions.¹¹²

The pressure on the box-office was clearest the previous season with the premiere of *Lake Liul* by Faiko. Alpers reports that the percentage of workers fell to sixty percent. Like *The Soufflé*, this production was very popular, with eighty-six performances during its premiere 1923/24 season. By the end of the 1927/28 season 156,569 spectators had seen it.¹¹³ Like *The Soufflé*, it filled the house at the Theater of the Revolution. A Meyerhold production, it integrated a picture of the decaying bourgeoisie replete with liquor, lechery and a jazzy “dance of death” into its political tale, with the liberation of the proletariat by the Red Army as the finale.¹¹⁴ Also, it is fair to assume that the avant-garde nature of the production and word of mouth discouraged a sizeable segment of workers from attending.

The many segments of Moscow society that shared avid theatergoing in common presumably descended upon a theater whenever a hit arrived. Assuming that workers actually accounted for seventy-five percent of the audience at the Theater of the Revolution, who constituted the remaining twenty-five percent at *The Soufflé*? The audience included higher-ranking bureaucrats, managers, white-collar workers, students, professionals, businessmen, craftsmen, Red Army soldiers, and

¹¹¹ This is the blanket term *sluzhashchie*, which appears in surveys about the social composition of audiences.

¹¹² Examples of gray-market practices were the resale of a ticket by a ticket holder or the sale of a “hot ticket” solely in combination with something else at the box-office. Scalping tickets was a black-market criminal offense. On these practices, see Mikhail Kazartsev, “Nam meshchaiut zhit’ kul’turno,” *Rabochaia gazeta*, December 25, 1927.

¹¹³ A.I. Mogilevskii, Vladimir Filippov, and A.M. Rodionov, *Teatry Moskvy 1917-1927*, “Repertuarnye spiski moskovskikh dramteatrov za sezony 1919/20-1926/27 gg. (Appendix II),” 178.

¹¹⁴ Gorchakov, 194. *A Profitable Post* was the other production staged at the Theater of Revolution after the Theater RSFSR-I closed and before the Meyerhold Theater opened.

housewives: the diversity of occupational groupings in contemporary Soviet society.¹¹⁵

These segments of the Soviet public enjoyed theater going and the loosened strictures of life under the NEP. *The Soufflé* drew them to the Theater of the Revolution in droves because they relished the puns, enjoyed its wild pace, and appreciated the playful winks to the audience. In other words, the spectators appreciated the satisfaction that the production afforded them on various levels.

In the case of *The Soufflé*, a real crowd pleaser, workers surely mixed with bureaucrats and businessmen in the audience, but their presence diminished because market forces squeezed them out to some extent. It appears that Alpers is toying with both terminology and statistics. Since the number of “workers” rarely exceeded fifteen percent at the central theaters, except at special or free performances, it is highly doubtful that they constituted seventy-five percent of the theater audience at *The Soufflé*. It is probable that Alpers is using an expanded notion of “workers” that also included “white-collar workers.” Of course, these were two different occupational categories in Soviet survey research, as already noted.

The combined total of seventy-five percent for these two different categories of “workers” generally accords with data from the general survey for the MGSPS Theater and the Safonov Theater.¹¹⁶ Also, it would be hardly surprising if workers actually represented at least three-quarters of the ten-percent drop because the ratio between “workers” and “white-collar workers” was one to three at the most in the central theaters and usually much smaller.¹¹⁷ This differential in the drop between “workers” and “white-collar workers” is also consonant with Alpers’ own observation about how the percentage of workers varied depending on the nature the show.

Even if “workers” represented only fifteen percent of the audience at *The Soufflé*, this was a relatively high percentage in comparison with the academic theaters. It illustrates how the regime’s politics of theater adapted to the economic exigencies of cultural life under the NEP. The combination of free performances and the workers’ belt assured that a greater share of those who lacked the wherewithal was able to attend theatrical performances than otherwise would have been the case.

¹¹⁵ The Russian terms are, respectively, *chinovniki*, *khoziastvennye rukovoditel’i*, *sluzhashchie*, *uchashiesia*, *svobodnye professiia*, *kommersanty*, *kustar’ia*, *krasnoarmeitsy*, and *domokhoziastveniki*.

¹¹⁶ The MGSPS Theater also enjoyed several popular hits during these years, including *The Raid*. The combined total of “workers” and “white-collar workers” at this theater according to the 1926 general survey was sixty-four percent. At the Safonov Theater, the combined total also equaled sixty-four percent. See “Zritel’ moskovskikh teatrov”: 12.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES AND THE MEANINGS OF *THE SOUFFLÉ*

The first section above has illustrated how various institutions, especially ones involved in ticketing, influenced theatergoing in the twenties. Without this “production of culture” perspective, the interpretation of data concerning the social composition of the theater public, and of particular theater audiences, would remain problematic. In the previous section, we have sought to understand what skills, including background knowledge of NEP society and politics, spectators brought to bear on their readings of *The Soufflé*.

Finally, given the theater’s prominent position in the cultural arena, which became increasingly politically charged during the 1920s, the question of the critical response to *The Soufflé* must be addressed. Were the critics as enthusiastic about the premiere as the audiences? As seen, theater reviews shaped public opinion, but they also represented the public polemics among the revolutionary theaters.

The premiere brought an unprecedented flood of reviews and critical articles. Although many of the positive reviews were of a decidedly qualified nature, they outnumbered negative ones by almost two to one.¹¹⁸ First, they reveal a wealth of colloquial terms used to revile Nepmen. The Nepmen were entrepreneurs and businessmen of various sorts. The “Nepman” was a highly charged ideological construction that connoted profiteering, immorality, and the corruption of officialdom. In the popular imagination, the “Nepman” embodied the values that Revolution sought to wipe out. For many, especially young communists, the New Economic Policy represented a step backward from the ideals of the Revolution and socialism. Victoria Bonnell has described the prominent role that the Nepman played in Bolshevik demonology.¹¹⁹

The terms in the reviews fell into three types: nouns describing negative types and their nefarious activities, verbs, and adjectives. Examples of the former were: *nepach* (a nasty nepman), *delets* (a smart operator), *aventiurist* (an entrepreneur) and *spekuliant* (a speculator). Other nouns applied to Nepmen collectively such as *gnil’* (rot) and *nakip’* (scum). Nepmen were involved in the business of *griundĕrstvo* (promotion) and *deliachestvo* (wheeling and dealing). Typical adjectives such as *merzkie* (loathsome) and *griaznyi* (filthy) combined with the nouns and verbs to form stock phrases that constituted the strands of standard discourse about Nepmen. For instance, “The filthy scum are feeding off Russia.”

In 1925, Andrei Vyshinsky was “elected” to be the new Rector of Moscow University.¹²⁰ If he didn’t see *The Soufflé*, perhaps he read a review of it. At any rate, the discursive affiliations between the rhetoric used to characterize and demean nepmen and the invective that Vyshinsky hurled at the defendants in the Moscow Show Trials is striking. He called the ex-Politburo members “scum,” “stinking

¹¹⁸ This is based upon my review of eighteen articles published in journals and newspapers during the two months following the premiere.

¹¹⁹ See Bonnell, chapter 5, “Bolshevik Demonology in Visual Propaganda.”

¹²⁰ Arkady Vaksberg, *Stalin’s Prosecutor: The Life of Andrei Vyshinsky*, tr. Jan Butler (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 39.

carrion,” and “dung.”¹²¹ An inspired orator, like the critics and worker-correspondents who reviewed *The Soufflé*, he strung together words to evoke the defendants’ loathsome nature, for example: “the most inveterate, the most arrant and decayed dishonest elements” and “the despicable bunch of adventurers.” Dehumanizing them, Vyshinsky cast his victims as animals that “crowed, grunted, and barked.”

The Soufflé employed stereotypes for dramatic effect, but the reviews definitely shaded into ethnic slurs about the small businessmen who prospered under the NEP. One ironically referred to Rak as the “celebrated hero of his native Odessa.”¹²² Rak’s first name and patronymic, Semën Yaklovich (Simon Jacob) and his patter characteristic of Odessa, the port-city renowned for its Jewish community, ensured that he would be read as a Jewish character.

For example, Comrade Rafail’s review was redolent of anti-Semitism. He praised the actor Orlov “who succeeded splendidly in portraying the Rak type, capturing the basic *class-national characteristics* of this “indispensable,” “dedicated,” “my-kind-of guy” that you meet everywhere that smells of pie.”¹²³ Another character from the Caucasus was the butt of similar inferences.

An Analysis of the Critical Response

One of the first critical articles appeared in *The New Spectator* under the initials “A.B.C.” The author methodically picked apart the production on every level. He contrasted the Theater’s recent “brilliant productions” with the “rare poverty of directorial invention” seen in *The Soufflé*.¹²⁴ He found none of “condensed grotesque” or “sharp typifying” of characters and even less of the supposed “exaggeration of sequences and situations” touted by the director.¹²⁵

He agreed that there *were* figures from everyday life on stage—but not ones from contemporary Moscow. He found traces of nineteenth-century Ostrovsky Chekhov, and “foul Yushkevich” in them.¹²⁶ Rita Kern was straight out of the sickening “boulevard plays and romances” of the past decade and a half in his view.¹²⁷ Emile Beskin also faulted the play for its lack of dramatic conflict and plot development. He observed that Rak’s *bons mots* and the play’s intrigues easily

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹²² D. Chuzhoi, *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 16 (April 19, 1925): 4.

¹²³ My italics. Tov. Rafail, “Anketa o `Vozdushnom piroge (iz besed),’ *Novyi zritel’*, no. 9 (March 3, 1925):7. Stalin’s methodical exploitation of “class” and “national” characteristics to foment fear and popular prejudice began in 1928 with the trial of the “wreckers” in the Shakhty Affair.

¹²⁴ A.B.V. “Vozdushnyi pirog,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 9 (March 3, 1925): 10.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10. Yushkevich wrote plays for the “bourgeois” boulevard theaters of Moscow in the decade before the Revolution. “Romances” referred to “pulp fiction” such as romance novels that still enjoyed great popularity in Soviet Moscow.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

amused the spectator, but deprived the public of a genuine, satirical social comedy.¹²⁸

Critics supportive of the avant-garde praised Gripich's concurrent production of *Echo* by Bill-Belotserkovsky because they considered the director to be a disciple of Meyerhold, his teacher. Consequently, the Moscow theatrical avant-garde viewed *The Soufflé* as a strange theatrical hybrid because it retained elements of the avant-garde formula originally developed by Mayakovsky and Meyerhold.

For example, it divided characters into good and bad ones. The sets were inspired by constructivism and the play unfolded as a montage of scenes from "everyday life." But it also seriously departed from avant-garde conventions with its realism and straightforward political topicality. From this perspective it was theatrical pabulum and offered no aesthetic challenges to the New Spectator in the eyes of these critics.

These articles were published in *The New Spectator*, the critically rich theatrical weekly of the Moscow Department of People's Education. Vladimir Friche was on the editorial board. Friche linked literary works to modes of production in his *Essays on the History of Western European Literature* and *The Sociology of Art*.¹²⁹ Arguably, the sociology of art was more advanced in Russia than anywhere else in the world at the time.¹³⁰

The editors defined their mission as being the mouthpiece for all contemporary currents in the art of theater.¹³¹ Within their polemical schema, the editors distinguished between Tairov's avant-garde Chamber Theater on the "left" and the Maly Theater on the "right." This introduced a new opposition. That is, within the group of academic theaters referred to in earlier Soviet-era polemics as the "right," the editors now distinguished between a "left" wing and a "right" wing.

In contrast, the reviews in *The Worker Spectator*, the artistically thin theatrical weekly published by the Moscow City Council of Trade Unions (MGSPS), criticized the production from a different angle.¹³² Like the editors of the other "mass" theatrical journal *The Worker and Theater*, its Leningrad counterpart, the

¹²⁸ E. Beskin, "Vozdushnyi pirog," *Novyi zritel'*, no. 9 (March 3, 1925): 4.

¹²⁹ The latter work was published in 1926.

¹³⁰ For instance, five decades later, Will Wright would employ a combination of Proppian analysis (developed by Vladimir Propp in his formal analysis of Russian folk tales in the early 1920s) and structuralist argument similar to Vladimir Friche's to explain shifts in the formulas of the American western. See Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (University of California Berkeley, 1975).

¹³¹ "Ot redaktsii," *Novyi zritel'*, no. 1 (January 8, 1924): 1.

¹³² For a discussion of the periodicals, the critics, and the complexities involved in differentiating the "left" from the "right," see A. Trabskii "Sovetskaia teatral'naia zhurnalistika," in *Teatral'naia kritika 1917-1927 godov: problemy razvitiia sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, ed. A. Al'tshuller (Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1987).

Worker Spectator defined its mission as being “accessible, understood, and similar to the *New Spectator*, to the broad masses of laborers.”¹³³

One worker-correspondent opined the following about *The Soufflé*: it painted a “false and reactionary” picture of the economy and the workers were depicted as “pathetic and useless.”¹³⁴ He recommended that the play be removed from the Theater’s repertoire immediately. Another feared that spectators who had not received “adequate political education” might mistake Koromyslov for a portrayal of a “real Communist director.”¹³⁵

Invoking Lenin’s view of the NEP as a phase in the “decay” of capitalism, the reviewer flatly stated: “There is no point in mixing Odessa humor with the depiction of the “nasty Nepman ringleader.” Interestingly, this reviewer contradicted “A.B.C” in *The New Spectator* review because he praised *The Soufflé* and *Echo* in one fundamental respect: all of the other plays at the Theater of the Revolution were “inaccessible to the working masses.”¹³⁶ Two of the other plays in the repertoire were Meyerhold productions. In these reviews one senses the official ire and intolerance that erupted at the end of the decade and banished comedy, especially satire, from the stage as a “harmful” (*vrednyi*) artistic genre.

The general point of view and tone are familiar. The reviewers spoke in the name of “Soviet public,” meaning the exclusive working-class public with genuine revolutionary ideals. They presumed to know the tastes of the public. They arrogated the authority to reject plays deemed unsuitable as they saw fit. This was the watchdog public that also mounted the frenzied public “trial” of *The Days of the Turbins* in 1926 and wanted it banned from the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theater.¹³⁷ These reviewers rejected *The Soufflé* as not revolutionary enough in a political sense, yet too avant-garde artistically. One reviewer even mentioned the Theater of the Revolution’s “defects” and “deviation”: code words signifying its previous ideological “errors” as an avant-garde theater.¹³⁸

On the one hand, we have a set of articles that deride the production for its direction, acting, set designs, and lack of substance; on the other, a set that criticizes the play’s contents as suspect and the positive characters as weak. This is the literal expression of the fully realized opposition between the avant-garde and the

¹³³ “Nash put’: vmeste s novym zritelem i ego khudozhestvennymi zaprosami,” *Rabochii i teatr*, no. 1 (September 18, 1924): 3.

¹³⁴ B.Sh. “Vozdushnyi Pirog v Teatre Revoliutsii,” *Rabochii zritel’*, no. 9 (March 9, 1925): 6.

¹³⁵ L. Iarkovskii, *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Gripich directed three premiere productions that season. The two other plays in the repertoire were Meyerhold productions. “Teatr Revoliutsii. Repertuar. Sezon 1924/25 (28 sentiabria-15 aprelia),” in *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1921-1926*, 234.

¹³⁷ See, for example, P. Kr-v, “Sud nad `Dniami Turbinykh’ (V Dome Pechati)” [“The Trial of ‘The Days of the Turbins’ at the House of the Press”], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 12, 1926 and A. Orlinkii, “Protiv Bulgakovshchina” [“Against Bulgakovism”], *Novyi zritel’*, no. 4 (October 12, 1926), 3-4.

¹³⁸ L. Iarkovskii, *Rabochii zritel’*, no. 9 (March 4, 1925): 6

proletarian theaters in 1925: the dominant attention to aesthetic matters versus the overriding concern with ideological suitability.

The Criticism of The Soufflé as Power Plays

Meyerhold's production of *The Forest*, the Ostrovsky classic, became a popular favorite consolidating Meyerhold's reputation as the leading revolutionary director.¹³⁹ Tens of thousands saw it during its first season in 1924. Meyerhold and Mayakovsky had established their reputations before the Revolution. They were members of the first bohemia that developed in the decade following the 1905 Revolution with the financial support of the tsarist court, city funding, rich benefactors, and the growing middle class. The exclusive atmosphere of the small clubs in St. Petersburg and Moscow became the playground of the theatrical avant-garde. Mayakovsky was a dandy and wrote lyrical poetry.

In contrast, many of the most talented artists of the first generation of Soviet playwrights were born at the turn of the century and came from the provincial intelligentsia. They started their careers as journalists, including Aleksandr Afinogenov, Nikolai Pogodin, and Vladimir Kirshon. As "proletaroid intellectuals" they earned their living as propagandists and writers for the official "organs" of Soviet power and developed as artists in the meantime.¹⁴⁰ Most were communists.

Those with relatively little cultural capital in terms of training and talent often came from working-class social origins. They joined the various new proletarian literary and theatrical movements such as Proletkult, the Smithy, October, and On Guard after the Revolution. Some also worked in the Cultural Section of the MGSPS and wrote for *The Worker Spectator*, the mass journal. These groups attempted to use their political capital as currency in the cultural arena, but the strategy failed because such capital was not readily convertible, even in the Soviet context. Both Lunacharsky and Trotsky publicly stated that the ideological pronouncements and political credentials of these proletarian artistic organizations gave them no purchase: they had to prove their artistic worth.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ During the subsequent decade it was performed almost 1,200 times. As usual, Meyerhold's extensive revision of the script to fashion a contemporary social satire caused a major controversy. The critic Vladimir Mass called the production a "celebration of theater." Shklovsky, the critic and scholar of formalist analysis, disparaged the production, writing "He [Meyerhold] went through Ostrovsky like a blind man through a ghost." See Viktor Shklovskii, "Osoboe mnenie o Lese, *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 26 (June 24, 1924): 11.

¹⁴⁰ On "proletaroid intellectuals," see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 73-74 and 252. He describes the social origins of the second bohemia in mid-nineteenth century Paris as "provincial" and "petit-bourgeois." The Soviet "proletaroid intellectuals" came from the provincial intelligentsia, except Boris Romashov, who was born in Moscow and travelled in theater circles.

¹⁴¹ On the literature of this period, including references to theater, see Marc Slonim, *Soviet Russian Literature, 1917-1977*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Oxford

In 1925, the revolutionary theaters remained united in their opposition to the academic theaters on the “right.” In 1920, Meyerhold had united the “left” by spearheading the political action against the “right,” an opportunity that he seized by constructing the “right” through his own ideological pronouncements. The avant-garde left and the cultural leaders at MGSPS—erstwhile opponents—also joined forces against the Theater of the Revolution with the premiere of *The Soufflé*.

It signaled a two-fold push against a potential challenger in the Moscow theater world. The left’s criticism of *The Soufflé* represented an offensive move against the Theater of the Revolution. With *The Soufflé*, The Theater of the Revolution had broken ranks with the avant-garde. At least it was perceived in such terms. The Theater of the Revolution also threatened to establish a new style of theater that was politically unacceptable to those at MGSPS.

However, the positive reviews of *The Soufflé* predominated in the press because new voices, primarily officials in the Political Directorate of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment and others in the ranks of the Communist Party nomenklatura weighed in. They rallied behind the production on various grounds. They affirmed that it was entertaining; it exemplified the new contemporary dramaturgy based on Soviet life; it represented the new socialist life; it was instructive for the spectator; and it was accessible to workers. Several reviewers specifically saw it as an eagerly awaited move away from the agitational theater to which the avant-garde was still wedded.¹⁴²

Mikhail Koltsov, an editor of *Pravda* and later the founder of the satirical journals *Krokodil* and *Ogonëk*, was most enthusiastic about the production. A leading voice of the new Soviet intellectual elite, he put his considerable weight behind the production. As he wrote in the pages of *Pravda*:

The Theater of the Revolution must be hailed for its choice of play. It balanced out its repertoire that tilted too much in the direction of the simple agitational unmasking of “the rotten Western bourgeoisie.” There is nothing to fear in the strong [hitting] passages of *The Souffle*. We are not schoolgirls who have to bashfully avert our eyes in the face of every dark side of contemporary life. If show trials exist, then “show performances” are even more justified in our revolutionary theaters.¹⁴³

Another reviewer also heartily recommended the production as the “art of revealing.”¹⁴⁴ As he put it: “Force, know-how and class-art must be directed against the front of inertia and “carrying on as usual.”¹⁴⁵ Another exclaimed, “At long last!

University Press, 1977), chapter 4. On “cultural capital” and “specific [artistic] capital,” see Bourdieu, *Ibid*, chapter 2 “The Emergence of a Dualist Structure.”

¹⁴² Vladimir Mass, “Eshchë o “Vozdushnom piroge,”” *Novyi zritel*, no. 9 (March 3, 1925): 5-6.

¹⁴³ Mikhail Kol’tsov, “O Vozdushnom piroge,” *Pravda*, February 25, 1925: 8.

¹⁴⁴ *Iskusstvo obnazheniia*.

¹⁴⁵ Anonymous, “Po moskovskim teatram. Vozdushnyi pirog. (Komediia B. Romashëva—Teatr Revoliutsii),” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (April), 1925: 67.

Finally the first signs of that critical theater that our public has been so longing for so long.”¹⁴⁶ The term “critical” here must be parsed. It certainly did not mean critical of the Soviet system. It meant criticism of officials who are not fulfilling their duties. Indeed, “criticism” and “self-criticism” were the levers of Bolshevik rule.

These reviewers took the production’s aesthetics in stride because of its usefulness in exposing “koromyslovism” in the new Soviet apparatus. This new vantage point advanced realism, topicality and the pragmatic use of art. Comrade Boguslavsky recommended that *The Soufflé* be required viewing for economic planners.¹⁴⁷ Among some in the upper echelons of the cultural apparatus, *The Soufflé* was an almost unqualified success.

It appeared to represent an emergent dominant position backed by the authority of the Communist regime. It rejected both the leftist critique of the play and the avant-garde critique of its production. This centrist position held a more inclusive sense of the “Soviet public” that encompassed both workers and the Soviet intelligentsia. Koltsov’s positive review of *The Soufflé* in *Pravda* just days after the premiere contributed to the deluge of criticism from all quarters.

His article in *The New Spectator*, “An Exam for Criticism,” advanced the notion that *The Soufflé* heralded the increasing interest of the Soviet-Party press in revolutionary theater.¹⁴⁸ Koltsov envisioned an entire restructuring (“perestroika”) of criticism to create what he described as the “new, theatrical-public criticism.” His article sparked a critique of theater criticism in the pages of the journal in 1925.¹⁴⁹ The institution of theater criticism underwent a trial of its own in the course of the published discussion and public debates during the mid-1920s. The judges of theater became the defendants in the process.

The Soufflé was remarkable vehicle of public meaning. It suggests that even relatively minor works can be critically important for understanding culture during periods of major social transformation. Seen as mere fluff by the avant-garde,

¹⁴⁶ B. Rappaport, “Mezhdū `Revizorom’ i `Dzhentl’menom” *Novaia vecherniaia gazeta*,” no. 21, (April 23, 1925): 7.

¹⁴⁷ Tov. Boguslavskii, “Anketa o `Vozdushnom piroge’ (iz besed),” *Ibid*: 7. The term for economic planners was *khoziaistvenniki*.

¹⁴⁸ M. Kol’tsov, “Ekzamen kritike,” *Novyi zritel’*, no. 9 (March 3, 1925): 5. The journal’s questionnaire “Is Criticism Needed?” also drew responses from leading voices in the theater world, including Gripich, Tairov, Eisenstein, Beskin, Zagorsky, Sadko [Blium] and Lunacharsky. The questionnaire and responses were published in *Novyi zritel’*, no. 13 (March 31, 1925): 6-7; no. 14 (April 7, 1925): 5-8; no. 15, (April 14, 1925): 8-9; no. 16 (April 22, 1925): 6-7; and no. 17 (April 28, 1925): 8.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Ruv. Shapiro, “Chetyre vyvoda: K itogam teatral’nykh disputov,” *Rabochii i teatr*, no. 11 (March 15, 1927): 7-8 and Pavel Poluianov, “Zadacha nashei kritiki,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 34 (August 24, 1926). Poluianov called for a “fundamental purge of people who are ideologically alien to us and work under the flag of specialists.” *The Life of Art* hosted a similar critique of theater criticism the following year. See, for example, *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 27 (July 6, 1926): 8-10; no. 29 (July 20, 1926): 11-12; no. 31 (August 3, 1926): 5-7; and no. 34 (August 24, 1926): 1 and 7.

dangerous distortion by worker-correspondents, and salubrious satire by Communist Party members in the cultural apparatus, the play generated divergent meanings issued depending on the variant positioning of spectator, whether a regular audience member or critic. I have detailed three variant readings of *The Soufflé*, each of which framed it in ideological terms.

In mid-February 1925, both Romashov's *The Soufflé* at the Theater of the Revolution and Erdman's *Warrant* at the Meyerhold Theater were being compared with Gogol's classic play *The Inspector General* by warring critical circles. Konstantin Tverskoi, a Leningrad critic, viewed this phenomenon as an "expression of theatrical and literary-circle patriotism."¹⁵⁰ This example is yet another indication that contemporaries were witnessing the drawing of new aesthetic and ideological lines—and understood the role of theater criticism in the process. As William Sewell, Jr. demonstrates in *Work and Revolution in France*, cultural schemas serve as resources for the actions of social actors and groups in the public arena.¹⁵¹ Criticism was an important resource in this respect, but ideology was even more crucial for the revolutionary theaters.

Ideology as a Cultural Resource

In his essay devoted to the subject, Clifford Geertz explains that ideologies make claims about the "condition and direction of society": they are authoritative public and cultural "blueprints" for political action that arise in times of "severe social dislocations."¹⁵² Similarly, Ann Swidler argues that ideology proliferates in "unsettled times" because it plays a powerful role in organizing communities.¹⁵³

Moreover, she adds, the sociological interest of cultural analysis lies not at the semiotic level alone—that is, what ideology says—but at the level of what it does: how ideology facilitates social action and develops into a system of cultural meaning. During the prolonged period of tumultuous social transformation that began in Russia as the First World War ended, the revolutionary theaters self-consciously devised and deployed the ideologies that accompanied their concerted efforts to establish new styles of theater and construct their audiences.

The revolutionary theaters constantly engaged in ideological work as part and parcel of mounting their theatrical productions, building their reputations, and expanding their audiences because they were contending for dominance in the cultural arena, which recognized ideology as revolutionary currency. As new actors in the Moscow theater world, they actively appealed to the public to understand their missions as well as their artistic work in ideological terms.

In practice, it unfolded as the melding of a stylistic strategy with the rhetorical formulation of a radical revolutionary ethos in the case of the avant-garde

¹⁵⁰ Konst. Tverskoi, "Sovetskii teatr," *Rabochii i teatr*, no. 18 (May 1, 1925): 9.

¹⁵¹ On cultural schemas, ideology, and practices, see William Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁵² Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, 216, 219, and 232.

¹⁵³ Swidler, "Culture and Social Action," 177-80.

left. In other words, the competition in the cultural arena was not determined by popularity alone, as measured by ticket sales or attendance, nor by canonization, which the academic theaters enjoyed, but also by ideological domination during the early Soviet era. The Meyerhold Theater represented a formidable challenge to the “right” because it was popular, ideologically strident, and finally consecrated as a “state” theater in 1925, which meant that Narkompros directly funded it.

Meyerhold and Eisenstein incorporated revolutionary rituals into their theatrical productions. But Meyerhold also packaged the *The Dawn* ideologically as “the dawn” of revolutionary theater. His fiery rhetoric especially appealed to the radical ethos of students and workers who were too young to have taken part in the Revolution and the Civil War, but who could participate in the Theatrical Revolution that Meyerhold fashioned for them. Other theaters drew on the resources at their disposal in the competition to build their reputations and augment their power.

For example, the MGSPS Theater built its reputation by establishing its ideological authority among workers.¹⁵⁴ The support of the “mass” journals and critics played a key role in this project. These writers stated the aims of the new theater in editorials and outlined proposals to support the accessibility of theater to the “mass” spectator. The lineage of their critical perspective predated the avant-garde.

It had roots in the nineteenth century social criticism of literature and theater. The straightforward criterion for judging a work of art consisted of its accessibility to the working class, ideological correctness, and relevance in terms of the class struggle. Accessibility meant realistic in formal terms and affordable for workers. Like the reading circles of workers organized by communists in the 1870s, the groups of worker-correspondents propagated concise ideological readings of theatrical productions. They instructed the “organized spectator” from the trade unions to understand plays in accordance with a simple ideological “line” of interpretation. This cultural appropriation of the past also fit the Soviet working-class ethos shaped by multilevel supervision in the workplace and sociocultural domination in everyday life.

The MGSPS’s ideology and the Soviet dramas of the Civil War presented at the MGSPS Theater by the mid-1920s built a special relationship with the core audience of workers. In this way, the MGSPS produced a powerful compound of ideology amalgamated with the working-class ethos. That is, from this ideological perspective, the worker-spectator was culturally superior to his “superficial” bourgeois counterpart.

Ideology was vital to the revolutionary theaters. It figured as a major resource for them in vying for dominance in the cultural arena. It also played a role in shaping the spectator’s understanding of theatrical productions, especially among spectators most attuned to ideological rhetoric. Yet, there was a significant variation between the ideology of the left avant-garde and the ideology that first originated in the Proletkult movement and subsequently developed at MGSPS.

¹⁵⁴ Initially, the repertoire consisted of plays by Beaumarchais, Ibsen, Lunacharsky and Ostrovsky. See Movshenson, 33.

The former fused “Theatrical October” with the revolutionary aesthetic of the avant-garde and the disciplined yet radical ethos of left communism. This general ideological adaptation served several purposes. It suited the development of avant-garde theater culture, reasserted the artistic authority of its leaders in Soviet times, and appealed to the ethos of a new public of militant young adherents. Rafail reports that only the energy of “Comrade Meyerhold, his closest associates, and eternal Komsomol revolutionary enthusiasm” allowed the Theater to win its “rightful place” in the Soviet Union.”¹⁵⁵

Although the experience of avant-garde theater appealed to many, especially “employees,” the ideology targeted the groups who were most open to its radical political appeal. The ideology delegitimized the academic theaters in the name of the New Spectator, but the experimental theater that Meyerhold advanced blossomed at the Theater of the Revolution for only two seasons before Gripich moved the theater in a new direction.

In contrast, the intense ideological work of MGSPS bespoke its mission of establishing the MGSPS Theater in the Moscow theater world and organizing the new audience of Soviet workers in a direct sense. The first required a continual critique of the avant-garde and mounting productions that were “accessible” to the worker-spectator. The second involved audience outreach. The worker-correspondents exemplified this strategy of communicating in an idiom that regular workers understood. Discount tickets, excursions, speeches at special performances, and the “mass” journals constituted the strategy of the proletarian left.

By the mid-1920s, the methodology of audience studies became a hot topic of debate in the theater journals. The ideologies about the public that accompanied audience research also represented important cultural resources for the revolutionary theaters. As an engineer of the audience, Meyerhold and his theater laboratory used observational methods to record audience reactions.¹⁵⁶ This was an applied method for purposes of editing theatrical productions. But chronometric recordings were also used to claim that the theatrical production had the intended effect on the New Spectator.

In contrast, the MGSPS spoke for the “worker-spectator” and the “mass spectator.” It advertised the excursion as a method for studying groups of spectators and instructing them. Bureaucratic authorities like the Artistic Section of the Directorate of Political Enlightenment used the new “science” of mass surveys to gain an overall profile of theater audiences. This also backed their authority as agencies of the state in charge of monitoring the population.

Reviewers and critics were powerful players in forging the new cultural system of revolutionary theater. Like the journals’ editors, they articulated the

¹⁵⁵ Rafail, “Neskol’ko zamechanii o teatre,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 21 (May 26, 1925): 2.

¹⁵⁶ The Theater Laboratory attached to the Meyerhold Theater recorded entire reflexological studies of performances. See RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 228 for a full listing of the forty-six reflexes recorded. In the early 1920s, similar studies were conducted at the Proletkult Workshops, the Theater of the Revolution, the Children’s Theater, and the MGSPS Theater.

ideology for their readers. The mass journals were especially important for establishing and aggrandizing the authority of the new leaders of the proletarian left. In turn, the voices of the worker-correspondents reflected the views of these new leaders. The trade unions and the Komsomol underwrote the future development of this project during the 1920s.

The Theater of the Revolution represented a third variant positioned between the aesthetic “extreme” of the avant-garde, on the one hand, and the political “extreme” of the MGSPS, on the other. The creative partnership between Gripich and Romashov continued with *The End of Krivorylisk*, another contemporary satirical melodrama. In moving from an avant-garde style to one based on satirical realism, the Theater won popularity among the “mixed” public of NEP society. Gripich found no need to expound at length about his theater in ideological terms because it found support in the cultural apparatus and his productions were popular with the broad public. Still, the playwright, director, and set designer made public statements about the ideological import of *The Soufflé*.¹⁵⁷

The traditions of the academic theaters sustained them during this period of sociocultural transformation. Overriding continuity characterized their development. The Revolution had wreaked havoc the relationship between the Moscow Art Theater and the old intelligentsia because this core public had in great part fled Russia. But the values of “truth, beauty, and genuine art” remained the aesthetic foundation of the Moscow Art Theater. It simply abstained from responding to the ideological attacks from the left. Yet, the extended tour abroad also reflected collective uncertainty about how to navigate the future in Soviet Moscow. The institutionalized ethos of the acting ensemble and the unquestioned authority of its artistic directors allowed the Theater to preserve its basic style when it returned and began staging new Soviet plays.

Beginning in 1927, when Stalin emerged victorious from the power struggle, the growing involvement of Party institutions in the day-to-day operations of the dramatic theaters became a major structural constraint. This political process would completely transform the making of theater and outweigh talent in defining the culture of the Moscow theater world.

¹⁵⁷ B. S. Romashev, A. L. Gripich, Viktor Shestakov, “Na putiakh rabochego teatr. Teatr Revoliutsii. Vozdushnyi pirog,” *Rabochii i teatr*, no. 18 (May 1, 1925): 7.

SIX

The Proletarian Playwrights and the Cultural Revolution

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Karl Marx observes that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances directly chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”¹ In 1905, Russia entered a revolutionary period as the tsarist regime sought to contain social forces that demanded political freedoms.

One of the most momentous periods in modern history followed on the heels of World War I: the autocracy fell during the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks seized power in October, and subsequently the Civil War laid waste to Russia for three years. The magnitude of the revolution that rocked Russia a decade later was comparable in its transformation of Soviet society. Historical circumstances such as the power concentrated in the Party and the need to industrialize the country militated in the direction of this revolution, but these factors did not determine its intensity.

In 1927, the power struggle in the Politburo of the Bolshevik Party that had begun four years earlier on the eve of Lenin’s death came to a conclusion. Stalin decisively defeated the leading oppositionists at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December, which brought their expulsion from the Party. 1928 saw the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan for the country’s rapid industrialization. The following year saw the launch of the wholesale collectivization of agriculture, on the twelfth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The press hailed 1929 as the Year of the Great Turn. As the industrialization drive gathered steam, production targets were regularly revised upwards and the reigning slogan became: “The Five-Year Plan in Four Years!” At the cost of tremendous suffering and unforeseen consequences, such as the staggering number of lives lost due to famine and the peasantry’s wholesale slaughter of livestock in the face of collectivization, the first Five-Year Plans ultimately succeeded in achieving the goals of rapidly industrializing the country and collectivizing agriculture.

The First Five-Year Plan also witnessed a “great turn” in the cultural sphere. Leopold Averbakh, the leader of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) that took command of the literary scene referred to it as “cultural revolution.”² At the First All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers in 1928, he maintained that everyone must undergo radical transformation, even the proletarians.³

¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

² The acronym RAPP stood for *Rossiiskaia assosiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei*.

³ On RAPP, see Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deeds,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1932*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978), 193 and 293, fn. 22. See also Edward J. Brown, *The*

If his rhetoric suggests the tenor of the era, understanding the combination of factors that underpinned the radical transformation of the theater during the First Five-Year Plan requires reviewing the sweeping changes in the administration of the theater, the crucial organizational changes within the theaters, and the new conventions of theater, all of which worked in concert to fundamentally alter the context of the reception—and consequently the meanings of theatrical productions.

THE NEW ADMINISTRATION OF THEATER DURING THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

Judging by the impressive array of policies and regulations governing theater in the 1920s, the power of Party and state agencies ran broad and deep. Narkompros was the top authority in the affairs of the central theaters and its chief directorates functioned as its executive bodies, however responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the theater actually rested with the General Managers of the theaters. Since these managers lacked training in theater, they oversaw the administration of the theater and repertoire selection; they deferred to the stage directors in artistic matters. Consequently, the latter had creative control over their theatrical productions. They selected new plays for the upcoming season and decided matters of staging. Nevertheless, a theater's creative work was still subject to layers of institutional oversight. One of the most important of these institutions was the Central Repertoire Committee (Glavrepertkom).⁴

It published the authoritative Repertoire Indexes rating plays on a scale of "A," "B" and "C" in terms of their ideological "acceptability" for the public.⁵ The "A" rating represented Glavrepertkom's top recommendation of a play for staging. In addition, Glavrepertkom banned many plays for various reasons. These could not be performed under any circumstances, but occasionally the agency approved censored versions.

Furthermore, several safeguards ensured that the theatrical productions of approved and selected plays were acceptable for public premiere. Each theater gave closed rehearsals for the officials of the various directorates to provide the authorities an opportunity to evaluate the production before it opened. At this point, the authorities could insist upon changes, but the considerable sunken costs of mounting a production gave the theater some leverage in these negotiations.

By the time of the general rehearsal before a cross-section of the Soviet public, which included members of the press and official social organizations, the upcoming premiere was a *fait accompli*. For example, Mikhail Bulgakov's play *Zoya's Apartment (Zoikina kvartira)*, a satire about the privileged class of Soviet entrepreneurs and officials, opened at the Vakhtangov Theater in 1926 amid public

Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950).

⁴ Glavrepertkom was the acronym for the Chief Directorate for Control of Performances and Repertory (*Glavnoe upravlenie po kontroliu za zrelishchami i repertuarom*).

⁵ The corps of censors who carefully vetted scripts was attached to Glavlit, the Literary Administration.

controversy. Hardline critics including members of RAPP vociferously protested but the play remained in the Theater's repertoire until it was finally banned in 1929.⁶ It was not an isolated incident. Other approved productions came under severe criticism the press. This state of affairs in which the artists exercised considerable control underwent significant changes, beginning in 1927 as Stalin consolidated his political power.

The conference held by the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Party Central Committee (APPO TsK) in May 1927 was a pivotal moment. Its resolutions focused on control over the theater repertoire and the development of contemporary Soviet dramaturgy, that is, dramatic plays on Soviet themes. One resolution recommended organizing contests and awarding prizes to spur the growth of "revolutionary proletarian dramaturgy."⁷

Another directed the representatives of Glavrepertkom—precisely the people who inspected productions before their public premieres—to obstruct the influence of "degenerate and anti-proletarian attitudes" in the theater, yet also—if contradictorily—refrain from "petty intrusions in the life of the theater."⁸ This resolution specifically mentioned supervising staging to prevent "new, unacceptable elements" from being introduced into theatrical productions. In order to properly police productions at this level, Glavrepertkom employees needed to be better trained. Apparently little changed. At least, that was the implication of Agitprop Chairman Krinitsky's report the following year.⁹

The major institutional overhaul that eventually succeeded in wresting control of the theaters from the artists came in 1928 with the centralization of the theater administration. In May, the Narkompros Collegiate established the Main Directorate of Literary and Artistic Affairs (Glaviskusstvo), giving it sweeping responsibilities and powers.¹⁰ As seen, before this centralization, the central theaters of Moscow operated under the jurisdiction of various bodies, for instance, the Moscow City Soviet and the Council of Trade Unions as well as Narkompros. Glaviskusstvo consolidated it under one roof. The new regime in the theater expanded state control and centralized it, streamlining the implementation of new policies and regulations—and ensuring greater accountability.

In addition, the "Resolution on Artistic-Political Councils at the Theaters" was issued in September 1929.¹¹ Certainly, it was the most invasive policy in the life of the theater to date. Originally instituted in the early 1920, *khudozhestvennie soveti*,

⁶ *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1926-1932*, Pt. 1, ed. A. Ia. Trabskii (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1982), 230-231. It was performed 200 times.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ Pavel Novitskii, *Puti razvitiia teatra* (Moscow: Kinopechat', 1927), 477-494.

⁹ *Sovetskii teatr*, 25.

¹⁰ "Polozhenie o Glaviskusstve," *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1926-1932*, 54-57 and 83, fns. 34-35. Its official name was the *Glavnoe upravlenie po delam khudozhesvennoi literatury i iskusstvo*, literally, the Main Administration of the Affairs of Belles-Lettres and Art.

¹¹ "Polozhenie o khudozhestvenno-politicheskikh sovetakh pri teatrakh," *Ibid.*, 72-73 and 82, fn. 16.

or Artistic Councils ostensibly increased the theater's ties with the working-class and Soviet society, allowing for public oversight of the theater. Artistic Councils consisted of each theater's General Manager, theater artists, and other theater staff. Furthermore, they included representatives of Party and Soviet organizations, especially trade union and the Komsomol members.

In theory, these Councils increased the role of the "Soviet community" (*sovetskaia obshchestvennost'*) within and around the theater. In practice, they rubber-stamped the theater's production plan and rarely convened, usually on the eve of a premiere. Their influence in the theater was nominal.¹² With the 1929 Resolution, the size of these councils grew, their composition changed, and their powers increased. Renamed "Artistic-Political Councils," they could have as many as thirty members.

The Resolution stipulated that representatives from any given theater could constitute no more than one-third of the membership, which reduced their potential influence. As one contemporary explained, in the past "Narkompros would approve a play without the agreement of the Council: now the new Councils will throw out all the clearly anti-Soviet elements even if at first it is to the detriment of the most active, artistic members of the theater."¹³ The new regulations packed the Councils with trade union representatives and Party members. The local Council of the Trade Unions could designate as many as fourteen representatives from plants and factories to serve on the Artistic-Political Council. Members also included representatives of the Union of Artistic Workers (*Rabis*), the Administration of Moscow Theatrical Enterprises (UMZP), the local and district Party committees, and the Komsomol.

For example, out of the 29 members on the Artistic-Political Council at the Theater of the Revolution, 19 were Party members.¹⁴ Only 5 came from the Theater itself. The remaining representatives were from large industrial enterprises, trade union organizations, and the press.¹⁵ An official report about the composition of the Councils dated December 7, 1929 showed that almost three-fifths of the Council representatives of the state academic theaters were either members of the Communist Party or the Komsomol.¹⁶

Moreover, almost half were "workers" by profession: the Resolution "proletarianized" the Councils. It represented an aspect of the general process of

¹² See, for example, "Soobshchenie ob obsuzhdenii v otdele Agitatsii, Propagandy i Pechati TsK VKP(b) doklada o rabote khudozhestvennykh sovetov pri teatrakh," dated December 15, 1928, Ibid, 26 and "O khudsovetakh: iz besedy s t. N. Rabichem," *Novyi zritel'*, no. 8, 1929: 6-7. The latter was published on the eve of Glaviskusstvo's Resolution about Artistic-Political Councils.

¹³ RGALI, f. 655, op. 1, d. 156, l. 203.

¹⁴ "Smotr khudozhestvennykh sovetov," *Sovremmenyi teatr*, no. 52 (December 25, 1928): 830.

¹⁵ *Rabochie-vydvizhentsy*.

¹⁶ "Svodka o sostave Khudozhestvenno-Politicheskikh sovetakh v Gosakteatrakh," RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, l. 15. The category of Party members included candidate members. These two groups accounted for 274 of the 440 Council members.

mass mobilization of the era, which enrolled Party members, workers, and peasants in the new Soviet-era educational institutions and the established ones. This mobilization promoted these same social strata into professional jobs with little training to become the cadres of the First Five-Year Plan.¹⁷

In fact, the newly appointed head of Glavrepertkom was Comrade Gandurin. Prior to his appointment to this high post in the Party apparatus, he worked in the garage of the Council of People's Commissars.¹⁸ Without a doubt, the mere reconstitution of the Councils did not give them control over the artistic process, but it created a formidable power base within the theater for exerting political pressure from below, primarily by Party and Komsomol members.

The case of the Theater of the Revolution also illustrates the considerable extent to which a Council could become involved in the actual operations of the theater. Its members sat on the Planning Commission, which means that it also supervised the selection of plays. In addition, "corrections" were made to theatrical productions based on its recommendations prior to their public premiere.¹⁹

As a result of the 1929 reorganization, Councils also had recourse to higher authorities in the event of disputes with the theaters' Production Councils, which developed the production design and staging. Finally, the training of the General Managers in the basics of theater history, stagecraft, and criticism better equipped them to implement the policies of Glaviskusstvo. From the highest administrative level to the extension of sociopolitical control through the reorganized Councils, the new regime in the theater squeezed the artistic directors with the "revolutions" from above and below.

The most significant change in personnel within Narkompros was the removal of Lunacharsky. He resigned from his post on October 12, 1929 and Andrei Bubnov, an ex-soldier and member of the Party Central Committee, replaced him as the new Commissar of Enlightenment that same day. With Lunacharsky's departure, the era of loosened control within the tightly policed sphere of Soviet culture, which had witnessed experiment and increasing public controversies, decisively ended.

Andrei Bubnov ushered in the hardline Stalinist policy on culture during the First Five-Year Plan. His direction of the Commissariat was quintessentially Stalinist. He focused on the correct ideological leadership of the arts, which translated into placing reliable Stalinists in all the top positions of leadership and administration. For example, he appointed Heitz to be the "Red director" of the Moscow Art Theater to ensure that it hewed to the political line.

¹⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Cultural Revolution as Class War," 32-34.

¹⁸ Nikolai Pesochinskii, "Velikii perelom' v teatral'noi kritike, 1930," *Voprosy teatrovedeniia*, ed. A. Ia. Al'tshuller (St. Petersburg: Vserossiiskii nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut iskusstvoznaniia, 1991), 101. In Soviet terminology he was a *rabochii-vydvizhenets*. On proletarianization and promotion (*vydvizhenie*) see Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 234-36.

¹⁹ "Smotr khudozhestvennykh sovetov": 831.

He conceived the arts to be a means of propaganda. On January 31, 1930 the *Narkompros Bulletin* published the Directive “On the Propaganda by the Theaters of the Five-Year Plan of Socialist Construction.”²⁰ It mobilized the theater for the Five-Year Plan, specifically instructing the theaters in Point #1 “to examine the repertory for new plays in the most painstaking manner, without letting any play that to some extent responds to the task of propagandizing the Five-Year Plan of socialist construction escape attention.”²¹

The Repertoire Index published by Glavrepertkom in 1929 simplified the matter. It was exhaustive, classifying 10,000 different titles, but a cursory examination reveals its nature.²² Contemporary Soviet plays by Aleksandr Faiko, Anatolii Glebov, Vsevolod Ivanov, Vladimir Kirshon, Boris Lavrenov, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Konstanin Trenev received the highest “A” rating. All of Mikhail Bulgakov’s plays were banned. The Forward to the Index devoted several lengthy paragraphs to political satire, explaining that it served no purpose in the Soviet order because there was no opposition to the rule of the proletariat.²³

The 1931 Index—the second volume of the 1929 Index—banned a vast number of plays and downgraded the classification of scores of others listed in the 1929 Index. The number of new Soviet plays to receive the “A” rating was exceedingly small: one by Bill-Belotserkovsky, one by Ivanov, one by Vishnevsky, and two by Kirshon.²⁴ Only one play by Afinogenov, two by Mayakovsky, and one by Pogodin received the “B” classification. The abrupt change in the repertoires of the central theaters that occurred in the 1929/30 theatrical season makes it clear that the General Managers of the central theaters implemented Bubnov’s Directive.

On the one hand, the centralization of administration through Glaviskusstvo represented a bureaucratic process that resulted in better planning, greater accountability, and higher profitability for the theater.²⁵ On the other, it was a political process that witnessed the radicalization of the Arts Administration (Glaviskusstvo), which favored both the works of the militant RAPP playwrights and

²⁰ “Tsirkuliar Soveta po delam khudozhestvennoi literatury i iskusstva otdelam narodnogo obrazovaniia muzeiam `O propaganda teatrami piatiletnego plana sotsialisticheskogo stroitel’stvo,” *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*,” 73-74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²² See “Iz otcheta o rabote Soveta po delam khudozhestvennoi literatury i iskusstva za 1928/29,” RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 104, ll. 5-6 and 8 and *Repertuarnyi ukazatel’ GRK*, vol. 1 ed. N. Rabich (Moscow: Teakinopechat’, 1929).

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴ *Repertuarnyi ukazatel’*, vol. 2 (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1931).

²⁵ Due to various changes in the system of ticket sales, overall revenues increased, but the most important factor was simply the increase in the total number of performances given by the theaters.

the increased control of the “proletarian public” (*proletar'skaia obshchestvennost'*) within the theaters.²⁶

Soviet Dramaturgy During the First Five-Year Plan

RAPP playwrights recommended their works as exemplars of “proletarian realism.”²⁷ The ideologues of RAPP elaborated a literary theory based upon the idea that writers must be inspired by Marxist ideology. With roots in Proletkult and other proletarian movements of the early 1920s, the ideological and aesthetic foundations of RAPP were years in the making. At the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, the playwright Vladimir Kirshon who was a leading playwright and polemicist in the ranks of RAPP gave a speech about dramaturgy. He provided a “List of Fundamental Works of Proletarian Art” that included one play by Andrei Bezymensky, the Komsomol poet, one by Vsevolod Vishnevsky, two plays by Aleksandr Afinogenov, and three by himself.²⁸

During the course of the First Five-Year Plan, these playwrights were propelled from Moscow’s “proletarian” theaters into the limelight at the prestigious “academic” theaters—even to the Chamber Theater of the prerevolutionary avant-garde theater director Alexander Tairov who founded it in 1914 as an “anti-realist” theater. The Chamber Theater was devoted almost exclusively to staging productions of the classics and the contemporary plays of the Western repertory, such as the plays of Eugene O’Neill.

Kirshon, the “house” playwright of the MGSPS Theater in the 1920s, was catapulted to fame when his play *Bread* premiered at the Moscow Art Theater. Even prior to the opening, the script was the center of discussions at the Communist Academy in Moscow. Aleksandr Afinogenov, the “house” playwright at the Proletkult Theater in the 1920s, also saw his play *Fear (Strakh)* open at the Moscow Art Theater in 1931.

In 1930, The Moscow Art Theater II performed a play by Ivan Mikitenko and the Vakhtangov Theater performed one by Nikolai Pogodin.²⁹ As before, the revolutionary theaters continued to stage their plays. Bezymensky’s *The Shot (Vystrel’)* premiered at the Meyerhold Theater in December 1929. In 1930, Vishnevsky’s *The First Cavalry* first opened at the Proletkult Theater in May and in September it also opened at the Theater of the Revolution.

Many of the new plays dealt with the theme of industrialization. Pogodin, a former journalist who visited construction sites for his newspaper articles, used his eye for realistic detail to write *The Poem About the Axe (Poema o topore)*, a play that deals with the “backwardness” of workers and peasants.³⁰ In his drama,

²⁶ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Emergence of Glaviskusstvo: Class War on the Cultural Front,” *Soviet Studies* 23, no. 2 (1971).

²⁷ On proletarian realism and aesthetics, see Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932*, 58-86.

²⁸ Pesochinskii, 103.

²⁹ Movshenson, 23 and 25.

³⁰ Gorchakov, 290.

communists, technicians, and shock-workers lead the “battle to reconstruct” the factory. Mikitenko’s *Light Up the Stars* (*Svetite zvezdy*) deals with the admission of lesser-qualified working-class students into higher education. The “proletarianization” of higher education was a central issue in the Cultural Revolution. Surely, the theme held particular interest for the younger spectators in the audience.



Figure 6.1. Babanova as Anka in *The Poem about the Axe*. She is a devoted steel mill worker and Komsomol member: she represents the young generation and the New Soviet Person.

However, the entry of these new Soviet plays into the repertory does not provide a full picture of the extent of changes in the Moscow theater world, especially from the perspective of the theatergoer. Although Russian and foreign classics as well as older Soviet plays still predominated in the repertoires of the central theaters of Moscow, these new plays on contemporary themes accounted for a high percentage of the premieres during the Cultural Revolution.

For example, at the Vakhtangov Theater, from the 1929/30 season until the end of the 1931/32 season there were seven new productions of which four were contemporary plays on Soviet themes, including one by Valentin Kataev, the author of *Time, Forward!* about the builders of Magnitogorsk. There were also two new productions of classics by Shakespeare and Schiller; and one play by Ben Hecht. Furthermore, these productions of new Soviet plays received many more performances than others in the repertoire, including the new productions of Russian and foreign classics.³¹

³¹ Based on my analysis of the figures for performances given by the Maly Theater, the Moscow Art Theater, the Vakhtangov Theater, the Meyerhold Theater, the Theater of the Revolution, the MGSPS Theater, and the Proletkult Theaters from the 1928/29 through the 1931/32 seasons in the chapters devoted to these dramatic theaters in *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1926-1932*. These plays were

In addition, these plays were performed in the branches of the central theaters in the outer-lying districts of Moscow. They were also taken on tour to the distant reaches of the Soviet Union. For example, the Vakhtangov Theater took Pogodin's play *Tempo* (*Temp*) on tour in the summer of 1931 to the metallurgical plant of Magnitogorsk in the Urals and Kuznetskstroï in Western Siberia.³² A longtime journalist, Pogodin went to Stalingrad to observe the building of the gigantic industrial Traktostroi factory to gather material for his play.³³

To be able to watch a theater from Moscow perform a play about quickening the pace of work from "Asiatic" levels to "Bolshevik tempos" must have been quite an experience for audiences involved in the grueling work of constructing these new Stalinist steel towns.³⁴ In *Tempo*, the theme is socialist labor: work as creation and the Soviet people as builders. The hero is the illiterate seasonal worker Laptev who arrives at the construction site and becomes a *entusiast-stroitel'*, or devoted builder—the prototype of the Stakhanovite—and breaks all American records!³⁵



Figure 6.2. Scene from *Tempo* by Pogodin. Source: *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*.

performed at least twice as often as others in the repertoire and as much as six times more often.

³² Ibid., 231.

³³ O. Litovskii, "Temy i p'esy. Tri prem'ery," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 57 (94) (December 4, 1930): 3.

³⁴ On the workers and living conditions in Magnitogorsk, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley, 1997), especially chapters 2 and 3: "Peopling a Shock Construction Site" and "The Idiocy of Urban Life."

³⁵ Elena Poliakova, *Teatr i dramaturgiia: iz opyty raboty MKhT nad p'esami sovetskikh dramaturgov, 1917-1945* (Moscow: Vserossiiskogoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1959), 171.

The production schedule for Moscow's central theaters also reached "Bolshevik tempos." Bubnov formalized the shift to a seven-days-a-week performance schedule. Not to be outdone by other commissars, a year later he revised the target upwards declaring 1931 to be a continuous work year for the theaters.³⁶ For instance, in addition to three premiere productions and more than two hundred performances during the 1928/29 regular season, the Theater of the Revolution sent one troupe on a tour of six cities in the three republics of the Caucasus during the summer of 1929. A second troupe visited eleven cities on its tour, including Samarkand in the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan. This troupe's repertoire consisted solely of the latest contemporary Soviet plays.

The nature of live performance preserves the unique aura that envelops the work of art and the presence of the actor, of which Benjamin writes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." However, the ceaseless reproduction of the same plays by the troupes across the U.S.S.R. stripped them from their original frames and reinserted into the contexts of Stalinist public life: the new industrial cities, the massive construction sites, and the state collective farms. Moscow theater culture and the popular veneration of theater art were gradually eclipsed by the Stalin cult and the exaltation of the political during this period.

The Young Guard (Molodaia Gvardiia), the Komsomol publication edited by Leopold Averbakh in the first years of NEP, was the original base of RAPP. RAPP became the natural standard bearer of the Cultural Revolution because it radicalized the *bor'ba*, or struggle against the old literary intelligentsia. The leaders of RAPP viciously criticized scores of writers and theater directors whom they identified as the "rightist danger" in the arts.³⁷ In the theater, their chief targets were the Moscow Art Theater and the Chamber Theater. Afinogenov and Kirshon were the leading playwrights of RAPP, but neither was interested in dialogue. An article that Afinogenov published in the second issue of *Soviet Theater* in the form of a dialogue between a Playwright, a Critic and an Artistic-Political Council member oddly reveals this.

The conversation begins when his three characters remain in the theater lobby while the audience returns to watch the finale of the performance. Initially, the Critic appears to be on the defensive, as the member of a theater's Artistic-Political Council (*khudsovetshchik*) makes the observation that any unsuccessful actor or author can become a successful critic.³⁸ The Playwright supports his argument with the examples of *The New Spectator*, *Contemporary Theater*, and *The Life of Art*: "They did away with these little journals and no one noticed anything, as though they had never existed."

³⁶ "Dokladnaia zapiska Narkomprosa v Sovnarkom RSFSR o meropriiatiakh po ullisheniui tetral'naia dela v RSFSR, February 23, 1930," *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1926-1932*, 60-61 and "Prikaz Narkoma po prosveshcheniia A.S. Bubnova, October 23-24, 1930," *Ibid*, 64.

³⁷ On the Cultural Revolution and RAPP, see Fitzpatrick, "The Cultural Revolution as Class War," 28-32.

³⁸ A. Afinogenov, "Razgovor mezhdu deistviem," *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 2, 1930: 10-11.

Indeed, all these journals were closed down in 1929, leaving the field to the newly established journal *Soviet Theater*. The editorial board of *Soviet Theater*, which was described as a journal of “Marxist theater studies,” consisted of seven at the time, including Afinogenov and Kirshon, and Pavel Novitsky, the new head of Glaviskusstvo’s Theater Section.³⁹ One might easily read the Playwright’s remark as an expression of the *schaudenfreude* of RAPP members at the demise of these journals that gave expression to the views of the avant-garde left, and upheld the need to understand art in artistic—not narrowly political—terms.⁴⁰

By the conclusion of Afinogenov’s exchange in the form of a dramatic sketch, it turns out that all three characters are in basic agreement. As the Critic summarizes: “The sorties of the class enemy on the ideological front makes an immediate response with Marxist analysis and Bolshevik intolerance an exceedingly crucial task of communist criticism.”⁴¹ Just as enemies were invoked to consolidate Stalin’s power in the political arena as the forcible state direction of the economy took hold, RAPP advanced the “unity of the proletarian theatrical front” in the interest of “dealing a blow to the class enemy” on the cultural front.⁴² The homogenized and politicized monologue of the RAPP ideologues quickly supplanted the dialogue of warring camps in the NEP era, resounding in the press like an echo chamber.

From the front page of *Pravda* to the *Literary Gazette*, the blitz of news and propaganda in these years of crisis and “socialist construction” (*sotsialisticheskoe stroitel’stvo*) trumpeted the slogans, the goals, and the accomplishments of those engaged in fulfilling it, including the proletarian playwrights. One such campaign of the Five-Year Plan was the mass recruitment of 25,000 workers to serve on the collective farms. Joined by urban Party and government officials, Komsomol members, and the secret police, the 25,000ers spearheaded the crusade in the countryside, reviving the traditions, ethos, and practices of the heroic Civil War period.⁴³ The first anniversary of the collectivization drive led by the 25,000ers coincided with the premiere on January 26, 1931 of Vladimir Kirshon’s play *Bread*.

³⁹ On Glaviskusstvo, see the discussion below.

⁴⁰ In particular, *The New Spectator* represented the views of the avant-garde left, but all of these journals were devoted to serious dramatic art of all political stripes, including experimental work.

⁴¹ Ibid: 11.

⁴² See the editorial in *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 1, 1930.

⁴³ Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 33.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF *BREAD*



Figure 6.3. Vladimir Kirshon. Source: O. K. Borodina, *Vladimir Kirshon*.

Kirshon's biography is similar to that of other proletarian playwrights. His social background was provincial "intelligentsia" not "proletarian": he was the son of a lawyer and medical assistant.⁴⁴ He was born in 1902 near Beslan in the foothills of the Caucasus and volunteered at age sixteen for the front in the Civil War. He joined the Komsomol and two years later entered the ranks of the Bolshevik Party. He was a product of the new Party institutions of higher education: he was sent to Moscow to study at the Sverdlov Worker-Peasant Communist University.

Upon the completion of his studies, he taught at the Party school in Rostov and became involved in the organization of the Rostov Association of Proletarian Writers, which adopted the political-literary platform of the Moscow proletarian group "October" as its program. He also became a leading member of the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP).⁴⁵ His first play premiered in Moscow at the MGSPS Theater in 1927.

The cast of characters in his play *Bread* tells us that we have entered a world defined primarily by political affiliation and class background, not by family ties, or by occupation, as in the many Soviet plays of the NEP period. The large cast of twenty-eight is evenly divided between those identified as Party members and government officials, on the one hand, and peasants, on the other. Kirshon employs the official classifications of the various peasant strata to describe the characters in his play because Party policy towards the peasantry drives the dramatic conflict.

During the NEP era, the Party applied the theory of class struggle to formulate its policy in the countryside, which meant combating the "kulak," who was regarded as the rural "capitalist," by seeking a *smychka*, or alliance, with the "middle peasants."⁴⁶ In theory, the poorer "batraks" and "bednyaks" were the natural allies of the proletariat. In principle, the procurement campaigns represented a progressive tax upon the peasantry to support the country's development.

⁴⁴ O. K. Borodina, *Vladimir Kirshon: ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* (Kiev: Izdatel'stvo Kievskogo universiteta, 1964), 5-7.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 25. VAPP was the precursor of RAPP.

⁴⁶ Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization* (New York: Norton Library, 1975), 391. See also Lewin, "Who Was the Kulak," *The Making of the Soviet System*, 121-41.

In actuality, the complexity of peasant life and the exigencies of grain procurement presented an entirely different set of practical problems for the plenipotentiaries of the Party in the countryside. For instance, how could an official distinguish between a kulak and a rich middle peasant? Those involved in the procurement campaigns were supposed to take most of the grain (“bread”) from the “kulaks” to meet their targets, but it was mainly in the hands of other peasants: the “middle peasants.” The play represents the application of Party policy in the village in the ideological sense first outlined. The style of the play is realistic, but its portrayal of Party policy and the characters is idealized.

The play begins with the arrival of Raevsky arrives at the home of Mikhailov, the Secretary of the Party Regional Committee, who is a Civil War buddy and a former brigade commander. Mikhailov is completely dedicated to his work and constantly answers the phone to issue orders about the smallest matters affecting production. His young wife Olga is stultified by small city life and enamored with Raevsky, a former commissar who is a professor. Raevsky has just returned from a three year posting in Germany. The play’s exposition reveals that Raevsky has a passionate nature. Despite his Party membership, it seems that he is both unwilling and incapable of submitting to discipline. Mikhailov dispatches him to the countryside for grain collection. Olga accompanies him.

Possessed of a Civil War mentality, Raevsky decides to start the collection immediately in order to fulfill his orders ahead of schedule. His decision plays into the hands of the kulaks. The collection falters. He plans to arrest the kulaks, but Dedov, the Secretary of the Village Soviet, warns him that it could lead to a major rebellion. Fearing this, Raevsky agrees to the collection of 2,000 poods of grain instead of 7,000 with Kvasov, a kulak.

Mikhailov arrives and rectifies the situation by using the poor and middle peasants against the kulaks. After he leaves, Raevsky receives a threatening note: Kvasov expects that his reaction will lead to a rebellion. Just as Kvasov anticipates, Raevsky demands to know who wrote the anonymous note or he will collect the 7,000 poods of grain—plus 2,000 more.



Figure 6.4. A scene from *Bread*. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*.

Once again, Mikhailov arrives and insists that Raevsky to rescind his order, but Raevsky refuses. At the play's climax, Kvasov, the kulak leader, rounds up a gang and tells them to trap Mikhailov in a hut and burn him alive—but to leave Raevsky alone (he is bound and gagged). They are ready to set the hut aflame, but Mikhailov is awaiting them with a group of Komsomol members. The latter gain the upper hand and arrest the kulaks.

Enemies were an integral part of the Stalin Revolution. Kvasov is the embodiment of the “class enemy” in the village. Like a reflection of Stalin's idea that sabotage is invisible and hence difficult to detect, Kvasov is sly: he conducts a devious struggle against the Communists. He sizes up his opponents and the situation carefully, then makes his moves; he is the director behind the scenes. He completely deceives Raevsky. In contrast, Mikhailov is always two steps ahead of Kvasov and the kulaks. Ultimately, Kvasov's rage turns demonic when he orders the Bolshevik leader to be burned alive even though his own son is in the hut. In Kvasov, Kirshon gave the audience a powerful image of the evil kulak that had been caricatured in Soviet posters and vilified in the press, but never before so successfully portrayed on the stage.⁴⁷

Formally speaking, *Bread* is not a play about collectivization. It depicts “class warfare” in the village, which crescendos in the furious resistance of the kulaks. It had great resonance as part of the contemporary campaign against the “enemies” of collectivization. If the kulak was seen as the longtime, implacable enemy in the countryside, then the other “internal” enemy in the play was perceived as no less dangerous in this epoch: the “deviationist” (*zagibshchik*).

Raevsky takes “excessive” measures and issues threats against the “middle” and “poor” peasants that official Party policy reserved for “kulaks.” Consequently, his approach represents a “distortion” of Party policy. Actually, Stalin vindicated his “general line” in the countryside in 1928, by blaming the influence of the “kulak” over the “middle” peasant and the “deviations” of various local Party organizations that were “alien to the Party and blind to the class position in the villages.”⁴⁸ The regime's use of violence against peasantry continued unabated. This led the peasantry to such a degree of despair and anger that Stalin feared the situation might explode and threaten his power.⁴⁹ On March 1930, Stalin's “Dizziness with Success” article appeared in *Pravda*. It smeared the Party cadres in the villages.

In a similar way, Raevsky represents “left” deviationism because he brings a Civil War mentality to bear on the village. Also, he is guilty of “right opportunism” by acquiescing to Kvasov when this approach fails. Raevsky's excesses closely approximated the approach of the 25,000ers in the emergency atmosphere of the early 1930s when they set up collective farms at all costs. Hence, the play represented both a fable about the village and a dramatic gloss of Party policy in the countryside within the context of the First Five-Year Plan.

⁴⁷ See the discussion below. On the kulak in Soviet posters of the 1920s and 1930s, see Bonnell, 207-208, 212, and 219.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, 233.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 515.

If Raevsky proves to be an unwitting foe of Party policy within the fictional world of the play, Mikhailov represents his polar opposite. He too is intelligent, but in a practical, quick-witted way. Down-to-earth and efficient, he meets all of the challenges that he faces with aplomb. His defining trait is level-headedness. The central opposition between the figures of Raevsky and Mikhailov make it clear that the play is not about politics narrowly construed—properly carrying out the Party’s “general line”—but about Bolshevik leadership.

Mikhailov is not just a superb leader: he also an image of the new Bolshevik of the Stalinist era, who is wise and skillful. The Stalin cult was launched simultaneously with the First Five-Year Plan. Mikhailov stands out as a dramatic figure akin to the Great Leader in being self-possessed, ascetic, and down-to-earth. He incessantly works in the service of the People and proves to be a strategist of the highest order.⁵⁰

For example, he takes command of the situation in the village after Raevsky has fallen short. In Scene 6 at the village gathering, his performance is amazing. First, he employs illustration and allows the peasants to reach their own conclusions:

Mikhailov: I ask you, why does the poor peasant and middle peasant, knowing that the state needs grain to strengthen agriculture, sell at the set price, while the kulak keeps his own, overbids the state price, and buys up grain in his own village?

A Middle Peasant: Tell us.

Mikhailov: Because the peasant has to buy boots for winter, pay taxes, do repairs. But the kulak waits. The kulak awaits “Kulak Spring.” When the prices flies upward on the market, then the kulak takes his grain to market.⁵¹

When Grunkhin, a poor peasant, exclaims that there are no kulaks in the village, Mikhailov proceeds with logical argument and explains that if that is the case, then the 7,000 poods must be collected from everyone in the village. Of course, the peasants say that is unfair: they prefer eighty percent of the villagers to remain exempt and the grain to be collected from the richest twenty percent.

Then, Grunkhin steps forward to ask Mikhailov a question. He pulls out two fistfuls of wheat and asks Mikhailov to tell him which of the two is better, his own

⁵⁰ On the Stalin cult, see Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, 450-452.

⁵¹ Vladimir Kirshon, “Bread” *Vladimir Kirshon: Izbrannoe* ed. Iu. N. Libedinskii, et al., (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1958), 223. As the Scissors Crisis of the NEP period showed, regardless of their strata, peasants sought to receive the highest price for their grain and did not take it to market when they decided it was again their interests. Unwillingness to sell at prices fixed by the state was not limited to “kulaks.” This also led to severe grain shortages in the cities and the grain procurement crisis of 1928. Lewin argues that Stalin’s concern was not the “alliance” with the peasantry but the backing of the working-class. The peasants’ “withholding of grain” was the rationale for collectivization.

grain or his son's grain? Grunkhin says that his son is using different growing methods. Mikhailov passes the test with flying colors. He chuckles and calls Grunkhin a joker: the wheat is the same, only one is spring wheat and other winter wheat. Mikhailov then reaches into his own pocket and pulls out a handful of grain, the quality of which astounds the peasants. Mikhailov explains that he stopped by the Lenin Commune where he picked up the sample of a "decent" harvest. This plants the seed of the superiority of state-run farms in the minds of the peasants, demonstrating Mikhailov's skills in propagandizing.

The play concludes after the fracas at the hut. Mikhailov informs Raevsky that he will stand trial and orders the kulaks to be arrested and led away. Kvasov confronts Mikhailov: it is a question of either "us" or "you," he warns. Kirshon has mendaciously put the Bolshevik phrase "kto-kogo (who will [defeat] whom) into Kvasov's mouth.



Figure 6.5. The Final Scene. Kvasov is tied up and tells Mikhailov "It's either us or you." Source: P. A. Markov, *V khudozhestvennom teatre*.

The play ends by using a classic avant-garde device. Mikhailov breaks the performance frame and turns directly towards the audience to deliver his lines: "You miscalculated Ivan Gerasimovich [Kvasov]. You thought there is only one Mikhailov, but look at how many Mikhailovs there are! (Mikhailov points to those on stage). There are Mikhailovs there! (Mikhailov points into the auditorium). You can't destroy all of us with fire!"⁵²

Kirshon's play is melodramatic. Both Raevsky and Mikhailov represent the best of the Soviet community since they are devoted representatives of the communist cause on the frontline in the village. The mission in the village tests their mettle. Will Raevsky succeed? Initially he fails owing to his failure to properly prepare the village for the grain collection. Mikhailov arrives and salvages the situation for his army buddy, which confirms his stature as a genuine hero. In effect, he returns Raevsky to the fold.

Once again, Raevsky falls prey to the manipulations of the scheming villain, Kvasov, who provokes him with an anonymous threat. At this point, Raevsky asserts his own will by imposing a punitive demand instead of ensuring that the grain procurement is met, as agreed. He is dangerously close to becoming a genuine

⁵² O. K. Borodina, 77. Other sources confirm how Dobronravov delivered these lines.

enemy of the Soviet community. Will he be saved? When he refuses to rescind his order, his fate is sealed. He has committed the worst possible sin possible for a Party member: insubordination. He will be expelled from the Party, realizing his worst fear.

THE MOSCOW ART THEATER PRODUCTION OF *BREAD*

Sudakov, who directed the extremely controversial *Days of the Turbins* in 1926, Bulgakov's play about the Turbin family during the Civil War, staged Kirshon's *Bread*. In his observations about the importance of a conceptual plan for creating a theatrical production, he remarks that Kirshon's script left him cold and he searched in vain for months for an idea that might spark his imagination.⁵³ His account of how he found inspiration for his work is reminiscent of the challenges that the members of the Art Theater troupe faced three decades earlier with Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, when they were called upon to embody a milieu with which they were entirely unfamiliar. Sudakov also went into the field to research his subjects firsthand in search of inspiration.

In the village he visited, his host told him about the "war" that had broken out because the kolkhoz had received the best land. He attended a meeting of the Communist Youth League. The following day, he witnessed the "joyous, fighting entry of the kolkhoz members onto the field" to harvest the grain. "The sunny day and the songs" had "a miraculous effect" on him.⁵⁴ The characters finally came alive for him, bringing "poetic intonation" to his work on the production. It is possible that the Artistic-Political Council, whose power in the theaters had increased enormously since their reconstitution in 1929, recommended and arranged his trip.

A major discussion of the staging took place at a meeting sponsored by the *Literary Gazette*, the publication of the proletarian left associated with RAPP, two months before the premiere. The discussion included leading members of RAPP: Aleksandr Fadeyev and Nikolai Ermilov.⁵⁵ In Sudakov's interpretation of Kirshon's "political play," the village was simply the background for much larger forces. According to him, the clash between the Party's "general line" (*general'naia liniia*) and deviations from it could occur in any milieu. During the debate, Sudakov outlined the play's central roles, responding directly to Kirshon's fears that the Theater would make Raevsky "full-blooded and charming" and "dry up" Mikhailov. Sudakov insisted that Raevsky had to be an attractive character: intelligent, passionate, and charming. His negative trait was his mistaken political line.

In contrast, Mikhailov was no intellectual: "he was made of coarser material and working-class blood coursed in his veins." The representatives of RAPP objected to Sudakov's characterization of Mikhailov. Fadeev held the view that Mikhailov was a person of an intellectual cast of mind: he arrived at his simplicity through the recognition of complexity. Ermilov asserted that the play expressed a

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 78-79.

⁵⁵ "Khleb' Kirshona na tvorcheskikh sobraniakh `Litgazety'" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 56 (93) (November 29, 1930): 3.

clash of two different worldviews: in contrast to Raevsky, Mikhailov “represented a much higher political culture.”⁵⁶

Kirshon’s Kvasov is the most sharply drawn peasant character. The theater historian E. Polyakova tells us that Kedrov’s Kvasov in the Moscow Art Theater production was not the conventional “poster-like” kulak of many theatrical productions—the fat, bearded villain—but “an intelligent, thrifty man who seemed to be concerned about the people in the village.”⁵⁷ However, Kvasov is rarely mentioned in the contemporary reviews of the production.

At this time, the campaign of mass collectivization (*sploshnaia kollektivizatsiia*) was unfolding in the countryside. The “dekulakization” (*raskulakivanie*) of the villages meant the military-style expropriation of hundreds of thousands of peasant households. Mass collectivization led to the imprisonment and deportation of millions of peasants.⁵⁸ The absence of reference to Kedrov’s colorful portrayal of Kvasov in the theatrical reviews of *Bread* is striking.

Lunacharsky lauded the actor Dobronravov for bringing the “fundamental tone” of Bolshevism to his portrayal of Mikhailov: “no attitudes, no verbosity, no posing, no romanticizing.”⁵⁹ In his opinion, Dobronravov succeeded wonderfully in capturing the defining characteristics of the Bolshevik: calmness and efficiency. He linked Mikhailov’s every action to the “creative poem of socialism” and “the music heard in Stalin’s latest speeches.” A critic of the journal published by the Union of Artistic Workers called Mikhailov “the first image of a true Bolshevik on the stage.”⁶⁰ Others mentioned his simplicity, abruptness, and rigidity: traits that especially appealed to the audiences of the early thirties.⁶¹

A major generational shift within the Theater contributed to this process. When the Cultural Revolution began, the original members of the troupe had already been with the company for three decades. The rising stars had a better feel for the characters in the new plays based on Soviet themes. Dobronravov in the role of Mikhailov is exemplary.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ E. Poliakova, *Stanislavskii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977), 175.

⁵⁸ Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, 474-476.

⁵⁹ A. V. Lunacharskii, “Khleb’ V. Kirshona na tsene Moskovskogo khudozhestvennogo teatra,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 9, February 14, 1931: 3.

⁶⁰ K. Berezon, “Za kachestvo produktsii: `Khleb’ na tsene MKhT I,” *Rabis*, no. 6 February 26, 1931: 14.

⁶¹ L. Tamashin, *Vladimir Kirshon: ocherk tvorchestva* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1965), 137-138.



Figure 6.6. Drawing of Dobronravov as the Bolshevik leader Mikhailov. He wears a tunic and Stalin mustache. Source: *Evening Moscow (Vecherniaia Moskva)*, February 2, 1931.

The director Sudakov reported that the theater audience erupted with stormy applause in the scene where Mikhailov emerges from the hut and arrests the kulaks. In his opinion, the public obviously “succeeded in falling in love” with Mikhailov.⁶² The public became “so anxious for his fate” that it began “to shout, to yell, and to make noise.”

Khmelev recalled Raevsky as one of his most memorable failures as an actor. In his view, the relationship between Mikhailov and Raevsky was artificial, false, and unnatural. The actor argued with the playwright about Raevsky’s unreservedly negative character and blamed him for his lack of success in the role. As he put it, “You can’t make something straight out of something twisted.”⁶³ Lunacharsky described Raevsky as unlikable and inconsequential.⁶⁴ Despite these deprecations, it seems that many found Khmelev’s Raevsky to be an attractive, romantic figure despite his faults as a Bolshevik leader, which become ever more apparent as the play progresses.⁶⁵

As seen, the production and distribution mechanisms of the Stalinist regime in the theater flooded the stage with contemporary proletarian plays. In Moscow, the Art Theater gave one hundred and twenty-three performances of *Bread* during the two years following its premiere. Other theaters mounted productions of the play in Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, Baku, Kaluga, and Tula.⁶⁶ A new set of institutions within the theater also affected the Stalinization of the stage, changing the context of reception for the spectator.

The intermissions at the theater were employed for propagandizing “socialist construction.” The theaters were directed to perform short pieces on themes about the aims, the heroes, and the enemies of the First Five-Year Plan. The State

⁶² I. Sudakov, “Teatr—Rupor literatury,” *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 4 (April), 1931: 10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁴ A. V. Lunacharskii: 3.

⁶⁵ *Teatr i dramaturgiia*, no. 6, 1933: 13.

⁶⁶ O. K. Borodina, 77.

Publishing House provided collections of these “small forms” for performance.⁶⁷ Lobby displays, theatrical posters and programs bore the slogans of the Five-Year Plan. The slogans of the Five-Year Plan also adorned the exteriors of theater buildings. It was only appropriate that means first employed by Meyerhold at the Theater RSFSR-I for the vaunted revolution in the theater were now put into the service of the Stalin revolution. This immersed the audience in a mix of propagandistic art and artful propaganda.

The Audience Response

Still, to dismiss the new plays by the proletarian playwrights as “propagandistic” limits our understanding by removing them from the context of established genres in the Soviet dramatic literature—and older traditions in Russian literature, such as the didacticism that defines the first Russian plays of the late eighteenth century and even crops up in *Crime and Punishment* by Fëdor Dostoevsky. The strong ties of the proletarian plays to the tradition of the heroic, patriotic plays of the 1920s are unmistakable. These early Soviet plays enjoyed great popularity. Also, it overlooks how theater audiences experienced them within the context of the First Five-Year Plan.

Audiences filled the houses to see *The Raid* by Bill-Belotserkovsky and *Virineya* by Seifulina in 1925, *Liubov Yarovaya* by Trenev in 1926, *The Break* by Lavrenev in 1927, and others that dealt with historical, revolutionary themes. Vyacheslav Ivanov captured the chaos and human drama of the Civil War in *Armored Train 14-69*, which became one of the Moscow Art Theater’s most successful Soviet-themed productions. It premiered in 1927 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. It saw 156 performances in its first two seasons. This play and other realistic historical dramas were the immediate forerunners of “proletarian realism” in Soviet dramaturgy.

⁶⁷ “Tsirkuliar,” in *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1926-1932*, 74.



Figure 6.7. Lyubov Yarovaya is the hero of this Civil War drama by Konstantin Trenev. Her husband, a lieutenant in the White Guard, is ordered to punish the Bolshevik prisoners. She is instrumental in his capture. He is led away at the end of the play to be executed. Source: *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*.

As we have seen, beginning in 1929, Glaviskusstvo imposed new Soviet plays on the central theaters and constrained them to perform them frequently. Consequently, the number of performances cannot be used as an index of popularity. Earlier figures confirm the popularity of the Soviet-themed historical plays just described. Is this also true of the new plays by proletarian playwrights about contemporary Soviet Russia?

Glaviskusstvo conducted a survey of the central theaters at the end of the 1928/29 season. It was similar to the one conducted on May 8, 1926, but the sample size was twice as large. The survey data show that *The Man with the Briefcase*, *Armored Train 14-69*, *The Rails Are Humming*, *The Days of the Turbins*, and *The Squaring of the Circle* were the most popular plays.⁶⁸

Kirshon's *The Rails Are Humming* was one of the first so-called "industrial plays." It had premiered at the MGSPS Theater on March 14, 1928.⁶⁹ It captured the pulsing rhythms of the time, romanticized labor, and extolled the joys of production.⁷⁰ Valentin Kataev's romantic comedy about the challenges of love for young people in Soviet times played to packed houses. It premiered at the small stage of the Moscow Art Theater on April 20, 1928.

Aleksandr Faiko's *The Man with the Briefcase* was another big hit with 163 performances in its first two seasons at the Theater of the Revolution.⁷¹ It premiered on February 14, 1928. The hero is Professor Androsov, a specialist and

⁶⁸ "Glaviskusstvo—seksiia teatral'noi raboty. `Svodka anketnogo materiala po moskovskim teatram za sezon 1928-29 goda. Material 2441 ankety tsentr. Komm. po izucheniiu zritel'ia pri Glaviskusstve,'" RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 321, l. 4.

⁶⁹ Movshenson, 34.

⁷⁰ See Tamashin, 57-70.

⁷¹ *Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1926-1932*, 308.

Soviet patriot who is opposed by a group of “contemplative intellectuals adjusting to socialist construction.”⁷² Part thriller and part ideological statement, it must have seemed prophetic when the Shakhty Affair charging engineers in the Donbass region with sabotage broke a month after its premiere.



Figure 6.8. A scene from *The Man with the Briefcase*. Source: *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*.

The major appeal of these new Soviet plays was that they portrayed contemporary people and current social and political issues in a realistic style. Faiko and Kirshon also used the melodramatic formula. As Kirshon’s play *The Rails Are Humming* suggests, the RAPP playwrights aimed to kindle in theater audiences the ethos of heroism and unbounded optimism associated with the First Five-Year Plan.

The number of spectators that attended theater in the Soviet Union grew dramatically during the First Five-Year Plan. According to the statistics of the State Planning Commission, or Gosplan, performance attendance grew from 627 million in 1931 to 806 million in 1932.⁷³ To my knowledge, the large-scale survey of the Moscow theaters conducted in May 1929 was the last of its kind. Nevertheless, there were some reports in the press about the audience response to *Bread*, such as Sudakov’s description of the reaction to Mikhailov.

Although *Bread* premiered amidst the forced collectivization drive, neither collective farms nor Machine Tractor Stations are mentioned in the play. Since the themes of the play are “class warfare” and the Party’s “general line,” the year is not specified. Yet the comments of spectators imply that they read the play against the background of collectivization.

A reporter for the newspaper *Evening Moscow* explains that the audience at one performance was similar to the crowd on stage because it included a delegation from the Regional Congress of Soviets. This delegation included representatives of village Soviets, village activists, and district Soviet officials. People in such positions were well aware of the collectivization drive and saw its implementation. During

⁷² Gorchakov, 209.

⁷³ V. Nevskii, “Sovetskii teatr v tsifrah,” *Teatr i dramaturgiia*, no. 4 (April) 1935: 63.

the discussion after the play, several told the reporter that the play was similar to village life.

Comrade Korotkov, the Chairman of the Soviet in Plavsky, reported that the chairman of the Soviet in a neighboring village had asserted that there were no kulaks in his village, just like a character in the play.⁷⁴ He added that the authorities arrested the *dvurushchnik*, or “double-dealer.” The double-dealer was a stock-figure in melodrama. In his guise as the masked “internal enemy,” the double-dealer was also a key figure in Stalinist political mythology.

The most dangerous double-dealer was the one with a Party card: a member that sabotaged the system through his actions. In the play, Comrade Raevsky does not obey Comrade Mikhailov, whom the Party has invested with full authority in the district. Mikhailov is fully “devoted” (*predannyi*) to his work. Raevsky must obey. Yet he does not: he is not *truly* a Party member as his actions demonstrate. He is a false official—a double-dealer and an embodiment of an “enemy of the people.”

If Mikhailov is Stalinesque, then Raevsky is a Trotsky figure, the iconic “enemy of the people.” After all, the critics recognize in him “left deviationism”: the “extremism” of which Stalin accused Trotsky and his plan for economic development in Soviet Russia. Like “Trotsky,” the surname “Raevsky” suggests Jewish ancestry.⁷⁵ One critic explicitly drew the comparison: Raevsky’s line “is the line of intellectualized excess (*intelligentskii avantiurizm*), a ‘leftist’ line, in which one senses Trotskyist imitation and throw-backs to Trotskyism (*trotsistskie otryzhki*) such as “the village is elemental.”⁷⁶

Furthermore, the critics also identified Raevsky’s “right opportunism,” which represented another cardinal political “sin.” Raevsky was guilty of this when he sought to placate the kulaks by collecting only 2,000 poods of grain for fear of causing a rebellion on the part of the class enemy in the village (i.e., the kulak). Nikolai Bukharin, one of the original members of the Politburo, advocated NEP as a longer-term economic policy. This position represented the political “right” to Stalin’s “centrist” approach. Bukharin was temporarily removed from the Politburo in 1927 as an opponent of Stalin. He would become an iconic “enemy of the people” during the Moscow Show Trials in 1937.

Comrade Paramonov, a representative of the Finyutinsky village Soviet disagreed with Comrade Korotkov. He observed that the well-to-do group of peasants (*zazhitochnye*) and the bednyak Romanov were nicely depicted, but not the key group of middle peasants because they did “not stand on [their] own” and “wavered.” In his opinion, the author was not familiar with the middle peasant. The implication is unclear. Perhaps he meant that middle peasants did not waver and stood up for their economic interests in actuality, making the application of the general line in the countryside problematic.

⁷⁴ “Delegaty 2-ogo oblastnogo s’ezda sovetov o `Khlebe’ Kirshona,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, no. 46 (June 24, 1931): 4.

⁷⁵ Trotsky was a *nom de guerre*. His given name was Leo Bronstein (*Lev Bronshtein*).

⁷⁶ P. Baranchikov, “O p’ese V. Kirshone `Khleb,” *Izvestiia*, no. 49 (4253) (February 19, 1931).

Most of the delegates, especially the women, liked Zotova, a vigorous and zealous young woman who is the Secretary of the Communist Youth League in *Bread*. She is one of the few women in the large cast of men and an undeniably positive character that represents the new female types in the political art of the Stalinist era.⁷⁷ The other three women are negative types: Kvasov's daughter Pasha, who has fallen head over heels for Raevsky; Mokrina, a nun; and Olga, Mikhailov's supercilious wife.

The delegates also disagreed about Raevsky. One from Tula argued that the guys in his village would arrest a ruffian (*shpana*) like Raevsky. He thought that the character was simply not believable. A female representative of the Tula village Soviet disagreed, asserting that types like Raevsky existed. She said that the play was good and added that the secretaries of the Party and Komsomol cells in the villages, and the Soviet representatives and urban Party workers who were conducting grain procurement, could learn much from it. Finally, the journalist reported that the majority of the village activists in the delegation were satisfied with the play.

This discussion with the group from the delegation provides a unique snapshot of the actual spectator. Since it was a rural delegation, this spectator was judging the production in light of her or his own experiences of the contemporary village, however much filtered through the lens of official ideology. The group was not representative of typical audience members at the Moscow Art Theater where employees, students, and workers who resided in Moscow predominated.

The implied spectator of *Bread* was acquainted with the twists and turns in the plots of the melodramatic formula that pitted villains against heroes. Since the implied spectator of this production knew the basic conventions at work, it allowed him to understand the playwright's intention: to illustrate the "class struggle" in the village. Consequently, this spectator also recognized the specific conventions invoked, the most important of which that Raevsky turns out to be a masked villain.

The "ideal" spectator of the Stalinist era inhabited a political world of struggles, arrests and trials; he instinctively recognized double-dealers.⁷⁸ Owing to the extensive intertextuality between popular literature, plays, propaganda, politics, and ideology, in the proletarian plays in particular, political "plots" blended into the conventional foundations of the theater art of this era. Consequently, the experience of theater became more political in nature. The interpretive conventions of this era were not new, just less distinctively aesthetic. The proletarian plays were accessible to the lowest common denominator in the auditorium.

The "Resolution of the Secretariat of RAPP" published in December 1931 characterized the theater spectator of the new era. The "spectator-laborer" (*zritel'-trudiashchiisia*) "keenly responded to everything in a performance that touched in one way or another on contemporary events."⁷⁹ He disliked "poor plays, weak

⁷⁷ See Bonnell, 100-135.

⁷⁸ The term "ideal reader" in reader-response theory refers to the generalized reader, whereas the "implied reader" means the reader of a specific work.

⁷⁹ "O zadachakh RAPP na teatral'nom fronte: postanovlenie sekretariata RAPP," *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 12, 1931: 8.

acting, and primitive staging caused by militant slogans included in the play.” The “spectator-laborer” represented the new person of the Stalinist era who enjoyed theater not for entertainment, but because it organized “the thoughts and feelings of the proletariat in the interest of his daily fight for socialism.”⁸⁰

The Theater Public of the Early Stalin Era

In his classic essays on the background of Stalinism, Lewin provides a picture of the general dynamics of Soviet society and politics to explain how Stalin launched the country in a new direction with rapid industrialization and state building. For the purposes of understanding how the theater public changed during the First Five-Year Plan, his descriptions of urban society are especially evocative.

Between 1929 and 1935, 17.7 million peasants joined the population of Moscow, “ruralizing” the city.⁸¹ The era was one of tremendous social flux. The standards of living and real wages declined for workers overall, but wage differentials were introduced in the early 1930s.⁸² Shock-workers received higher wages. Is it possible that this segment of workers enjoyed their status with special access to theater tickets? The top Party bosses, the top managers, and the top administrators constituted the country’s sociopolitical elite. They enjoyed a range of special privileges including choice seats in the theaters for the asking.

It is likely that the policy of proletarianization brought *vydvizhentsy* into the theater because it rapidly changed the social composition of the universities. Fifty percent of the students were from the working class by 1930.⁸³ Many of these students would become the members of the new Soviet middle class, who valued *kul'turnost'*, or cultivation.⁸⁴ This social group of the young and upwardly mobile from the working-class augmented the already sizeable contingent of workers and students in the theater audiences of the late 1920s. Given the broad range of social strata in the audience, their tastes likely varied considerably.

As Lewin describes it, after the Shakhty Trial in May 1928, “there were waves of purges, dismissals, and arrests of ‘alien elements’ and, in particular, of their children taking place in universities and institutions. The numerous ‘social purges of students’ enhanced the anxiety and panic among the intelligentsia and even produced suicides.”⁸⁵ As we have seen, students and workers together constituted a large share of the theatergoing public. Surely, official policies such as

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, 219 and 333-34 fn. 37.

⁸² Ibid., 250-51.

⁸³ Ibid., 236.

⁸⁴ On the training of the new elite, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 149-182. On the tastes of the Soviet middleclass in the 1930s, see Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁸⁵ Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, 233.

proletarianization, purges, and wage differentials also reconstituted the social strata within the categories of “students” and “workers” in the central theaters.

In the audience research of the 1920s, the category “employee” served as a blanket term that overlapped with the term “intelligentsia.” For instance, we have seen that some identified themselves as “employees” (*sluzhashchie*) for purposes of the survey at the Meyerhold Theater in 1920, but described their occupations as artists. During the First Five-Year Plan, the Soviet “intelligentsia” grew as the state funded culture (educational and artistic institutions). The number of “engineering and technical workers” also grew rapidly. They were the qualified cadres needed for industrialization. Consequently, the category of “employees” grew.

In addition, the various administrations and agencies, that is, the bureaucracies (*apparaty*) expanded exponentially. The lower ranks of these bureaucracies were filled with officials possessing little education and few professional skills⁸⁶. It is possible that the bulk of the “employees” that entered the central theaters during the First Five-Year Plan came from the lower ranks of the *apparaty*. They did not displace the core publics of the various theaters, but surely changed the overall character of the theatergoing public.

Iu. Iuzovskaya cited the passage in Stanislavsky’s autobiography entitled “Revolution” where describes the “completely unexpected” laughter and reactions of the “new public” who discovered in the plays of the Moscow Art Theater a “comical subtext” never before recognized by the artists themselves.⁸⁷ The critics cites Stanislavsky in order to make the argument that the “task” of each theater, including the Moscow Art Theater, was not to make the spectator understand the play, but rather to understand the “unsophisticated” spectator who oftentimes has a keener sense of the perception than the artist.

However, the observation also implied an overall decline in the cultural level of the spectator. The Stalin revolution brought a sea change in the theater audience similar in respects to the October Revolution. Once again workers and peasants entered the theater for the first time. Like the public of the post-1917 period, the ethos of the “proletarian” spectator was militant and revolutionized.

Bread is a classic example of proletarian realism. When enacted on the stage, such plays presented powerful and moving images of heroes and enemies using the enduring melodramatic formula. The heroes of this theatrical genre, such as shock workers, Komsomol members, collective farm workers, and agents of the secret police also belonged to the pantheon of Stalinist iconography discussed by Bonnell in her study of Soviet posters.⁸⁸ Unlike their counterparts in official propaganda, the representations of these heroes in the dramatic theater were more compelling the less typified they were.

If considered as signs, these characters were firmly embedded in their sociopolitical contexts, therefore fundamentally defined by their relations to the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 235.

⁸⁷ Iu. Iuzovskaia (sic), “*Khleb Kirshona v MKhT I, Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 10 (February 27, 1931): 3.

⁸⁸ Bonnell, *The Iconography of Power*, especially chapters 1 and 3.

other characters and politically demarcated groups.⁸⁹ In addition, actors are signifiers who can speak and describe their identities, assert what they represent, and explain what they are doing. Thus, in order to define what the Party is to him, Raevsky uses the metaphor of a ring to describe the sense of belonging that it gives him. However, the most distinctive property of live performance is the auratic presence of the hero (or enemy) whose tone of voice and every gesture communicate the overt meaning of his lines and actions, as well as subtle undertones. Clearly, Dobronravov succeeded in embodying the Bolshevik leader Mikhailov in ways that highly engaged the audience emotionally.

Beyond the ideological significance of the play, or rather, interwoven with it, lay the mythological narrative about the future realization of the communism through the dedicated work of millions under the leadership of the Party in the present day. In this sense, the true script of the proletarian plays was found in socialist construction and the goals of the Five-Year Plans.

Finally, these plays shared much in common with popular fiction and the Soviet plays of the 1920s: the essential dramatic conflict was a question of who would beat whom, or *kto-kogo*. In melodrama, this is known from the outset, which necessitates stacking the odds against the hero and introducing scenes that threaten the hero's demise in order to increase the element of suspense for the spectator. The scene in last act of *Bread* in which the hero Mikhailov eludes death is a case in point.

Lunacharsky praised the production for "giving hundreds of thousands of people who have not seen authentic grain procurement the opportunity to experience it by means of the stage."⁹⁰ He also applauded the embodiments of "individual peasants and the peasant masses in subtle, living images." Perhaps he, like many in the audience, had only read about the grain procurement in the press.



Figure 6.9. Scene from *Bread*. Kvasov is on the far left in the hat. Raevsky is holding the shovel. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 293 n. 9.

⁹⁰ Lunacharsky: 3.

THE DOMINANCE OF RAPP DURING THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

When Bubnov became the Commissar of Enlightenment, he announced that Narkompros had not yet become a genuine headquarters of the Cultural Revolution.⁹¹ He embarked on carrying out the perestroika of the Commissariat. During the NEP period, many proletarian groups involved in the theater clamored for special recognition from Narkpmpros, but it was not forthcoming. This changed in 1929. As an organization, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, or RAPP, was well poised to receive Bubnov's support.

The membership already numbered in the thousands and many in the top positions were Communists. As a literary association, its prestige was growing. In 1928, its Executive Committee included Serafimovich, Gladkov, Kirshon, and Fadeev, all of whom were recognized writers.⁹² In addition, the Executive Committee included the critic Ermilov, the literary ideologue Libedinskii, and Averbakh, a skilled strategist who became the chief of RAPP headquarters.

In its own way, the scene that unfolded at the major theatrical conference hosted by RAPP, which ran concurrently with the premiere of *Bread*, was more dramatic than the play because it captured the quintessence of the Cultural Revolution—indeed, the institution of cultural revolution itself. All of the major players in the Moscow theater world attended, except the directors of the Moscow Art Theater, who sent Pavel Markov from the Theater's Literary Section to represent the Theater.

Afinogenov, whose plays had been produced at the Proletkult Theater throughout the 1920s, delivered the keynote speech: "On the Creative Method of Proletarian Theater." He spoke at length about the "dialectical method" to advance the overarching idea that "consummate" works of proletarian demanded the creative unity of the playwright, the theater director, and the actor.⁹³ RAPP asserted that the critic had an essential part to with the director and the actor in the process of creating theatrical productions in the theaters.⁹⁴

This was not mere rhetoric. In 1930, RAPP orchestrated the scathing criticism of Mayakovsky's satirical *Bathroom* at the Meyerhold Theater. Disillusioned with life, with the course of political events, and especially with the plight of artists in Soviet Russia, to which he and Meyerhold, however unwittingly, made no small contribution, the poet-playwright committed suicide one month after the play's premiere. In 1931, the Moscow Art Theater production of Kirshon's *Bread*, the Meyerhold Theater production of Vishnevsky's *Final and Decisive*, and the Chamber Theater production of Nikitin's *Line of Fire* all underwent criticism in the

⁹¹ Pesochinskii, 99.

⁹² Brown, 53.

⁹³ See, for example, "Khleb' Kirshona na tvorcheskikh sobraniakh 'Litgazety'" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 56 (93) (November 29, 1930): 3; "Khleb'—vedushchaia p'esa sezona: na diskussii v Komakademii," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, no. 46 (June 24, 1931): 4; and B. Reznikov, "Khleb' V Kirshona v I MkhAT," *Pravda*, February 19, 1931.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Kruti, *Rabochii i teatr*, April, 1931: 10-11.

press. In addition, RAPP convened discussions of these plays at the Communist Academy and the Writer's Club.

Kirshon delivered a major speech entitled "Creation and Worldview" at the conference. He asked whether an actor from a "reactionary" theater—obviously implying the Moscow Art Theater—could play the role of both a White Guard and a Communist. He had in mind the actor Dobronravov as Nikolka Turbin, the young White Guard soldier in Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins*, and as Dmitri Mikhailov, the Secretary of Regional Committee, in his play *Bread*. He argued that such an actor in the role of a Communist was a "deception." Without perestroika neither the director nor the actor could fathom the proletarian playwright's meaning. As he explained, the actors "must invent analogical situations [for themselves] in order to deceive the spectator, in order to call forth feelings [in themselves] that will excite the spectator."⁹⁵

Kirshon cited Diderot to lend authority to his argument. His point was that the actor could only communicate the truth of Mikhailov's distress about the disruptions in the supplies of parts to the factory if he actually knew what it felt like—what only a true proletarian feels. Predictably, the reviews of *Bread* were remarkably uniform. The press coverage reflected Kirshon's basic argument, praising Dobronravov's portrayal of Mikhailov as a major improvement over previous Communists seen on the stage, but not an entirely convincing one.

Kirshon's closing remarks also reflected the rhetoric of the contemporary press and especially Vyshinsky, the prosecutor of the "wreckers" in the Shakty Trial. In Kirshon's view, the conference demonstrated that "violent class warfare is being conducted in the most subtle forms, in gradations of meaning, in particular formulations. It is completely masked in an inimitable, literary form."⁹⁶

The violence was on the part of RAPP. The entire conference is best seen as theological in nature because it represented the intention of RAPP to impose order on those assembled by universalizing itself as the proletariat.⁹⁷ As the chief organizer of the reconstruction of theater mandated by the Party, it sought to consolidate its power through a demonstration of symbolic force.

On the one hand, Afinogenov employed abstract words, big phrases, and convoluted language suitable for intellectual demagoguery, such as "dialectical materialism," "the rejection of rejection," and the like. On the other, Kirshon, Sutyryn and Vishnevsky repeatedly shifted between the Russian plural pronoun "we" to explain what RAPP stood for, for example, "*We* are remaking the world"—the implied criticism being that *we* are committed activists and *you* are not fulfilling your obligation to the Soviet people—and the direct criticism of specific theaters and individual people.

Decades before the Cultural Revolution in China, at this conference in Soviet Moscow, Afinogenov and Kirshon, both young, militant communists with little

⁹⁵ V. Kirshon, "Tvorchestvo i mirovozzrenie," *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 2-3 (February-March 1931): 38.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: 41.

⁹⁷ On the "oracle effect" and universalizing strategies, see Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 211-3.

artistic capital, were lecturing established theater people twice their age, including two internationally renowned theater directors, and the representative of a third, Stanislavsky, who had changed the face of theater worldwide. The notion of the Soviet regime “unleashing” militants during the Cultural Revolution is apposite here, but the sociology of the situation explains why it is so apt. Young people may be enthusiastic and idealistic but they are also people “who have nothing” as Bourdieu bluntly puts it.⁹⁸ They typically possess little capital whether economic, social or intellectual.

Therefore, they make extremely reliable Party members and exceptionally severe watchdogs that can be “unleashed” against those who do, including members of the Party who have risen in the apparatus but take issue with the Party. In return for their unflinching support of the Party and exemplary leadership in RAPP, these young Communist playwrights could enjoy an audience consisting of the elite of the Moscow theater world: they could instruct them and relish their criticism of them. In this way, the RAPP leaders projected their power as symbolic warders. The conference represents an excruciatingly intimate picture of the Cultural Revolution, when symbolic, not physical, violence was exercised.

A two-page cartoon accompanied by verse was published in the issue of *Soviet Theater* devoted to the conference. Entitled “The Battle on the Theatrical Front,” it graphically encapsulates the polemical positions in Moscow’s “theatrical front” from the perspective of RAPP. It is also a parody of the twelfth-century epic poem *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*. Accordingly, each of the main heroes is uniquely identified with a descriptor, such as “the ardent,” “the tempestuous,” and so forth. It provides a deceptively playful depiction of gravely serious confrontations. In the upper right corner, with the RAPP flag flying above him and the battle plan set out before him, sits Averbakh, the chief of headquarters (See Figure 6.10).



Figure 6.10. “The Battle on the Theatrical Front.” Source: *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February-March, 1931.

⁹⁸ On this point, see *Ibid*, 217.

Afinogenov fires the big cannon while the literary scholar and critic Dinamov (wearing spectacles) feeds him cannonballs. Behind Dinamov, far right center, with notebook in hand, sits Lunacharsky, in the role of the field correspondent. Below him are two men with sabres. On the right is the academic theater director Tairov. Tairov's adversary in this "decisive match" is the RAPP theater critic Ermilov. The RAPP playwright Vishnevsky in on the lower right, firing the machine gun, under orders to shoot at the "beauty" of the column of Tairov supporters.

On the far lower left, Meyerhold the "technologist" cuts a quixotic figure in this caricature. He is dressed like a constructivist and sits atop a play horse, holding a broken spear. The theater specialist Volkonsky sits backwards at the tail end of the horse, holding an "old shield." He was at the conference and rejected the RAPP thesis that hegemony in the proletarian theater was reserved for entire theatrical *kollektiv*. He insisted on the hegemony of the director.

In the verse, there is a double entendre: Volkonsky's shield hides *weak* areas, that is, there are weak points in his argument. But as we see in the cartoon, Volkonsky is also holding the shield very low over his body so that it covers *sensitive* areas, that is, his crotch. Of course, these lines also refer to Meyerhold's famous speech entitled "Weak Areas on the Theatrical Front" when he launched Theatrical October in 1920. Grossman-Roshchin, a member of the Communist Academy is their opponent. Sutyurin, a RAPP lieutenant, sits atop the RAPP tank crushing Volkenstein, the "idealist," and others.

The "courageous" pilot and bombardier in the top left corner is "the militant Kirshon." In the upper center of the drawing, holding the torch is the theoretician Podolsky. To his left, bomb in hand, is Sokolovsky representing TRAM, or the amateur Theater of Worker Youth that operated under the auspices of the Komsomol. He is ready to throw his bomb at the Moscow Art Theater and blow up Pavel Markov. Markov, who represented the Moscow Art Theater at the conference, is standing backwards behind the small cannon on the left-hand side of the drawing with a loaf of bread in his mouth. The verse tells us that Markov has "camouflaged" his intentions while "quietly chewing on *Bread*."

The closing stanza reads:

Fearing the abyss of history,
The enemies beat a retreat.
And on the theater front
RAPP is celebrating Victory.⁹⁹

Therefore, the drawing tells us that RAPP is waging a three-pronged attack on the Moscow Art Theater ("idealism"), the Chamber Theater ("dynamic realism"), and the Meyerhold Theater ("mechanical system") with assistance from TRAM, despite the "disease of autonomy" from which TRAM suffers. In addition, it pulled out the heavy artillery of dialectical materialism against the "neo-Hegelian" and "idealist" theoreticians. The drawing represents a mental map of the theater world

⁹⁹ "Bitva na Teafronte," *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 2-3 (February-March 1931): 32-33. Verse by A. Avkhangel'skii.

from the perspective of the leaders of RAPP. It depicts the conference as a glorious victory for RAPP.

Nevertheless, the seasoned directors at the conference remained unconvinced about the dialectical method and asked Afinogenov to be more concrete about the method. They asked him to provide specific directions for their work on theatrical productions. Even Lunacharsky remained skeptical. Afinogenov called this demand and other critical responses to his keynote address “distortions” and “vulgarizations” that could not to diminish the basic truth of the RAPP platform. With this strategy, he aimed to put his opponents in the wrong. Actually, the directors’ *understanding* of the dialectical method was beside the point: the significance of ideological discourse is that it must be treated with due respect, not understood.¹⁰⁰

The domination of RAPP during the Cultural Revolution constrained the creative rivalry among theaters by saddling them all with plays by proletarian playwrights. In addition, it homogenized and politicized critical discourse, making anything not expressed in schematic “class” terms seem aesthetically and ideologically suspect. Of course, the critics praised *Bread* as the theatrical event of the season. However, at the discussion held at the Communist Academy after the premiere, Afinogenov took the opportunity to exercise his own authority and find fault with Kirshon’s play.

In his view, the evolution of the class-consciousness of the middle peasant, that is, the play’s “central political figure,” was not “artistically justified.”¹⁰¹ It appeared that the grain collection (*krasnyi oboz*) ensued as the result of the armed confrontation when Mikhailov and the Komsomol members vanquished the kulaks. Instead, Afinogenov argued, the play should have illustrated “an organic shift in the attitudes and actions of the middle peasant.” In the play, there was no “evolution in the class-consciousness” of the middle peasants. In view of the actual violence perpetrated on the peasantry in these years, if the play implied what Afinogenov suggested—that the success of the grain collection was the consequence of armed confrontation, not the evolution of consciousness—then it strangely communicated an almost unspeakable truth.

¹⁰⁰ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 153.

¹⁰¹ A. Afinogenov, “Trudnosti perestroika,” *Sovetskii teatr*, no. 4 (April), 1931: 8.

Conclusion: The Power of the Theater

Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs that properly concern them.

Paul Valéry

On April 23, 1932, the tyranny of RAPP abruptly ended when the Party Central Committee dissolved the proletarian organizations in literature and the arts, disbanding RAPP, the Proletkult Theater, the amateur Theater of Worker Youth (TRAM), and other theatrical organizations. Hence, the intense challenge to the stage director's hegemony from the playwrights and critics of RAPP proved short-lived. 1932 brought another chapter in the bolshevization of the theater to a conclusion and set the stage for the next. Many factors contributed to this official reversal of policy.

For one, Stanislavky issued a direct challenge to the authorities in 1931. He declared that his Theater could produce "pot-boilers" that did nothing to cultivate the tastes of the masses—or art. There is no question that he had in mind the production of *Bread*. Heitz, the "red director" of the Moscow Art Theater, was dismissed and the Art Theater's creative autonomy was restored.¹ Also, Maxim Gorky returned to Russia in 1931. He refocused attention on the "quality" of art whereas "quantity" had displaced this emphasis in the cultural sphere, as in others, during the First Five-Year Plan.² Furthermore, the reign of RAPP had not put an end to the factional infighting seen throughout the 1920s, but only diminished it.

As we have seen, within the orbit of the elite central theaters of Moscow, the bolshevization of the theater was an uneven process during the first decade of Soviet rule. It consisted of the concatenation of several major institutional developments: the establishment of the chief administrative bodies of Narkompros and, later Glaviskusstvo; the imposition of the increasingly stringent policies of Glavrepertkom, the central censorship committee; and the creation of the various ticket distribution mechanisms. Party control finally mounted within the central theaters beginning in 1927.

Although the Stalinist regime partially retreated from the policy of direct control within the theater at the end of the First Five-Year Plan, it began to consolidate its influence over authors and playwrights with the creation of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934 under Maxim Gorky, its first chairman. The former leaders of RAPP became members of the Union's Executive Committee. Subsequently, the "red directors" and Artistic-Political Councils became enduring institutions of Party rule in the theater.

The historical case of the Moscow theater world exemplifies general sociological patterns of development. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century in Russia, Europe, and America, the creation of the theater as a distinct form

¹ Inna Solovyova, "Theater and Socialist Realism, 1929-1953," *A History of the Russian Theatre*, ed. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 275.

² On literature within the politics of production in this period, see Clark, 189-206.

of high culture developed on the basis of privately run organizations funded by publics who purchased season subscriptions. As seen in the case of the Moscow Art Theater, organizational control allowed it to define the distinctive repertoire of plays for its public, which consisted of segments of the elite and the new middle class. Nevertheless, as a cultural enterprise, it remained caught between culture and commerce, unlike the theaters subsidized by the tsarist court. The tsarist regime recognized the legitimacy of the serious stage, but the new private theaters remained subject to police actions. After 1917, the dramatic theater was subsidized by the Soviet state for the purposes of mass cultural enlightenment. As cultural organizations, the theaters initially remained in control of cultural production, however the purposes and publics that they would serve were radically transformed during the revolutionary era. By the end of the decade, the theaters were caught between culture and communism.

The Spectator in the Polemics of the Theater World

The revolutionary moment promoted polemics, or dialogues of power among theater directors, theater critics, and theater theorists because ideology became valuable currency in the theater world after 1917. By advancing new cultural aims, the theatrical left transformed the terms of discourse about the theater. Theatrical October was the most instrumental manifestation of the revolutionary platforms and millennial visions that found expression in the theater. Meyerhold consciously used ideology to fashion a new public for revolutionary theater. He redefined the dynamics of the theater world in Moscow as a struggle between the fledgling revolutionary theaters and the entrenched status quo. By transferring the taken-for-granted political binary of “left and right” to the theater world, Theatrical October had a profound effect on how the theater came to be seen and discussed.

This study has examined the theater spectator in his various guises as an ideological figure. Service to the people remained the “mission” of the Moscow Art Theater after the October Revolution. The aesthetic instruction of the “new public” gave this traditional theatrical institution its purpose. Meyerhold spoke in the name of the “new spectator” who was an active participant in the revolutionary theater. The First Worker’s Theater of Moscow Proletkult claimed the “worker-spectator” as its own. RAPP legitimized its claim to power on the basis of the needs and demands of the “spectator-laborer” and the “proletarian community.” In its own unique way, each theater invoked the “people,” which functioned as an unassailable basis for universalizing its claim to authority in the increasingly politicized field of dramatic theater in Soviet Moscow. This demonstrates the constitutive power of theater politics. Indeed, like these theatrical tropes, “Soviet society” itself was an ideological construct. Such constructs matter.

They can have real consequences when they transform how people see and act in the world. The division between the “left” and the “right” was not merely a rhetorical device: it was the product of the investment of an unprecedented amount of historical labor in the political sphere and in the theater world. The field of power, which defined and reproduced people’s belief in the legitimacy of those who

exercised power, embodied the power of words, the slogans, and the programs that mobilized collectives in Soviet society.

Why did ideology become valuable currency in the Moscow theater world after 1917? It did so for the same reason that ideology came to the fore in 1898. Political turmoil and social change create new potential audiences for cultural goods, especially theater—not only for political messages and platforms. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, theatrical organizations took advantage of the opportunity. Consequently, the ideological ferment in the Moscow theater world after 1917 was more a function of the new theaters competing in the field than the significance of the politics of theater per se. Without a doubt, the terms of the discursive battles were determined by aesthetic and political values, but the intensity of the competition was conditioned by the power at stake. In quiescent periods, the continual ideological work of cultural institutions recedes into the background as aesthetic matters take precedence.

At the institutional level, new cultural organizations must distinguish themselves from existing ones in order to establish themselves and construct new publics for their works. As we have seen, in the creation of theater as a form of high art, the Moscow Art Theater sharply defined its high-flown aesthetics to distinguish itself from traditions of the tsarist theaters, on the one hand, and commercial entertainments, on the other. This was no less ideological than the construction of “revolutionary” or “proletarian” theater during the early Soviet era.³ It was the product of the theater company’s and the critics’ efforts to sacralize the work of the Moscow Art Theater.

The rules of etiquette defined a fundamentally new relationship between the audience and the work of art, a new “manner” of artistic appreciation. These practices both elevated the status of the Art Theater and of the audience as the cultivated public. Indeed, there was nothing inherent in naturalism that made it a form of “high culture.” This valuation was the consequence of concerted ideological work, which redefined artistic talent and quality. Once again, the Moscow Art Theater focused on the reeducation of the audience when it faced the new public in 1917. In contrast, the Meyerhold Theater sought to redefine avant-garde formal conventions as “revolutionary theater.” Meyerhold’s repurposing of his theatrical approach relied heavily upon ideological work and the support of leftist critics. He sought to define the relationship between the audience and “revolutionary theater” by inverting the sacred rules of etiquette that had been instituted at the Moscow Art Theater.

Revolutionary politics bred militancy in the theater world during the 1920s. The theatrical left assumed that the Bolshevik regime would ultimately recognize its supremacy. Broad state support and the zero-sum mentality of the power game blinded those most active in the contest for dominance to their precarious position.

³ DiMaggio describes this process of “ritual classification” in the establishment of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra as high culture in Boston. See Paul DiMaggio, “Culture Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Classification and Framing of American Art, Part II,” *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (1982): 303-322.

In 1929, when RAPP commandeered the Cultural Revolution, Lunacharsky, the erstwhile moderate in questions of limited artistic experiment and circumscribed creative autonomy, became a crypto-Stalinist.

The Actual Spectator

In the rapidly changing social and political climate of the early Soviet period, each theater could not create the spectator in its own image. In their continuing efforts to align their aesthetics with the tastes of the public and the demands of the regime, the theaters evolved over time. During the era of the NEP, the central theaters sought to increase revenue through ticket sales because the new policies reduced their operating budgets. They altered their repertoires to appeal to the broader public, not just their core audiences as they defined them. For example, the Meyerhold Theater imported conventions from popular entertainment into its productions. The staging of *The Forest* employed spare constructivist sets and social masks—standard conventions of revolutionary theater—but the entertaining reinterpretation amused the public at large while it made the Ostrovsky classic available to the new audience of Soviet young people.

The large-scale surveys of Moscow theater audiences provide evidence of the diversity of the theatergoing public and indicate variance in the social composition of the audiences at specific theaters. However, the influence of theater politics on the composition of theater audiences remains inconclusive. The comments of spectators and anecdotal evidence suggest that leftist Komsomol members favored the Meyerhold Theater, but membership in the Party or the Komsomol did not alone ensure a taste for revolutionary theater. The taste for the theater was a function of education and occupation. As the ranks of Party and state *apparaty* filled with the educated, “employees” who held Party cards filed into the theater auditoriums. Those who frequented the theater wanted to see good plays performed well, regardless of the theater’s politics or their own, whether “workers” or “employees.”

It appears that the most educated, seasoned theatergoers preferred the Moscow Art Theater and the Chamber Theater. The educated and politically engaged—especially fractions of the young Soviet creative intelligentsia and the Komsomol—gravitated towards the Meyerhold Theater. Young workers and students attended performances at the Proletkult Theater where tickets were cheap. The MGSPS Theater drew workers because they enjoyed discounts and free performances. Despite Sontag’s claim—and aesthetes, in general—that taste observes no rules, social research confirms that preferences are shaped by a variety of factors from social background and education to occupation and cost.

The categories of “employees” and “students” predominated in the auditoriums of the central theaters. “Workers” accounted for roughly one-tenth of the theatergoing public. Nevertheless, it is possible that statistics actually inflated the percentage of “workers” in the audience, as seen in the case of the Theater of the Revolution. Since this study has been limited to the dramatic theater, it may be that workers predominated at the circus and the cinema—the forms of “commercial” entertainment in Soviet Russia. If this were the case, it would confirm the general

patterns of social stratification in cultural consumption seen in Europe during this same period.

The Experience of Meaning

The analysis at the micro-level of individual theaters has been used to explore the question of the meaning. The immediate power of the theater derived from the plays and the spectator's familiarity with theatrical conventions. But the emotional impact and resonance of theatrical productions also issued from their embeddedness in society and politics, that is, the extensive intertextuality between theatrical performances, the press, and politics. The theatrical productions studied here illustrate how the dramatic theater helped to define key dimensions of the revolutionary ethos and Soviet culture: the values of social justice and duty; devotion to the revolutionary cause; identification with the Soviet social order; attitudes towards corruption; and commitment to the policies of the Communist Party. In turn, the institutions of Soviet society shaped the spectator's interpretations of the stage. The study of the reception of a small set of theatrical productions disclosed several distinct interpretive communities.

The theater aesthetics of the early Soviet period owed much to prerevolutionary traditions. The popular genre of melodrama best served the revolutionary theaters because its conventions were familiar to the spectator. Melodrama also presented a Manichean view of life that meshed with official representations of class conflict and other binaries of Soviet culture. Yet, the Meyerhold State Theater proved ill adapted to become an institution of the Stalinist theater world. The creative force behind the theater was a single individual—the mercurial Meyerhold—who first emerged as a brilliant avant-garde régisseur during the Silver Age of art and literature. His innovations in staging and satirical productions were masterful, but his attempts at Soviet-style realism were uninspired and met with disapproval. After 1930, satire became a forbidden genre.

The Moscow Art Theater's acting traditions proved well suited to staging the realistic works of Soviet playwrights. The actors were able to breathe life into the melodramatic proletarian plays that the directors regarded as weak and schematic. After his heart attack in 1929, Stanislavsky no longer worked as a director at the Theater, which came to present illusions of life and wellbeing in Stalinist Russia. Devoted to the ideals of truth and authenticity, it was a cruel irony that the Moscow Art Theater became the most celebrated theatrical institution in the country by serving as the ideal vehicle for representing the power of the new heroes of the Stalinist era.

The Power of Theater

From a Durkheimian perspective, the theater's symbolic power defines its political significance. Due to its prominence in the social and cultural life of Moscow, the theater first revealed its counter-cultural potential at the turn of the century. At that time, the Moscow Art Theater played a key role in transforming public consciousness and establishing belief in a new social and political order.

Subsequently, the cultural institution of theater contributed to creating, reproducing, and transforming Soviet power by bearing on the experience of the contemporary spectator.

Following the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy in 1917, the commitment of the theater to the transformation of society made specifically aesthetic concerns somewhat suspect. In his Epilogue to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin quotes the Italian futurist Marinetti in order to draw a simile between Fascism and the *l’art pour l’art* movement, which defined art as a self-referential sphere of aesthetic values.⁴ Benjamin argues that fascism rendered politics aesthetic with its cult of the leader, giving the proletarianized masses a way to express themselves. War became the consummate object of alienated aesthetic pleasure in Fascist politics. In contrast, Benjamin concludes, communism responded by politicizing art. The implication is that both fascism and communism provided the masses with expressive substitutes deformed by power.

Are politics intrinsically antithetical to art? As an instrument of the emancipation of the masses—a possibility that Benjamin entertained for film—theater stood at the forefront of public discourse in revolutionary Russia. Like Piscator in Weimar Germany, Meyerhold and others of the theatrical left used theater to convey political messages to popular audiences following the Bolshevik Revolution. They politicized the theater and its aesthetics in a narrow sense.⁵ RAPP and the proletarian playwrights advanced an even more limited political conception of the theater and drama.

A period of social conservatism followed the Cultural Revolution: the era of revolutionary experiment in the theater definitively ended. In Maxim Gorky, the regime acquired a writer of international stature. The Vakhtangov Theater staged his pair of new plays dealing with the revolutionary year of 1917: *Egor Bulychev and Others* in 1932 and *Dostigaev and Others* in 1933. The Moscow Art Theater also staged *Egor Bulychev and Others* in 1934 and, at Stalin’s behest, Gorky’s *Enemies* in 1935. Gorky died the following year. The Moscow Art Theater was renamed in his honor.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).

⁵ There was no equivalent of Bertholt Brecht, who attempted to use theater to bring the public to critically historicize its own experience of art and politics, in Soviet Russia.



Figure 1. A scene from *Egor Bulychev and Others* by Maxim Gorky.



Figure 2. A scene from *Dostigaev and Others* by Maxim Gorky

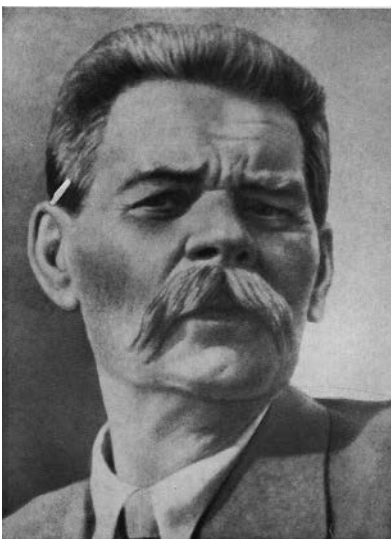


Figure 3. Maxim Gorky

A Great Russian nationalist revival unfolded. Under Stalin, the theater became the epitome of ritualized political adulation: the regime inflamed the passion of the masses for the dramatic theater by transmuting it into love for the Leader and country.⁶ On April 21, 1937, *Anna Karenina* premiered at the Moscow Art Theater. It was a stage adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's masterwork, featuring the love triangle involving Karenin, his wife Anna, and Count Vronsky. Anna Tarasova, who played Mikhailov's wife in *Bread*, starred as Anna Karenina. Nikolai Khmelev, who played Raevsky in *Bread* was Karenin. Levin and Kitty were omitted. Comrade Stalin and his inner circle of Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, and Zhdanov, attended the premiere.⁷ An orgy of official celebration and public frenzy ensued.

Within days, the Gorky Academic Moscow Art Theater of the USSR became the Gorky Academic Moscow Art Theater of the USSR of the "Order of Lenin" in recognition of its outstanding success. The day following this honor, the leading members of the cast became "People's Artists of the USSR." More honors were heaped on the directors and other artists at the Theater in the following weeks. Nemirovich-Danchenko, the director of the production, referred to it as the "renaissance of the Art Theater."⁸

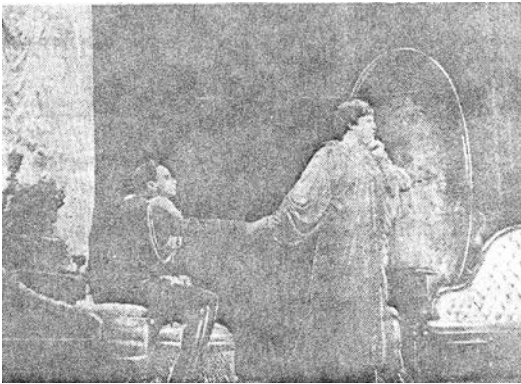


Figure 4. A scene from *Anna Karenina*. Source: *Lesnaya promyshlennost'* April 25, 1937.

⁶ Groys and Brooks interpret Stalinism as a work of art. On Stalinism as the radicalization of the avant-garde, see Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, tr. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). On Stalinist politics as performance, see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷ A. Gvozdev, "Letopis' Khudozhestvennogo teatra 1898-1938," *Iskusstvo i zhizn*, no. 10 (1938): 30.

⁸ Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, "Pis'mo L.D. Leonidovu" dated June 14, 1937, *Izbrannye pis'ma v dvykh tomakh 1879-1943*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1943), 456-58.



Figure 5. Count Vronsky. Source: *Anna Karenina v postanovke Moskovskogo ordena Lenina Khudozhestvennogo Akademicheskogo teatra soiuza SSSR imeni M. Gor'kogo*.

The newspaper of the Communist Youth League, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, remarked that no production had ever called forth such uniformly positive reviews from the press and spectators. Indeed, the reviews referred to *Anna Karenina* in superlative terms: it was a “creative victory,” “a great victory of Soviet theater,” “the greatest victory of Soviet art.”⁹ *Komsomolskaya Pravda* also reported that Muscovites were storming the box office:

During the evening before a performance, a line is formed and its organizers make a list and check the queue from time to time. At dawn, on the other side of the entrance, a second line is formed and the first is declared “illegal.” And here (this is how it was on the twenty-third and twenty-fifth of April) squabbles broke out between the people standing in both lines and almost led to fights. The militia politely tried to settle the dust by letting in people from both lines.¹⁰

The newspaper *Soviet Art* reported that the workers at the Theater’s Office of the Director estimated that it would take fifty years to allow the adult population of Moscow to see it.¹¹ There were just not enough tickets to go around. Instead, the Theater brought the performance to the people. The performance on May 10, 1937 was broadcast live on the radio throughout Russia from factories in Moscow, to dormitories in Kalmykia on the Black Sea, to the eastern reaches of Siberia.¹²

⁹ See, for example, N. Izgoev “Anna Karenina,” *Izvestiia TsIK i VTsIK*, April 20, 1937; Iu. Iuzovskii, “Anna Karenina,” *Pravda*, April 23, 1937; and V. Zaleskii, “Anna Karenina,” *Za kommunistichoe prosveshchenie*, April 26, 1937.

¹⁰ “U teatral’naia kassy MKhAT SSR im. Gorkogo,” *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, April 28, 1937.

¹¹ “Uspekhi Anny Kareniny,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, April 29, 1937.

¹² The Museum of the Moscow Art Theater, letter no. 3757.

Telegrams and collective letters of gratitude poured into the Moscow Art Theater on May 11, 1938. A group of 325 had listened to the radio at the Marti Plant Number 194.¹³ A student at the Moscow Machine Construction Institute wrote, “Such things could be made only here, in the country of victorious socialism. Our directors and artists live and create under the direct supervision of the brilliant Leader and friend comrade Stalin.”¹⁴

Some listeners were moved to compare the position of women under the old regime and under Soviet rule. For example, Comrade Skrebunova, a cleaning woman, remarked about the sad parting scene when Anna must leave her child: “The actress so conveyed these feelings that I understood even more strongly and clearly the freedom and rights of women and mothers in our country—the country of the Stalin Constitution.”¹⁵ Comrade Ganicheva, a sixty-seven year old cleaning woman, was listening alongside her with “tears pouring from her eyes.”

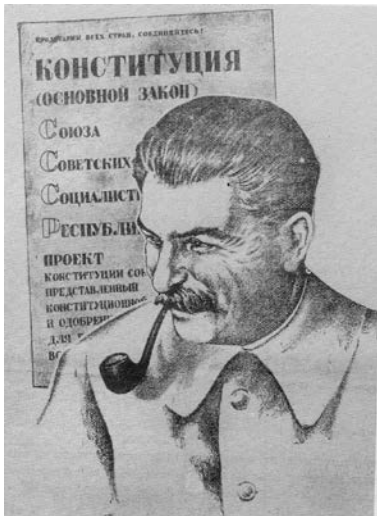


Figure 6. The Stalin Constitution.

Under Stalin, “realistic” in form or “socialist” in content actually became secondary considerations in theater art because the theater and theatergoing had become socialist in form and content. The theater—even the formerly autonomous Moscow Art Theater—had become a full-fledged institution of the Stalinist system, and the public at the elite central theaters was the product of Stalinist institutions. The unified interpretive community ensured that the true meaning of *Anna Karenina* escaped no one: it was a brilliant achievement; it reflected the importance of the Stalin Constitution and the equality of women and men in the Soviet Union; it exemplified the genuine, realistic art of the Moscow Art Theater created by

¹³ The Museum of the Moscow Art Theater, letter no. 3762, “Svodnyi obzor pisem radioslushatelei,” l. 1

¹⁴ Ibid., l. 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., l. 4.

Stanislavsky and Gorky; and most importantly, it reminded everyone that the theater was the work of the true Director, the brilliant Leader.

Bibliography

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossisskoi federatsii, State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow

Fond 5508 Soiuz rabotnikov iskusstv (Rabis)

Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossisskoi federatsii, State Archive of the Russian Federation, St. Petersburg

Fond 2306 Narkompros RSFSR

Fond A-2306 Narkompros teatral'nyi otdel

Fond A-2313 Glavnyi politico-prosvetitel'nyi komitet (Glavpolitprosvet) teatral'nyi otdel

Muzei MKhAT, Museum of the Moscow Art Theater, Moscow

Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow (RGALI)

Fond 645, Glavnoe upravlenie po delam khudozhestvennoi literatury i iskusstva Narkomprosa RSFSR (Glaviskusstvo)

Fond 655, Moskovskii teatr imeni Vl. Maiakovskogo

Fond 656, Glavnyi komitet po kontroliu za reperturom (Glavrepertkom)

Fond 962, Glavnyi komitet po delam iskusstv pri Sovete Narodnykh Komissarov SSSR

Fond 963, Gosudarstvennyi teatr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da

Fond 1230, Tsentral'nyi komitet proletarskikh kul'turnykh organizatsii (Proletkul't)

Fond 2310, Upravlenie teatral'no-zrelishchnykh predpriatii Narkomprosa RSFSR

Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Moskovskoi oblasti, Central State Archive of Moscow (TsGAMO)

Fond 880, Moskovskii oblastnyi sovet Proletkul'ta za 1929-32 gg.

Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi teatral'nyi muzei imeni A.A. Bakhrushina, A. A.

Bakhrushin Central State Museum, Moscow

Fond 499, Teatr imeni Evgenii Vakhtangova

Fond 540, MKhAT

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

Ezhenedel'nik akademicheskikh teatrov

Iskusstvo trudiashchimsia

Izvestiia

Iskusstvo i zhizn'

Khudozhnik i zritel'

Komsomol'skaia pravda

Kul'tura teatra

Lef

Literaturnaia gazeta

Narodnyi teatr

Novosti sezona
Novyi Lef
Novyi zritel'
Oktiabr' mysl'
Ogonëk
Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov
Pravda
Proletarskii put'
Rabis
Rabochii i teatr
Rabochii zritel'
Russkoe slovo
Sovetskii teatr
Sovetskoe iskusstvo
Sovremennyi teatr
Teatr
Teatr i dramaturgiia
Teatr i muzyka
Teatral'naia Moskva
Teatral'noe obozrenie
Trud
Vecherniaia Moskva
Vestnik rabotnikov iskusstv
Vestnik teatra
Voprosy istorii
Za kommunisticheskoe prosveshchenie
Zhizn' iskusstva
Zrelishcha

BOOKS, ARTICLES AND PLAYS

Aksenov, I., B. Arvatov, E. Beskin et al. *O teatre: sbornik*. Tver: 2-ia Gostip, 1922.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy." *Sociological Theory* 22, 527-573.

Alpers, Boris. *Teatral'nye ocherki*. 2 vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977.

----- . *Teatr revoliutsii*. Moscow: Teakinopechat', 1928.

----- . *Teatr sotsial'noi maski*. Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1931.

Al'tshchuller, A. Ia., ed. *Ocherki istorii russkoi teatral'noi kritiki konets XIX-nachalo XX veka*, 1979.

- ."Russkii teatr i obshchestvennoe dvizhenie: aspekty izucheniia." In *Russkii teatr i obshchestvennoe dvizhenie*. Edited by N. Koroleva, Leningrad: LGITMiK, 1984.
- ."Speltakl' v kontekste istorii." In *Spektakl' v kontekste istorii*. Edited by A. Ia. Al'tshchuller. Leningrad: LGITMiK, 1990.
- Amiard-Chevrel, Claudine. *Le Théâtre Artistique de Moscou, 1898-1917*. Paris: Éditions du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1979.
- Anastas'ev, A. et al., eds. *Istoriia sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*. Vols. 1-4. Moscow: Nauka, 1966-1971.
- Anna Karenina v postanovke Moskovskogo ordena Lenina Khudozhestvennogo Akademicheskogo teatra soiuzs SSSR imeni M. Gor'kogo*. Moscow: izdanie MKhAT, 1938.
- Anisimov, A. *Teatry Moskvy: vremia i arkhitektura*. Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1984.
- Argenbright, Robert. "Marking NEP's Slippery Path: The Krasnoshchekov Show Trial," *The Russian Review* 61 (April 2002).
- Bardovskii, A. *Teatral'nyi zritel' na fronte v kanun Oktiabria*. Moscow: Russkoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1928.
- Bebutov, Valerii, "Nezabytoe." In *Tvorcheskoe nasledie V.E. Meierkhol'da: sbornik*. Edited by L.D. Vendrovskaia and Aleksandr Fevralskii. Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1978.
- Baxandall, Michael. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Beckerman, Bernard. *Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience and Act*. Edited by Gloria Brim Beckerman and William Coco. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Belaia, G. *Iz istorii sovetskoi esteticheskoi mysli, 1917-1932: sbornik materialov*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980.
- Beletskii, A.I. et al., eds. *Noveishaia russkaia literatura. Kritika. Teatr. Metodologii. Temy. Bibliografiia*. Ivanovo-Voznesensk: Osnova, 1927.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1973.
- ."Moscow Diary." Edited by Gary Smith. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986.

- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Best, Joel. *Social Problems*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.
- Boiarskii, Ia. et al., eds. *Moskovskii teatr revoliutsii, 1922-1932. Sbornik statei*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Mosoblispolkoma, 1933.
- Bonnell, Victoria E. *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Borodina, O. K. *Vladimir Kirshon: ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva*. Kiev: Izdatel'stvo Kievskogo universiteta, 1964.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- . *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Edited by Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- . "Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber's Sociology of Religion." In *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*. Edited by Scott Lash and Sam Whimster. London: Allen and Unwin, 1987.
- . *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Bradby, David and John McCormick. *People's Theatre*. London: Croom Helm, 1978.
- Braun, Edward. *The Theater of Meyerhold: Revolution on the Modern Stage*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1979.
- Brown, Edward J. *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950.
- Brown, Frederick. *Theater and Revolution: The Culture of the French Stage*. New York: Viking Press, 1980.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Chamberlain, William. *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921. 1918-1921: From the Civil War to the Consolidation of Power*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965.
- Chekhov, Mikhail. *Literaturnoe nasledie. Ob iskusstve aktera*. Vol. 2. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986.

- Clark, Katerina. *Petersburg, Crucible of Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Clayton, J. Douglas. *Pierrot in Petrograd: The Commedia dell'Arte/Balagan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theater and Drama*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.
- Clurman, Harold. *Soviet Diary*. Unpublished diary in the private collection of Mel Gordon, dated April 26-May 27, 1935.
- Danilov, S. "Materialy po istorii russkogo zakonodatel'stva o teatre." In *O teatre: sbornik*. Edited by S. Danilov and S. Mokul'skii. Leningrad-Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1940.
- DiMaggio, Paul. "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America." *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (1982), 33-50.
- , "Culture Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Classification and Framing of American Art, Part II." *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (1982), 303-322.
- Dmitriev, Iu. A., ed. *Istoriia russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1984.
- Dmitrievskii, V. "O konktreno-sotsiologicheskom izuchenii teatral'nogo zritelia." In *Teatr i dramaturgiia*, edited by A. Al'tshuller et al. Leningrad: LGITMiK, 1967.
- Dobrenko, Evgeny. *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Dreiden, Simon. "'Khotelos' posmotret' etu p'esu.' *Na Dne* 1919." In *V zritel'nom zale—Vladimir Il'ich*. Vol. 1. Revised third edition. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980.
- Dubnova, E. "Luka i Satin: k istorii stenicheskikh interpretatsii *Na Dne*." In *Neizvestnyi Gor'kii: k 125-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia*. Moscow: Nasledie, 1994.
- Dunham, Vera S. *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: George Allen and Unwin, 1915.
- Efros, N. *Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr, 1898-1923*. Moscow-Petersburg: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924.
- , "*Na dne*." *P'esa Maksima Gor'kogo v postanovke moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo teatra*. Moscow-Petersburg: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923.

- Esslin, Martin. *An Anatomy of Drama*. London: T. Smith, 1977.
- Eyerman, Ron and Lisa McCormack, eds. *Myth, Meaning, and Performance: Toward a New Cultural Sociology of the Arts*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006.
- Fevral'skii, Aleksandr. *Moskovskie vstrechi*. Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1982.
- . *Pervaia sovetskaia p'esa. "Misteriia-Buff" V.V. Maiakovskogo*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1971.
- . *Zapiski rovesnika veka*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1976.
- Fevral'skii, Aleksandr and L. Vendrovskaiia, eds. *Tvorcheskoe nasledie V.E. Meierkhol'da*. Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1978.
- Filippov, V. *Besedy o teatre: opyt vvedeniia v teatrovedenie*. Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1924.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and Arts under Lunacharsky, 1917-1921*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- . *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- , ed. *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- . "The Emergence of Glaviskusstvo: Class War on the Cultural Front." *Soviet Studies* 23.
- Frolova, E. "Iz opyta izucheniia zritel'ia v 20-kh godakh." *Metodologicheskie problem sovremennogo iskusstvoznaniia*. Issue 1. Leningrad: LGITMiK, 1975.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Fülöp-Miller, René and Joseph Gregor. *The Russian Theatre: Its Character and History with Especial Reference to the Revolutionary Period*. Tr. Paul England. London: Benjamin Blom, 1930.
- Garin, E. *S Meierkhol'dom: vospominaniia*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974.

- Gay, Peter. *Weimar Culture: The Outsider As Insider*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- . *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Genard, Gary. "The Moscow Art Theatre's 1923 Season in Boston: A Visit From On High?" *Theatre History Studies* 16.
- Gladkov, A. *Meierkhol'd: V 2-kh tomakh*. Vol. 2, *Piat' let s Meierkhol'dom: vstrechi s Pasternakom*. Moscow: Soiuz teatral'nykh deiatelei RSFSR, 1990.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1973.
- Golomshtok, Igor. *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China*. New York: Icon Editions, 1990.
- Golub, Spencer. *The Recurrence of Fate: Theatre and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994.
- Gorchakov, Nikolai. *Theater in Soviet Russia*. Translated by Edgar Lehrman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.
- Gordon, Mel. *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia*. New York: Applause Books Publishers, 1987.
- Gor'kii, Maksim. *P'esy*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo detskaia literature, 1966.
- Griswold, Wendy. "The Devil, Social Change, and Jacobean Theatre." In *The New American Cultural Sociology*. Edited by Philip Smith, 126-140. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Groys, Boris. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Guldberg, Jørn. "Socialist Realism as Institutional Practice: Observations on the Interpretation of the Works of Art of the Stalin Period." In *The Culture of the Stalin Period*. Edited by Hans Gunther, 149-177. New York: St. Martins Press, 1990.
- Gvozdev, A. *Teatral'naia kritika: Stat'i. Retsenzii. Vystupleniia*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1987.
- Gvozdev, A., et al. *O teatre. Sbornik statei*. Leningrad: Academia, 1926.

-----. *Revizor v teatre imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da. Sbornik statei*. Leningrad: Academia, 1927.

Heijermans, Herman. "The Good Hope: A Drama of the Sea in Four Acts," translated by Harriet Gampert Higgins, *The Drama: A Quarterly Review of Dramatic Literature*, no. 8, (November 1912).

Hermassi, Karen. *Polity and Theater in Historical Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Houghton, Norris. *Moscow Rehearsals: An Account of the Methods of Production in Soviet Theater*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1936.

-----. *Return Engagement: A Postscript to "Moscow Rehearsals"*. London: Putnam, 1962.

Il'inskii, Igor'. *Sam o sebe*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973.

Izvekov, I. "Zritel' v teatre." In *Teatral'nyi Oktiabr'. I -yi sbornik*. Edited by A. Gvozdev et al. Leningrad-Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Teatral'nyi oktiabr', 1926.

Kalashnikov, Iu.S., ed. *Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavskii ob iskusstve teatra. Izbrannoe*. Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1982.

Kenez, Peter. *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Kerzhentsev, V. *Revoliutsiia i teatr*. Moscow: Dennitsa, 1918.

Kharkhordin, Oleg. *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Kirshon, Vladimir. "Bread" *Vladimir Kirshon: Izbrannoe*. Edited by Iu. N. Libedinskii, et al. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1958.

Kleberg, Lars. *Theatre As Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*. London: Macmillan Press, 1993.

Kobrin, Iu. *Teatr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da i rabochii zritel'*. Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral'noe izdatel'stvo, 1926.

Koksheneva, K. A. *Zritel' teatra revoliutsionnoi epokhi, 1921-1924*. Dissertation. Institut teatral'nogo iskusstva im. A.V. Lunacharskogo (GITIS), Moscow, 1985.

Korbon, A. and N. Korepanov. *Spektakl' segodnia*. Moscow: TsK Vserabis i Teakinopechat', 1930.

-----. *Khudozhestvenno-politicheskie sovery (KhPS)*. Moscow: TsK Vserabis i Teakinopechat', 1930.

- Korshunova, V.P. and M.M. Sitkovetskaia, eds. *Meierkhol'd. Perepiska. 1896-1939*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976.
- Kotkin, Stephen. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Leach, Robert. *Revolutionary Theatre 1917-1924*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- , *Vsevolod Meyerhold*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Lewin, Moshe. *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization*. New York: Norton Library, 1975
- , *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Lunacharskii, A. V. *Teatr i revoliutsiia*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924.
- , *Teatr segodnia: otsenka sovremennogo repertuara i stseny*. Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo MODPiK, 1927.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Mally, Lynn. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Mandelstam, Nadezhda. *Hope Abandoned*. New York: Atheneum, 1974.
- Margolin, S. *Pervyi rabochii teatr Proletkul'ta*. Moscow: Teakinopechat', 1930.
- Markov, Pavel. *Kniga vospominanii*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983.
- , *Noveishie teatral'nye techeniia*. Moscow, 1924.
- , *O teatre*. 4 Vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974-77.
- , *Pravda teatra*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965.
- , *V Khudozhestvennom teatre: kniga zavlita*. Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1976.
- Markov, Pavel and N. Chushkin, eds. *Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr 1898-1948*. Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo," 1950.

- Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers, 1963
- Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii: "Teatr i totalitarnoe gosudarstvo." June 1990.* Moscow: Soiuz teatral'nykh deiatelei RSFSR, 1991.
- Meierkhol'd repetiruet*. 2 vols. Edited by M. Sitkovetskaia. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Artist." Rezhisser. Teatr," 1993.
- Meierkhol'd, V.E. *O teatre*. St. Petersburg: Prosveshchenie, 1912.
- Mgebrov, A. *Zhizn v teatre*. 2 vols. Moscow-Leningrad: Academia, 1929 and 1932.
- Mironova, V. "Montazh attrakcionov: S.M. Eizenshtein v Teatre Proletkul'ta." In *Studiinye techeniia v sovetskoi rezhissure 1920—1930-kh godov*. Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1983.
- Mogilevskii, A. I., Vl. Filippov and A. Rodionov. *Teatry Moskvy, 1917-1927. Stat'i i materialy*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, 1928.
- Moi vek, moi druz'ia i podrugii. Vospominaniia Mariengofa, Shershenevicha, Gruzinova.* Edited by K. Iur'ev and S. Shumikhin. Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1990.
- Morson, Saul and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Movshenson, A. G. *Repertuar moskovskikh teatrov za sovetskii period: spisok prem'er za 1917-1936*. Undated manuscript. Rossiiskaia teatral'naia biblioteka imeni A. V. Lunacharskogo. St. Petersburg, Russia.
- Nelidov, V.A. *Teatral'naia Moskva. Sorok let moskovskikh teatrov*. Berlin-Riga, [1931].
- Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vl. *Izbrannye pis'ma 1879-1943*. 2 vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979.
- Nosova, I. "Stanovlenie metodov issledovaniia auditorii v sovetskoi sotsiologii iskusstva." In *Metodologicheskie problemy sovremennogo iskusstvoznaniia. Sbornik statei*. Vypusk 1. Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1975.
- Novitskii, P. *Sovremennye teatral'nye sistemy. Lektsiia 1-3*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1933.
- "Problematika sovremenogo teatra." In *Ezhegodnik literatury i iskusstva na 1929 god*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo kommunisticheskoi akademii, 1929.

- Novozhilova, L.I. and I.L. Nosova. "Teatr i zritel': konkretno-sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia 20-kh godov." In *Nauka o teatre*. Leningrad: GITIS and LGITMiK, 1975.
- O'Connor, Timothy. *The Politics of Soviet Culture: Anatolii Lunacharskii*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Pavlov, V. A. *Teatral'nye sumerki: stat'i i ocherki ob akademizme i MKhAT'e 1926-27*. Moscow: Novyi zritel', 1928.
- Pavlova, T. "Teatr F.A. Korsha i zritel'." In *Problemy sotsiologii teatra*. Edited by N. Khrenov. Moscow: Ministerstvo kul'tury, 1974.
- Peacock, James. *Rites of Modernization: Symbols and Social Aspects of Indonesian Proletarian Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Pesochinskii, N. "'Velikii perelom' v teatral'noi kritike, 1930." In *Voprosy teatrovedeniia. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*. Edited by A.Ia. Al'tshuller. St. Petersburg: Vserossiiskii nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut iskusstvoznaniia, 1991.
- Petrovskaia, I. *Teatr i zritel' Rossiskikh stolits, 1895-1917*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1990.
- Poliakova, Elena. *Stanislavskii*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977.
- , *Teatr i dramaturgiia: iz opyty raboty MKhT nad p'esami sovetskikh dramaturgov, 1917-1945*. Moscow: Vserossiiskogoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1959.
- Pyzhova, O. *Fragmenty teatral'noi sud'by*. Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1986.
- Read, Christopher. *Culture and Power in Revolutionary Russia: The Intelligentsia and Bolshevism Before Stalinism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.
- Repertuarnyi ukazatel'. Sbornik otzyvov o p'esakh dlia professional'nogo i samodeiatel'nogo teatra. Vypusk I*. Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral'noe izdatel'stvo, 1925.
- Repertuarnyi ukazatel' GRK Narkompros I*. Edited by N. Rabicha. Moscow-Leningrad: Teakinopechat', 1929.
- Repertuarnyi ukazatel*. Vol. 2. Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1931.
- Repertuarnyi ukazatel. Ofitsial'nyi spravochnik razreshennykh i zapreshchennykh dramaticheskikh, muzikal'nykh, khoreograficheskikh i estradnykh proizvedenii*. Edited by O. Litovskii. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1934.

- Ripellino, Angelo. *Majakovskij e il teatro russo d'avanguardia*. Turin: Einaudi, 1959.
- Robin, Régine. "Introduction: Cultural Stalinism, Didacticism and Literariness." *Sociocriticism* 2, 7-46.
- Romashov, B. *Vosdushnyi pirog: komediia v 5-i deistviiakh(15 stsenakh)*. Repertuar teatra revoliutsii. Moscow: Moskovskoe teatral'noe izdatel'stvo, 1925.
- Rostotskii, B. *O rezhisserskom tvorchestve V.E. Meierkhol'da*. Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1960.
- , ed. *V. E. Meier'khol'd. Stat'i. Pis'ma. Rechi. Besedy*. Part 2, 1917-1939. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968.
- Rudnitskii, Konstantin. *Meierkhol'd*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981.
- , *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1969.
- , *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*. Edited by Lesley Milne. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- Rybakov, Iu. *Teatr imeni Evg. Vakhtangova: piat'desiat sezonov, 1921-1971*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971.
- Sayler, Oliver M. *Inside the Moscow Art Theater*. New York: Brentano's, 1925.
- , *The Russian Theater Under the Revolution*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1920.
- Selezneva, Tamara. *Kinomysl' 1920-kh godov*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1972.
- Sewell, William, Jr. *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Sherel', A., ed. *Meierkhol'dovskii sbornik*. Vol 2. Moscow: Tvorcheskii tsentr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da, 1992.
- Shevtsova, Maria. "The Sociology of the Theater, Part One: Problems and Perspectives." *New Theatre Quarterly* 5, 23-35.
- Sitkovetskaia, M.M. (ed). *Meierkhol'd repetiruet*. 2 vols. Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1993.
- Slonim, Marc. *Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets*. New York: Collier Books, 1961.

- . *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers and Problems, 1917-1977*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Smelianskii, A. *Mikhail Bulgakov v Khudozhestvennom teatre*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1989.
- Sobolev, Iu. *Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr: ocherki*. Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo," 1938.
- Solovyova, Inna. "The Theatre and Socialist Realism, 1929-1953." *A History of Russian Theatre*. Edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, 325-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966.
- Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1917-1921*. Edited by A. Iufit. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1968.
- Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1967. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1921-1926*. Edited by A. Ia. Trabskii. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1975.
- Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy. Russkii sovetskii teatr 1926-1932, I*. Edited by A. Ia. Trabskii. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1982.
- Stanislavskii, Konstantin. *Moe grazhdanskoe sluzhenie rossii. Vospominaniia. Stat'i. Ocherki. Rechi. Besedy. Iz zapisnykh knizhek*. Moscow: Pravda, 1990.
- . *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve*. In *Sobranie sochinenii*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1954.
- . *Rabota aktera nad soboi*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennoe uskusstvo, 1938.
- . *Sobranie sochinenii*. 8 vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1954-61.
- . *Stat'i. Rechi. Otkliki. Zametki. Vospominaniia. 1917-1938*. In *Sobranie sochinenii*. Vol. 6. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1959.
- . *Pis'ma 1918-1938*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo," 1954, 1959 and 1961.
- Stepanov, Z. V. *Kul'turnaia zhizn' Leningrada 20-kh—nachala 30-kh godov*. Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1976.
- Stites, Richard. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

- . *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Stourac, Richard and Kathleen McCreery. *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917-1934*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Stroeveva, M. *Rezhisserskie iskaniia Stanislavskogo, 1917-1938*. Moscow: Nauka, 1977.
- Styan, J.L. *Drama, Stage and Audience*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Swidler, Ann. "Cultural Power and Social Movements." *Cultural Sociology*. Edited by Lyn Spillman, 311-323. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- . "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, 273-86.
- Swift, E. Anthony. *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Tamashin, L. *Vladimir Kirshon: ocherk tvorchestva*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1965.
- Tarasova, A. K. *Dokumenty i vospominaniia*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1978.
- Taylor, Richard, ed. *Sergei Eisenstein: Selected Works*. Vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Teatr imeni Evg. Vakhtangova: 20 let*. Moscow: Izdanie muzeia teatra, 1946.
- Teatral'naia Moskva: putevoditel'*. Moscow, 1928.
- Teatral'nyi almanakh. Sbornik statei i materialov*. Kniga 2(4). Moscow: Vsesoiuznoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1946.
- Tolstoy, Vladimir, Irina Bibikova and Catherine Cooke, eds. *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.
- Trabskii, A. Ia. "Sovetskaia teatral'naia zhurnalistika," in *Teatral'naia kritika 1917-1927 godov: problemy razvitiia*. Edited by A.Ia Al'tshuller. Leningrad: LGITMIK, 1987.
- Tret'iakov, Sergei. *Slyshish' Moskva?! Agit-ginol' v chetyrekh deistviakh*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966.
- Tubin, Ia. "A.V. Lunacharskii o publike teatra." In *Sotsiologicheskie problem khudozhestvennoi kul'tury: teoriia, metodologiia, konkretnye issledovaniia*. Sverdlovsk: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1976.

- Vaksberg, Arkady. *Stalin's Prosecutor: The Life of Andrei Vyshinsky*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991
- Van Gyseghem, Andre. *Theater in Soviet Russia*. London: Faber and Faber, 1943.
- Verhaeren, Emile. *The Dawn (Les Aubes)*. Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1915.
- Viola, Lynne. *Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Collectivization*. Oxford, 1987.
- Volkov, N.D. *Meierkhol'd*. Moscow: Zrelishcha, 1923.
- *Meierkhol'd*. Vols. 1 and 2. Moscow-Leningrad: Academia, 1929.
- *Teatral'nye vechera*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966.
- Von Geldern, James. *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- V pomoshch' direktoru teatra. Zakony, rasporyazheniia, raz''iasneniia*, compiled by A. B. Gilenson. Moscow: Narkompros RSFSR-Uchpedgiz, 1935.
- Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom. Sbornik vospominanii*. Edited by L. Vendrovskaiia. Moscow: Vsesoiuznoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1967.
- Williams, Raymond. *Drama in Performance*. London: Penguin Books, 1968.
- Worrall, Nick. *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage: Tairov-Vakhtangov-Okhlopkov*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Wright, Will. *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
- Zakhava, Boris. *Vospominaniia. Spektakli i roli. Stat'i*. Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1982.
- Zograf, N. et al., eds. *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra*. Vol 1. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1954.
- Zolotnitskii, D. *Akademicheskie teatry na putiakh Oktiabria*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1982.
- *Budni i prazdniki teatral'nogo Oktiabria*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1978.
- *Zori teatral'nogo Oktiabria*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976.

Zritel' o teatre imeni Vs. Meierkol'da. Materialy k izucheniiu zritel'ia Vypusk 1-yi.
Moscow: Teatral'nyi oktiabr', 1926.