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# Roots and rebellion: An investigation of the evolution and implications of legacy in Revolutionary Soviet theatre

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Roots and Rebellion:

An Investigation of the Evolution and Implications of Legacy in Revolutionary Soviet Theatre

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Visual and Performing Arts  
James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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by Katelyn Elizabeth Murray

August 2013

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Theatre and Dance, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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For my mother, Scarlett Murray, who is a constant source of inspiration, love, and support.

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## Introduction

There is an abundance of literature investigating the theatrical aesthetics of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde. The topic has been studied at length by theatre historians and social historians alike. However, there is, as of yet, no definitive text that connects the aesthetics of the pre-revolutionary period to those of the revolutionary period to those of the post-revolutionary Stalinist period. A concise throughline investigation is lacking from the historiography of this subject. Revolutionary theatre historians have largely been unable to adequately discuss the connection between the theatrical developments of this time period and their political, economic, and social context and significance. Social historians, similarly, are unable to intuit the significance of certain artistic movements and theatrical breaks with convention within the context of their studies of the larger social context of revolution.

It is my intention to present here a detailed discussion of the emergence and significance of the Russian theatrical legacy incorporating its development from the pre-revolutionary period through the Stalinist turn toward socialist realism. I will focus on the political, social, and economic conditions that provide for and nourish revolutionary theatrical innovation.

Conversely, I will consider the same conditions that provide for the annihilation of artistic experimentation and advancement during the Stalinist period.

The period which I am studying spans from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 1930s. There is, of course, a plethora of source material available to readers concerning these periods. I have engaged in an in-depth analysis of both secondary source materials regarding specific artists and their work, including Edward Braun's studies of Vsevolod Meyerhold, and theatre history texts

dealing specifically with Russian and Soviet theatre. My collected primary source materials include first-hand accounts of performances, literature and poetry of the period(s); various writings of specific theatre artists and philosophers themselves; and reviews from contemporary theatre critics such as Yury Sobolev.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarly works on the broad political context of the Russian Revolution include: Geoffrey Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union* (Waukegan, IL: Fontana Press, 1990); Figes, Orlando, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). The 1990s saw a rise in cultural historians, producing such valuable works as: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution: 1917-1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Revisionist history has most recently come to the forefront, the best of such works being: Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

## **Act I: The Evolution of Theatrical Legacy in Pre-Revolutionary Russia**

It may seem strange to begin a study of revolutionary theatrical innovation in Russia with a discussion of 18<sup>th</sup> century artistic theory. However, in order to fully comprehend the roots of the revolutionary theatre and the significance of its contributions to the larger political, social, and cultural climate as a whole, it is necessary to begin with an observation of the contextual conditions and conventions of pre-revolutionary theatre in tsarist Russia.

Theatre evolved in Russia, similarly to Europe, from the tradition of amateur school plays organized by the Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Theatre became a method of entertainment for the educated nobility early on. As in most Western European countries, court theatres became popular in almost all the homes of the nobility.

Peter the Great was the first Russian ruler to experiment with the idea of a public theatre. He attempted, with the creation of his theatre on Red Square (operating from 1702 through 1706) to establish a sort of school for the education and Westernization of the Russian public. While nobles were mostly European-educated, the common Russian still lived a traditional Slavonic lifestyle. Despite Peter's early optimism, the theatre on Red Square was disbanded quickly because of the apparent lack of interest towards expressed by the locals.

Peter was the first ruler to envision theatre as a medium for the expansion of Enlightenment ideas in Russia. His attempts at cultural reform were continued by his successors, who were faced with a monumental task. Russia is and was a vast empire, stretching across many territories and

incorporating people of different religions, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. To make things more difficult, the majority of the population was illiterate. How best, then, to encourage the spread of Enlightenment ideals?

The theatre has long been considered an environment for the moral education of the public. It was under this premise that Catherine the Great (1762-1796) promoted the development of theatre in Russia, which had previously been frowned upon as the profession of wandering minstrels called *skomorokhi*. Under Catherine, theatre became a presumed force for the “improvement of morals and cultural knowledge.” Almost every aspect of Catherine’s reign was geared towards the continuation of Peter the Great’s introduction of Enlightenment ideas. The German princess saw it as her personal and professional mission to bring the light of Western advancement into the backward wilderness of Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Theatre was thus seized upon as the medium through which Enlightenment ideals were to be transmitted to the public. Accordingly, the second public theatre in Russia’s history was opened in 1779. Called the Free Russian Theatre, it was ironically owned and operated by Karl Knipper, a wealthy German merchant. Despite its name, everything performed at this theatre was either a translation or an adaptation of something European. As will be discussed later, this is not at all an unusual trend in pre-revolutionary theatre.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Murray Frame, *School for Citizens: Theatre and Civil Society in Imperial Russia* (New Haven: CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Catherine and her successors, however hopeful about the theatre's noble role in the education of the masses, did not permit unchecked theatrical activity. The Decree of 1782 authorized police to carry out supervision of any theatrical event throughout the empire, with the exception of the private court theatres. The subsequent Censorship Law of 1804 required the official pre-screening of all plays published by the Ministry of Education. In 1811, censorship duties were transferred to the Ministry of Police, and they were shifted again in 1819 to the newly established Ministry of Internal Affairs. It was clear that while Catherine was supportive of the theatre as an educational tool, she was still wary of its ability to cause social unrest.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely this wariness that resulted in Catherine's endorsement of a theatrical monopoly in the twin capitals of the empire. It was decreed that any theatre wishing to set up shop in either St. Petersburg or Moscow must have the express permission of the government. Thus, Imperial theatres faced no competition for audiences. The state theatres experienced miraculous stability during the 18<sup>th</sup> and most of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries due to their virtually unchallenged hold on the audiences of the urban capitals. As a result of the urban monopoly, theatrical innovations stagnated.

Catherine's idea of the theatre as an "emblem of enlightenment" continued on in the minds of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian rulers. In reality, the average Russian audience member felt alienated because of the vast difference between his lifestyle and the material and ideals being presented onstage. The vast majority of plays being performed were either translations or adaptations of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27.

European works. For example, Alexander Sumarokov, praised as the first great Russian dramatist, based all of his plays on French classics.<sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming presence of foreign troupes also stunted the emergence of an authentic Russian theatre. French, English and German troupes set up theatres all over the country and received extensive funding from the Russian government itself. The French and the Germans were particularly adored, as is evident by the record of government monetary allotments. In 1809, the St. Petersburg French acting troupe was given 175,648 rubles, the Moscow French troupe was given 66,340 rubles, and the Petersburg German troupe was afforded 138,390 rubles. Meanwhile, the native Russian troupe in Petersburg received 54,600 rubles and the Moscow troupe was given a measly 35,000 rubles.<sup>6</sup>

Why were foreign troupes so obviously preferred over native Russian troupes? The answer is simple. Enlightenment ideas were a product of the West. Who better to educate the backwards public than the Europeans themselves? Members of the Russian intelligentsia had studied German philosophy for years, and works from writers like Schiller formed more than the basis of their own philosophy. The presence of these touring troupes and their innovative practices, although detrimental to theatrical development in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, became extremely important to later developments among the early avant-garde movement. The effect of these foreign troupes on Russian innovators of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century will be discussed at length at a later point.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 34.

The mid 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a demand for the Russification of the theatre by members of the newly formed intelligentsia that had begun to lose faith in the idea of Enlightened despotism. Tsar Alexander II (1855-1881) had helped to fuel this disillusionment with his radical policy shifts. He had at first seemed to be an Enlightened ruler, advancing the bureaucratization of government and advocating real reform. His 1862 emancipation of the serfs was unprecedented. Although certain members of the nobility disagreed with his stance on emancipation, most of the intelligentsia were pleased with the tsar's reform efforts. However, after an attempt on his life in 1866, however, Alexander II changed his tune. He ushered in a period of strict conservatism and abandoned all reform efforts in fear of inspiring a violent revolution. Nobles and intelligentsia members who had grown used to a more relaxed sense of freedom and entitlement were not at all pleased.

The intelligentsia, disillusioned with the idea of Enlightened despotism, criticized Alexander II and Nicholas I, his successor who advanced the rule of repression during his reign, by advocating the development of an inherently Russian theatre. Playwrights such as Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Ostrovsky began writing plays that reflected the national identity and ordinary lives of Russians. In part, the production of these plays themselves actually constituted a critique of the tsar, as it was known throughout the empire that Nicholas I was extremely fond of French ballets.<sup>7</sup>

This demand for a distinctly Russian national theatre grew, fueled by the increasing urbanization of the 1860s. The abolition of serfdom in 1862 and the development of trade and commerce had

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 78.

led to a steady increase in urban populations. Between 1860 and 1897, the total population rose from 74.1 million to 126.4 million. This growth was reflected in the establishment of new regional theatres in provincial cities such as Nizhny Novgorod. By the early 1890s, there were 127 theatres in the provincial urban centers alone.<sup>8</sup>

The expansion of regional theatres in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century contrasted sharply with the restriction of urban theatres in Petersburg and Moscow. The monopoly of the Imperial theatres, established under Catherine, had come to be considered outdated. The policy had been strongly argued against by playwrights and theatrical entrepreneurs for years. On March 24, 1882, the monopoly was overturned by Alexander III. This was a huge development for the Russian public theatres. To the delight of many, private theatres could now be organized in the country's two main urban centers without government or directorate approval. Importantly, the ruling did not grant freedom from censorship. All plays were still required to be submitted to the appropriate government organization for official approval before any production of the text could be mounted.<sup>9</sup>

Why the sudden change in policy? Alexander III had his own reasons for overturning the monopoly. Aside from the pressure being levied on him by influential writers such as Ostrovsky, the tsar harbored a strong hatred for Germany and was an ardent Slavophile. The establishment of privately owned People's theatres in the urban centers would, and did, siphon audiences away from touring German troupes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 104.

The private theatres did not take long to take off. Between 1882 and 1901, fourteen private companies were established alongside the five Imperial theatres. The ever-important and incredibly influential Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) was established by Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko at this time, in 1898. Other private theatres established by individuals such as Fyodor Korsh (the Korsh Theatre, Moscow, 1882-1917), Savva Mamontov (the Mamontov Private opera), and Alexei Suvorin (the Suvorin Theatre, St. Petersburg, 1895-1917), contributed to the wider social trend that was gradually challenging the state as the “curator of artistic culture and the arbiter of identity.”<sup>11</sup>

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a true Russian theatrical culture was emerging. The economic development of the 1880s and 1890s fueled industrialization and created a need for workers. These workers comprised new audiences for the growing theatre scene. Theatre journals, such as *Theatre in Life* (1897-1918), sprang up, analyzing performances and providing critical reviews. In his *What is Art?*, Leo Tolstoy mentions this fact, writing, “Pick up any newspaper of our time and in every one of them you will find a section on theatre and music.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet, the intelligentsia’s dream of fostering a unified national culture was not altogether accomplished. People’s theatres were difficult to keep in business as ticket prices were expensive and leisure time was minimal. Urban audiences grew in diversity as they grew in numbers due to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Tolstoy, “What is Art?,” trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 19.

the influx of more and more first generation peasants. This created problems of accessibility for Russian theatres.<sup>13</sup>

However, there was a larger difficulty faced by the newly established People's theatres: the question of artistic experimentation. Because of the constant competition with the larger, government subsidized Imperial theatres, privately owned theatres constantly struggled to stay afloat. It was quickly discovered that the artistic experimentation sought out by the founders of the People's theatres was not compatible with the current tastes of the public as a whole. Thus, it became extremely difficult to reconcile the commercial viability of productions with their level of artistic exploration.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason, calls arose for the establishment of a system of state subsidies to supplement the income of People's theatres in the 1880s. These demands were largely ignored by the government; however, the appearance of factory subsidized theatres made it somewhat easier to practice theatrical innovation. The Vasilevsky Ostrov Workers' Theatre, established in 1887, is the first example of a factory subsidized theatre in this period.<sup>15</sup>

Although authorities at first remained largely ambivalent regarding People's theatres, a state-funded organization known as the Guardianships of Popular Tolerance did begin providing some assistance to privately owned companies around the turn of the century. In 1901 there were 97 theatres receiving assistance from the Guardianships, and in 1904 that number had increased to

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<sup>13</sup>Frame, *School for Citizens*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

150. In 1905, there were 305 private theatres receiving some form of government subsidy to keep their doors open.<sup>16</sup>

Even so, People's theatres largely failed to bridge the gap between the commercial and the educational. Members of the intelligentsia were disappointed in the meager results and instead began to look to the more well-funded Imperial theatres as the venue for social education. It appeared as though civil society and the commercial market proved to be as authoritarian as the monarchical rulers and, therefore, simply couldn't be trusted to culturally educate the masses.<sup>17</sup>

Members of the early Russian avant-garde, however, were not satisfied with the antiquated methods and resources of the Imperial theatres. One observant theatre-goer describes the stage sets at the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre as "soiled, faded, discoloured, as well as unspeakably crumpled." The standard at that point in time for Russian scenic design still relied on scenic painting methods developed during the Italian Renaissance. Stock sets were often used without regard for their applicability to the time period or the specific needs of the play. Theatres were overrun by starlets who were expected to provide and select their own luxurious costumes that were oftentimes distracting, however impressive, onstage.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to gain strength as well as funding and assets, theatre artists attempted to organize themselves under the Russian Theatre Organization (RTO), which was established in 1894. The establishment of the RTO signifies theatre artists' endeavor to "professionalize" the theatre. The

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 174-186.

RTO offered loans and grants to struggling artists, subsidized theatres, and attempted to provide its members with a voice. By 1917, the group had grown to a membership of 6,000 people.<sup>19</sup>

People's theatre achieved another victory, in spite of the difficult times, with the opening of the extremely influential Moscow Art-Accessible Theatre (MKht) in 1898. "Accessible" was dropped from the title in 1900 in order to avoid falling under the censorship laws of the public theatres. Intended to be an "exemplary" and "model" institution, this theatre was founded by Konstantin Alekseyev (who adopted the pseudonym Stanislavski in 1885) and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Both Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko had previous experience working in theatre; Stanislavski had established the Moscow Society of Art and Literature in 1888 and organized productions at the old Pushkin Theatre while Nemirovich-Danchenko had taught theatre with the Moscow Philharmonic Society.<sup>20</sup>

As has been previously mentioned, the influence of European touring troupes is clearly present in the work presented at the MKhT. Stanislavsky was particularly influenced by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's troupe, which completed two tours through Russia in 1885 and 1890. Their emphasis on antiquarianism in costumes and set design heavily influenced the development of psychological realism at the MKhT. The centrality of the Saxe-Meiningen stage director, Ludwig Cronegk, and his insistence on detailed rehearsal periods is also a quality Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko strove to emulate in their theatre.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 147.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 173-182.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 176; Nikolai Gorchakov, *Theater in Soviet Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 23.

The Moscow Art Theatre revolutionized the way plays were developed and performed. Their practices demonstrated a radical shift from the outdated practices of the Imperial theatres.

Stanislavsky himself phrased the mission statement of the MKhT in terms of a protest, saying:

We protested against the old manner of acting, against theatricalism, false pathos, declamation, artificiality in acting, bad staging and décor conventions, the emphasis on new productions that spoiled the ensemble work, the whole system of presentations, and the insignificant repertoires of the time.<sup>22</sup>

All of the negative characteristics listed here by Stanislavsky were, of course, indicative of the Imperial State theatres' production practices at the time.

The MKhT charged itself with updating and revolutionizing contemporary theatrical practices. The idea of a different set designed specifically for each production, inspired by the German Saxe-Meiningen troupe, was first introduced there. Nemirovich-Danchenko, too, did much to establish the stage director as the leading authority in the theatre. Lengthy rehearsals and dress rehearsals also became standard, whereas the Imperial theatres patched together full productions within a few days of rehearsal. This meant an insistence on quality of productions over quantity of the repertoire. Between 1904 and 1917, for example, the Imperial Alexandrinsky theatre staged 394 plays whereas the MKhT produced only 70 plays between the time of its conception and the revolution.<sup>23</sup>

This reduction of the quantity of plays in the repertoire came at a price. During the years before the revolution, the MKhT was often on shaky financial grounds. The theatre's founders had set

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>23</sup> Frame, *School for Citizens*, 180.

out to fund it as a joint-stock holding company, but eventually became dependent on Savva Morozov, a noble patron and former owner of the Mamontov Private Opera, for funding. After his death in 1905, the MKhT funded itself with extensive tours through Europe, where their practices of psychological realism heavily impacted the development of European theatre.<sup>24</sup>

Arguably, the Moscow Art Theatre's most long-lasting contribution to Russian theatre is its emphasis on realistic artistic design and performance. However, the innovation that most fascinated its founder was that of "psychological realism" or "psychological profundity." Stanislavsky would pursue this idea even beyond the walls of the MKhT in his later experiments.<sup>25</sup>

The growing professionalization of theatre was, in a way, fired in the flames of the 1905 revolution. The reasons for the revolution are many. Increasing industrialization and modernization from the 1860s onward necessitated the organization of the empire into a standardized administrative bureaucracy. The changes associated with the expanding bureaucracy created an unstable and shifting society in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Russia had the highest growth rates in industrialization in all of Europe in the 1890s. The prime sectors of industrialization included railway construction, mining, textile production, and sugar industries. This development was funded by both newly formed Russian financial institutions and foreign capital. Although industrialization was completely dependent on the output of the agricultural world of the peasants, this all-important sector of the economy remained largely untouched by

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 178-182.

<sup>25</sup> Gorchakov, *Theatre in Soviet Russia*, 23; Frame, *School for Citizens*, 180.

technological reform. Agricultural development lagged sadly behind, putting an enormous strain on peasant communities.<sup>26</sup>

The rift between the industrialized urban areas and the impoverished rural sectors of the country was illustrated by the famine that ravaged the countryside in 1891 and 1892. Due to a particularly bad crop, peasants were unable to produce enough food to keep their families fed. As a result, rural communities were thrown into chaos. Zemstvos, the local peasant governing bodies, gained strength as they attempted to organize relief efforts. Members of the intelligentsia also went to the countryside in large numbers to assist. Try as they might, these educated, wealthy philosophes could not create a real connection with the peasantry, who were extremely distrustful towards them.<sup>27</sup>

The embarrassing loss of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 seemed to bring all of the country's problems to a head. The economic disparity between urbanized areas and the rural countryside was vast. On January 9, 1905, a group of demonstrators gathered outside of the Winter Palace to express their discontent. Their intent, importantly, was not to overthrow the government, but to petition the tsar to take action regarding the extreme poverty of the lower classes. Sadly, due to a misunderstanding on the part of the government which perceived them as revolutionaries, the demonstrators were gunned down. The image of the ruler as "Grandfather Tsar" was forever shattered by this action.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History* (London: Pearson Publishing, 2001), 283, 303.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union* (Waukegan, IL: Fontana Press, 1990), 398.

<sup>28</sup> Frame, *School for Citizens*, 187; Kappeler, *The Russian Empire*, 329-330.

The whole of Russia reacted to the events of January 9<sup>th</sup>, dubbing the day, Bloody Sunday.

Although winter crept in and greatly reduced the opportunity for staged protests, the spirit of activism grew as information regarding the events of Bloody Sunday circulated. It is important to mention that, within most groups, the conversation at this point in time was not at all focused on any notion of a complete overthrow of the government. The vast majority of people simply wanted to implement reforms to the current governing system that would ensure them more personal and professional rights. At this point in time, the focus was on reforming the existing structures instead of forging new ones.

In October, the country's workers went on strike. Fledgling labor unions and professional groups organized massive strikes among their members. Although the group itself never officially condoned the strike, some members of the Russian Theatre Organization (RTO) participated in it, closing the doors of their theatres. Many others remained open but voiced their concerns in different ways. Some RTO members organized themselves into smaller collectives and issued statements demanding reforms. One of these statements, entitled, "The Needs of the Russian Theatre," was published in *The Word*, a popular newspaper, in February of 1905. According to the artists who drafted it, "material insecurity and administrative oppression hinder[ed] the theatre in its enlightening and social mission." Artists clamored for more self-regulation and less strict censorship.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Frame, *School for Citizens*, 190; Paul du Quenoy, *Stage Fright: Politics and the Performing Arts in Late Imperial Russia* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 145-146.

Because of its refusal to directly petition the government, theatre artists began pulling away from the RTO. The more established the organization became, the more it came to be regarded as a bureaucratic tool of the government, loyal to the tsarist state. Nevertheless, the RTO certainly played a large part in the establishment of a theatrical civil society. The existence of this society is evident by the theatre strikes of October 1905 and the clamor for change evident in pamphlets like “The Needs of the Russian Theatre.”

The growing political involvement of theatre artists is evident in political pamphlets, such as the one drawn up by a loose confederation of theatre people at the Panaev Theatre on October 20, 1905. Unlike “The Needs of the Russian Theatre,” this petition did not concern itself exclusively with theatrical reform. The Panaev Theatre petition called for the abolition of capital punishment, amnesty for political criminals that had been wrongly arrested, and the development of a constituent assembly “based on the direct, secret, equal, and universal suffrage for the drawing up of regulations regarding the structure of the state.”<sup>30</sup>

The demands of the Panaev Theatre petition were echoed by protesting organizations all over Russia. Most of these organizations were pacified when Nicholas II released his October Manifesto, promising a limited number of rights to the people, including the reduction of workday hours and the establishment of the Duma. Most protestors accepted these reforms; however, satisfaction was not universal. The St. Petersburg Soviet, in particular, was eager to continue the strike, though due to a lack of popular support, this was not possible.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Frame, *School for Citizens*, 190-192.

<sup>31</sup> Du Quenoy, *Stage Fright*, 170.

As it often does, rapid reform of society led to a discussion of theatrical reform and the ideological role of the theatre. As innovative as the Moscow Art Theatre had been in the period before the 1905 revolution, some critics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to find fault with its practices. Valery Bryusov, a collaborator of Vsevolod Meyerhold, criticized the Moscow Art Theatre in his “Against Naturalism in the Theatre.” Bryusov argued against the realism represented at the MKhT in favor of the concept of “deliberate conventionalization.” Instead of expending unnecessary effort on the realistic recreation of historically accurate sets, Bryusov argued for the suggestion of truth through the means of artistic convention. He praised factory theatres for their use of convention, which was in reality not a matter of artistic conception but one of necessity, due to their insufficient and uncertain funding. Bryusov also advocated a return to the classical conventions of the ancient Greek and Roman theatres.<sup>32</sup>

Vyacheslav Ivanov, one of Bryusov’s contemporaries, also refuted the Moscow Art Theatre’s focus on realism and agreed with his insistence on traditional forms; however, he looked to the medieval mystery plays to promote “collective action.” For Ivanov, the theatre could potentially become the most powerful of all the arts. He fully believed it was capable of replacing the Church as a force of unity, which had lost much of its luster due to its unyielding support of the tsarist government. Ivanov believed that by encouraging collective action in the theatre, a spiritual community could be formed in which bourgeois commercialism would be destroyed in a kind of “majestic liturgy.” He suggested this could be possible if certain theatrical conventions were embraced, namely open staging, the unification of the acting and audience space, choral singing, and group dancing. While Ivanov’s ideas were seen as providing for a “hasty

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<sup>32</sup> David Krasner, *Theatre in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2007), 330.

popularization” of the theatre by his contemporaries, later Soviet authorities were quick to implement his theories.<sup>33</sup>

After all, Ivanov’s ideas do not differ greatly from the efforts of thinkers such as Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Bazarov. These intellectuals strove to endow scientific socialism with the same religiosity and ardent belief that was characteristic of the Russian Orthodox faith. Even Ivanov’s statement that, “Theatre has nothing to do with aesthetics; it serves not beauty but the good and the true,” seems to echo the positivism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century intelligentsia.<sup>34</sup>

Bryusov and Ivanov were only two of a plethora of philosophers, poets, and others artists that began to theorize about the theatre following the revolution of 1905. Most of the people involved in the debate about the theatre of the future were either newly acquainted with the professional theatre or were outside of it entirely. Nevertheless, they debated incessantly. Books such as *Kniga o Novom Teatre (Book on the New Theatre)* edited by Alexander Benois, *Krizis Teatra (The Theatre in Crisis)*, and *V Sporakh o Teatre (In Debate on Theatre)* furthered the discussion on the role of the stage within society.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically, all of the discussion about the theatre in the years immediately following the Revolution of 1905 was accompanied by a great repression of theatre’s political voice. In the wake of the 1905 revolution, political messages were not well received by the censorship authorities. This resulted in the abandonment of contemporary drama and, instead, the staging of

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<sup>33</sup> Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 9-10.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

classical literary works of Nikolai Gogol, Aleksandr Pushkin, and Ivan Turgenev. Many of Fyodor Dostoevsky's works were adapted into plays during these years. Stagings of Wagner's operas also became very popular. The theatre was very much a reflection of classical Russian literature, so much so that Mayakovsky declared, "contemporary theatre only functions as the enslaver of the word and the poet."<sup>36</sup>

With this declaration, Mayakovsky launched Russian Futurism. Similar to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Italian Futurism in that its proponents wanted to sever all ties with previous aesthetic traditions, the Russian futurists scorned literary plays. They praised speed and the cult of dynamism like the Italians; however, Russian futurism had a more emotional component. Themes of love and anti-war were very popular among the Futurists, probably because of the growing tension in the Baltic region leading up to World War I.<sup>37</sup>

The first Russian Futurist plays were performed December 2-4, 1913 in Petersburg's Luna Park Theatre. Both productions, mounted by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Mikhail Matyushin respectively, sought to create new, prophetic acting styles and shared themes of deep resentment of "bourgeois mediocrity and the regimented mechanization of civilization."<sup>38</sup>

*Victory Over the Sun*, the first of the Futurist plays to be presented to the public, was directed by Matyushkin. The backdrops for the production, painted by Kazimir Malevich, utilize only geometric forms and contain no indication of place. It is almost as though the audience is

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

intended to receive the story of the play allegorically; it is the events themselves that are significant, not the location of the story. The costume for the production consisted of grotesque portrayals of militarized characters that were intended to foretell the results of future wars. The play alludes to a time when humanity has transcended above war. This is typical of the anti-war themes that were central to Russian Futurism.<sup>39</sup>

*Vladimir Mayakovsky*, titled after its author, director, and lead actor, presented a slightly different rendition of Russian Futurism. The backdrop, designed by Pavel Filonov, consisted of a series of panels vaguely indicating city streets, but there was a conscious confusion and abstractness about them that provided for an uncertain location of action for the play. Actors clad in white clothing carried cardboard cutouts of allegorically named characters such as, “The Man With No Head.” This literal presentation of character pointed both at the artifice of theatre and offered a critique on the futility of Realistic theatre’s insistence on “living” characters.<sup>40</sup>

Russian Futurism seems, in some ways, to embody the pre-revolutionary sense of eminent struggle. These plays were permeated by the “presentiment of impending catastrophe and seethed with hatred for the ‘fat men’ who were hiding in their ‘shell-like’ houses and surreptitiously preparing to turn mankind into ‘red meat.’” It is not difficult to see why many components of Russian Futurism were adopted by Soviet innovators after the revolution.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 14.

As the Russian Futurists were working on their first productions, another pre-revolutionary theatre innovator, Alexander Tairov, was simultaneously developing his own aesthetic style. Although he was labeled a Futurist by contemporary theatre critics, Tairov saw himself as conducting his own experiments separate from the Futurist collective. Tairov's dissatisfaction with the established theatrical conventions of the pre-revolutionary period are summed up in his statement that, "At the [Moscow] Art Theatre, the actor is in the end only a slave to the writer, and in Meyerhold's Theatre only a slave to the artist-designer." Tairov wanted to establish a theatre for actors.<sup>42</sup>

For inspiration, Tairov turned to a traditional Italian form, *commedia dell'arte*. He embraced polarized genres of tragedy and comedy. His productions were very geometrically clean and linear, as is evident in their costume and set designs. Above all, Tairov emphasized a distance from the everyday in his theatre. Rudnitsky says of his performances:

Tairov's work existed only on the stage, there it was everything. The proscenium arch rigidly defined its boundaries, its edges. All productions were arranged in the firm belief that beyond the line of the proscenium there is nothing and can be nothing.<sup>43</sup>

Probably the most obvious of Tairov's influences was that of the ballet. He was heavily influenced by Mikhail Fokine of the Diaghilev Ballet, who introduced him to the principles of balletic staging in which the floor is largely clear and center stage is empty. This kind of staging allowed, in Tairov's words, for the "poetry of the body" to be clearly exhibited. It also made it easier to underscore the centrality of the heroine (always played by Alisa Koonen, Tairov's

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16.

favorite actress) by placing her center stage. Balletic staging was nicely wedded to Tairov's desire for geometric clarity in his productions.<sup>44</sup>

The first production in which Tairov's vision is clearly presented is *Sakuntala*, an ancient Indian drama he presented at the Kamerny theatre in December of 1914. Balletic staging was clearly used to promote geometric clarity and the centrality of the heroine. Tairov's designer, Aleksandr Ekster, painted costumes onto the nude bodies of the actors in order to preserve the "principle nakedness of the body." The play itself was mythological exoticism and had nothing at all in common with the social reality of Russia on the brink of World War I, and this was exactly to Tairov's liking. His belief in the separation of the actor and audience spheres is evident in both his staging practices and his choice of material.<sup>45</sup>

Both Tairov and the Futurists were similar in their absolute refusal of moderate theatrical forms. Other theatre professionals, however, experimented with ideas that were slightly less sensational and spectacle-based. Konstantin Stanislavsky and his former student Vsevolod Meyerhold are often painted as complete opposites, with Stanislavsky portrayed a traditionalist and Meyerhold being a radical student rebelling against his teacher's instructions. The reality, however, is that these two figures were far more similar than is usually assumed by scholars.

Both Meyerhold and Stanislavsky were alike in their avoidance of the "dynamism" associated with the Futurist movement. In the years leading up to the Revolution of 1917, both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were dividing their efforts between large prestigious theatres and small

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 17.

experimental studios where they developed and refined theories while working intimately with small circles of actors. Both artists became dissatisfied with the large theatres despite their relative financial security because it did not allow for experimentation. In the words of theatre historian Konstantin Rudnitsky,

The machinery of a stable theatre is cumbersome, and because it depends on the box office and immediate success it therefore automatically orients itself toward the best results achieved yesterday or the day before. It is not interested in innovation.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the two artists led a double life, working in the large theatres in order to fund their efforts in smaller studio environments.

Stanislavsky opened the First Studio with the express intention of experimental and pedagogical purposes employed in the development of his “system,” which he based on the premise of emotional realism. Stanislavsky believed his system to be a new way of working with actors that would allow them to capture and experience “truth” and “integrity of feeling.” He had attempted to develop the system within the MKhT during rehearsals for its 1911 production of *Hamlet*; however, he met with extreme resistance from the actors. Thus, he built a new, smaller theatre which he populated with young, fresh talent. The Studio was never intended to rehearse plays for public production. In reality, the First Studio, in Stanislavsky’s mind was less of a theatre and more of a “creative laboratory.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite Stanislavsky’s original intent, his students began directing shows themselves, eager to demonstrate their grasp of the system. This led to the emergence of several extremely important

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 20.

theatre artists including Evgeny Vakhtangov, Richard Boleslavsky, Alexei Popov, and Mikhail Chekhov. Unfortunately, it also led to the development of the First Studio as a kind of second branch of the MKhT, producing shows for public consumption. Stanislavsky was later forced to open the Second and Third Studios of the MKht, still searching for an experimental workshop.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the progress that was seen in the development of Stanislavsky's system within the First Studio, not everyone expressed confidence. Nemirovich-Danchenko expressed extreme doubt in the practical viability of Stanislavsky's theories. He feared that the intimate emotional realism that had been developed in the smaller Studio venue could not be transferred to larger theatres such as the MKhT. In a letter from February 1917, Nemirovich-Danchenko warns his partner, writing,

[In the Studio] the performers do not have to force either their voices or their feelings and hence preserve sincerity and individuality in their purest form... but all this is possible *only* in an intimate situation, here, in the Studio, only in intimacy... it is simply another form of theatre. And the more ideal it is, the more fragile—fragile in both a spiritual sense and in the sense of rupture—is its link with the art of the large theatre, in its present form.<sup>49</sup>

While Stanislavsky primarily concerned himself with the inner workings of the actor and the ideals of emotional realism, Meyerhold was fascinated “first and foremost by the external- visual and aural, sculptural and musical side of the theatre.” Meyerhold called himself a traditionalist and built a platform for his Studio on Borodinskaya Street accordingly. He renounced what he saw as the futile reproduction of a past time period in the realistic detail or artistic style of that period and instead emphasized the beauty and magnificence of spectacle as opposed to historical accuracy. In fact, he was so passionate about this point that he allowed for open renunciations of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 22.

realism declared openly in front of and addressed to spectators during performances. Meyerhold employed symmetrical sets and staging with a frontal emphasis in blocking. Unlike Tairov, however, Meyerhold had a tendency to merge the space of the stage with that of the auditorium through scenic and lighting blending.<sup>50</sup>

This blending of the audience and acting spaces was evidence in his first production, *Masquerade*, which Meyerhold staged as a “tragedy within the frame of a carnival.” Both the audience space and the onstage set were covered in gilded surfaces with plenty of ornamentation. His rebellion against literary focus in theatre was evident by his use of fragmented monologue, which presented a blatant irreverence for the word.<sup>51</sup>

Above all, Meyerhold sought “the cultivation of an all-powerful actor whose strength and power would lie in his ability to compel his body to express what it had to express and his voice to convey what it had to convey.” It was precisely this motivation that encouraged the artist’s first experimentations with the ideas that would form the roots of his biomechanics program for actor training. Interestingly enough, these experiments with physicality were inspired by mime and commedia dell’arte, two forms that were the polar opposites of the literary drama that was commercially popular at the time of Meyerhold’s experiments.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike Stanislavsky’s First Studio, Meyerhold’s “creative laboratory” remained just that. As the Studio’s artistic leader, Meyerhold remained in control of its trajectory. The Studio on

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 23.

Borodinskaya Street continued to house its director's experimentations well into the revolutionary period.

It is important to note that the experiments of the newly emerging avant-garde were built upon the theatrical machinery already in place in Russia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However different the productions of Meyerhold, Tairov, and other experimenters seemed to be from the productions of the Imperial theatres, they would not have been possible without the 19<sup>th</sup> century evolution of a legitimate theatrical civil society.

This society of professional theatre artists recognized the winds of change and assumed an active role in the shaping of a society they perceived as shifting. The Russian theatre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was already in the process of adapting itself into a kind of learning institution similar to the vision of Peter the Great and Catherine, in which citizens could educate themselves about society and morality. Different from Peter's vision, though, was this new theatre's avoidance of prescribed European ideologies. The avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was already embarking on its own path of innovation and experimentation, separate from European ideals. Interestingly enough, though, many of their early experiments utilized traditional European forms that they then re-appropriated to suit their own purposes.

The impact of this period in Russian theatre on the theatre of the revolution is often downplayed by scholars. Its significance is clearly represented by the number of theories concerning the theatre that abound in the pre-revolutionary era. Psychological realism, emotional realism, Meyerhold's traditionalism, and Futurist expression and formalism are all vastly different ideas

with differing trajectories. The further development of these ideas in the Soviet period is dependent upon the political, economic, and social conditions of that time.

## Act II: Revolution as Theatrical Culture

The year 1917 found an unhappy Russia teetering on the precipice of revolution. The February uprising had necessitated the official abdication of Tsar Nicholas II on March 15, 1917, and the Provisional Government, headed by Alexander Kerensky, was unable to quiet the ever-increasing voice of dissent within the troubled nation. The reasons for discontent were manifold.

The initial goal of the revolution was to bring the values and organs of popular sovereignty to a nation whose heritage, by and large, included little to no history of such bureaucracy. The existence of a centrally elected parliament complete with political parties was a relatively new invention, originating with the recent 1905 revolution. In the wake of the tsar's abdication and the renunciation of absolute monarchy, the revolutionaries looked toward the only government institutions of any legitimacy in the country: the soviets. Soviets were essentially glorified town councils, and had been in existence since the days of the 1905 revolution. It was not the most developed legacy off of which to establish a legitimate government, but it was, essentially, the only one present. Thus, the Provisional Government, a group comprised of mostly military leaders and members of the intelligentsia, seized upon the opportunity to align itself with the soviets.<sup>53</sup>

It was established that the Petrograd Soviet (considered the largest and most well-organized soviet at the time) would rule equally with the Provisional Government under the principle of "dual power." In practice, however, this was not exactly the case. The Provisional Government

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<sup>53</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

began to undermine the authority of the Petrograd Soviet more and more. This was not driven by, as some critics suggest, a power-hungry desire to consolidate power, but was rather an action that grew out of necessity. The people clamored for change, and detailed communication with the Petrograd Soviet crippled the Provisional Government's ability to achieve the desired progress.

The notion of defending the revolution also became a very real threat when tsarist sympathizers emerged, challenging the legitimacy of the Provisional Government. War also put a huge strain on the newly instated government bodies. Russia's involvement in World War I had been a large factor leading to the overthrowing of the tsar, and it continued to be a problem during the days of the Provisional Government. Russia was tired. The revolution had promised her people a way out of the war and the Provisional Government now seemed to be standing in the way of that end. Huge anti-war demonstrations such as the July Days (July 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>) of 1917 were a perfect illustration of popular discontent in Russia within the years of the Provisional Government.<sup>54</sup>

In all actuality, the war was a much-hated strain on Kerensky's government. He would have gladly retreated, but for fear of losing Russia the recognition of the other nations involved in the struggle. Kerensky and his advisors knew that much would be lost by pulling out of the war and earning the scorn of the Allies, especially considering the fact that Russia might need foreign assistance in modernizing and industrializing itself. For these reasons, Kerensky danced around the issue of war, but it was arguably this issue that was most instrumental in causing his downfall.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 51.

On October 26, 1917, the Bolshevik party, bolstered by the support of many anti-war worker factions, led the soviets to overthrow the Provisional Government in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, immediately seized upon and consolidated power, establishing their government as the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

It just so happened that not everyone was in agreement with that sentiment. Civil war broke out on a massive scale. The Red Armies of the Bolsheviks, organized from various workers’ militias and led by Leon Trotsky, faced off with the White army, a group made up of Provisional Government and Tsarist supporters. In addition, the Reds and Whites both found themselves fighting the Green Army of the countryside, comprised mainly of peasants fighting for independent land rights. The result was not far from total chaos.

Despite their best efforts, the Whites did not meet with success. After three bloody, brutal years of civil war that devastated both the people and resources of Russia, they were forced to surrender.

The importance of the Russian Civil War to the trajectory of the revolution cannot be overstated. The culture and climate of militarized internal warfare established long-lasting features of the society born out of this struggle.

First, internal warfare created enemies out of friends. Families were split along generational lines, the older members usually being less radical supporters of Kerensky’s government and the

younger members finding inspiration in the more radical messages of Bolshevik liberation. Thus, the splitting of the nation was accompanied by the splitting of the family. This was accompanied by the destruction of trust within revolutionary Russia. The perceived need for vigilance against spies, traitors, and the like became a legitimate concern. This cult of paranoia established by civil war would later be expanded and heightened by the show trials and purges of the Stalinist period.

Secondly, and equally importantly, the Civil War provided the necessary context for the Party to assume total dominance over the soviets, thereby setting up a precedent of Party supremacy.

Because of the need to mobilize militias, implement martial law, and plan military strategies was paramount, the soviets were temporarily subordinated to the organs of the state. Party supremacy later became structurally permanent because of the need for extensive government planning associated with worker education. It is because of this process that Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that “the dictatorship of the proletariat was quickly transformed into a dictatorship of the Party.” The process itself is, of course, completely contradictory to true Marxist doctrine, but it is important to remember, especially in the case of Soviet Russia, that governments evolve out of the conditions that provide for them.<sup>55</sup>

The Bolsheviks relied on certain nationalistic ideology to build the strong central government necessitated by the Civil War. The very presence of this nationalism was a contradiction of Marxist ideology, which emphasizes international proletarian brotherhood and denounces both nationalism and strong central governments as fracturing forces which prevent rule by the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7.

proletariat. In a way, the centrality of nationalism to the Bolshevik cause undercut their victory in the war. A story is told by survivors of the civil war that points at these contradictions.

Two Russians, both enemies of the Bolshevik regime, were having a conversation while observing Red Army troops. One of the Russians observed that “we won”—that is, that the White cause had actually won. His interlocutor was puzzled because he could find no logic in the statement, for the soldiers they were observing were not White troops but Red troops. The other man disagreed, pointing out that the external symbols that inspired the Red Army (such as the red star) or even their political affiliation were not important. The most important thing was the White idea: Russia must remain a powerful state backed by a strong, disciplined military force. And it was precisely this quality that he saw before him. He remarked that he had not seen such well-disciplined troops with such fighting spirit in the Russian army since the beginning of World War I.<sup>56</sup>

This newly emerged sense of Russian nationalism was to play a huge role in both the centralization of Bolshevik party politics as well as the eventual Stalinist social reality.

But what does all of this mean for theatre? Where does the avant-garde fall within this ever-shifting context of social and political revolution?

Theatre in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia exploded with shapes, forms, and methods because the need for it was arguably greater than had ever been experienced in the country’s history. The newly established Soviet government faced a nation divided upon political, economic, social, and even religious lines, and the Party’s goals of Marxist utopia were more than idealistic considering the current conditions of the vast majority of citizens. Lenin believed, in this case as a true Marxist would, that the cultural and spiritual conversion of the masses to Bolshevik beliefs would serve as a vital underpinning for all the facets of the Soviet government. The need for a theatre specifically employed in the education of the proletariat was therefore central to the survival of

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<sup>56</sup> Vladimir N. Brovkin, “Bolshevism, Nationalism, and Statism: Soviet Ideology in Formation,” in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*, ed. Vladimir Brovkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 276.

the Bolshevik revolution in its early years. The rifts caused by the Civil War had to be mended, and for this, authorities turned to the theatre. Consequently, theatre became more than an element of the social climate of the times, but also assumed a role as an important factor within the political culture of early Soviet Russia as well.

But why did the responsibility of educating proletarians fall primarily on the shoulders of the theatre? Despite the fact that the last decade of tsarist rule was fraught with eventful happenings which had created a strong demand for printed materials (the Russo-Japanese War, the 1905 Revolution, Stolypin's land reforms), the literacy levels of the majority of the population were still destructively low.

The problem of illiteracy had been exacerbated by the Bolsheviks' establishment of a command economy during the Civil War. War communism caused small, independent commercialized newspapers, many of which were located in the provinces, to crumble. The effect can be seen by comparing the 2,000 to 3,000 operational bookstores in pre-revolutionary Russia to the meager several hundred still in existence in 1922.<sup>57</sup>

Illiteracy cannot be blamed upon the shortage of printed materials alone, however pressing the problem of printing and distribution may have been. Education had not been a concern in the countryside, where peasants farmed for a living, and thus, a large part of Russia's illiterate population was made up of peasants. Richard Stites relates a story of a 1922 government inquiry

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<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey B. Brooks, "The Breakdown in the Production and Distribution of Printed Material," in *Bolshevik Culture*, ed. Abbott Gleason (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 152-154.

in which it was revealed that Soviet newspapers were being widely used as cigarette papers by peasants who could not comprehend them.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the education of the people fell to oral tradition, in short, to the theatre. In the early years, there were three main groups to whom the Bolsheviks addressed their “Bolshevizing” mission. The most obvious of the three, of course, is the proletariat. The vast majority of the people considered to be proletarians were unacquainted with Bolshevik ideology. Interestingly enough, the education (or in this case, the *re*-education) of former Whites was also a priority of the newly established Bolshevik regime. Unlike the later years of the regime, in which enemy elements were simply removed from the equation by means of imprisonment, murder, or exile, the early Soviet government dedicated itself to providing for the conversion of former White-supporters to Bolshevik values, in part by means of the theatre. This is an important difference between the early years of Soviet rule and the era of Stalinism that will be discussed at length later.

Arguably the most important group within early Soviet Russia that was in need of an education in Bolshevik values were the Party members themselves. The Party had not held a significant, consistent majority of votes during the pre-revolutionary period. After the revolution, its membership swelled with members of the newfound proletariat, consisting mostly of uneducated first-generation workers whose roots lay not too far from the peasant classes.

By examining theatre within the context of ideological education and nation-building, it is easy to understand why the Bolsheviks moved so quickly to centralize theatres. All state theatres were

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42.

nationalized on November 9, 1917, a mere two weeks after the Bolshevik takeover. On August 26, 1919, the Bolsheviks pronounced all theatrical holdings to be under the ownership of the state, liquidating all private ownership over such enterprises.

The centralization of theatres reveals the extent of the Bolshevik leaders' acknowledgement of their importance. By centralizing all theatres under their control, Bolshevik leadership could control the messages they broadcast.

### **Nikolai Evreinov and the Culture of Mass Festivals**

For reasons that have already been discussed, the Bolsheviks looked toward theatre to unite the new nation at the close of the Civil War. They saw the stage as “an altar on which is sacrificed the old social evil in order to purge the community of unrighteousness that they may enter upon a new epoch animated by the new spirit.” In no other form is this idea so clearly personified as in the Bolshevik mass festivals immediately following the Civil War.<sup>59</sup>

The Bolshevik festivals were huge events which required massive amounts of people and soldiers to take part in the action. Usually occurring on public streets, the dramatized parades included processions, outdoor movies, museums, concerts, and choral performances. All members of the proletariat were invited to engage in the playing out of historical revolutionary victory (as this was the common theme of the pieces).

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<sup>59</sup> Spencer Golub, *Evreinov: Theatre of Paradox and Transformation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 92.

Plays often got their history wrong in order to paint an empowering picture of the Bolshevik victory. “Just as the Bolsheviks sacrificed old principles in the interests of a new identity, directors sacrificed historical veracity in the interests of myth.”<sup>60</sup> Though they criticized the past for its cowardice and primitive nature, they found in it a wealth of romantic heroes that could be extracted as symbols of Bolshevik victory.<sup>61</sup>

These spectacles were not entirely unique in their form or their aims. They drew upon many centuries of public governmental ceremonies. In his book, *Revolutionary Dreams*, Richard Stites states that “the Russian revolution drew on a rich tradition of ritual culture, of forms, traditions, and motifs rooted in the past. Of greatest antiquity were the survival of pagan festivals, song and dance, lewd carnivals, bear ceremonies, ritual burnings of stylized devils and the like.”

Ritualized Orthodox Church festivals had also been a huge part of Russian culture. The ceremonial parades of the Romanov dynasty, too, had a hand in shaping the new theatrical aesthetic as these events held a sense of pageantry and presentationalism not so dissimilar from the massive performance festivals that evolved under the Bolsheviks’ reign. “Common euphoria” and “collective emotion” were also engendered during the public funeral services that had been held in the early days of the Civil War to commemorate deceased soldiers. The ceremonial interment for the 184 White Army soldiers killed in Petrograd during early revolutionary upheavals was the first secular outdoor, all-class ceremony without a single, central charismatic figure as focus in Russian history.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 178.

<sup>61</sup> Golub, *Evreinov: The Theatre of Paradox*, 195.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 79-80.

The festival culture of the Bolsheviks was responsible for popularizing performance in many ways. The tastes of the upper classes had long governed trends in Russian theatres, but the mass performances sought to destroy that particular status quo. Several of these early theatrical events are worth specific investigation.

In March 12, 1919 a Red Army theatre troupe put on a version of “The Fall of the Autocracy” which was one of the first large-scale historical pageants of the revolution. In the performance, actor-soldiers representing the autocracy and the Revolution spoke lines taken from the press, sang, and simulated combat. The soldiers, of course, portrayed themselves as heroes and made idiots out of the upper classes. This performance was repeated around Petrograd 250 times in seven months. It was out of these grassroots experimentations in the Red Army and Proletkult theatre workshops in 1919 that the mass spectacles emerged.<sup>63</sup>

In a very similar production, the Theater and Drama Workshop presented “The Third International” on May Day 1919. The performance consisted of staged slogans about the revolution, the end of tyrants, the burial of martyrs, and the people’s hope for a world of peace. It was the first outdoor revolutionary pageant ever staged.<sup>64</sup>

All the outdoor performances of the Civil War period seem to lead directly toward the last great mass spectacle. Directed by Sergei Evreinov, “The Storming of Winter Palace” was performed on Palace Square with no less than 6,000 performers on November 7, 1920. The military

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 94.

provided most of the cast and also served as an organizational model for rehearsals. Actors were divided into platoons. Each platoon leader communicated with the leaders of other squadrons through the use of military signals and field telephones.<sup>65</sup> The group was seen as a “mass protagonist” by Evreinov, and its prominence was symbolic of the victory of the proletarian masses as a whole.<sup>66</sup>

Festivals taught many average Soviet citizens about performing, but they also drained the country’s coffers and required the work release of many people during the rehearsal process. Why, during a Civil War, would a nation’s government be so insistent on diverting resources away from the cause? What placed these festivals on the Bolshevik agenda at all during times of war?

“Festivals were a bid for political legitimacy, an attempt to lend the Revolution a sacred aura.” The aim was to politicize the masses while at the same time exhorting them to sacrifice their own interests to the common cause. These festivals were meant to instill a passion for socialism within the breasts of the Soviet citizens. One Swedish observer said, “Here [at a Soviet mass spectacle] a person can better understand socialism in his heart in an hour than he can at home in his head after reading a whole library.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>66</sup> Golub, *Evreinov*, 197; F. Deak, “Russian Mass Spectacles,” *The Drama Review* 19, no. 2 (June 1975): 1.

<sup>67</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 209.; David Bradby, *People’s Theatre* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), 45; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 97.

Noted festival historian Spencer Golub has this to say about Bolshevik spectacles: “The people and their leaders both desired a life-centered theatre, the people in the interests of greater liberation and the leaders in the interests of greater control.”<sup>68</sup> For the Bolsheviks, the mass spectacles were needed to gain legitimacy by perpetuating and sustaining a culture of revolution in order to knit Party members with quickly shifting ideologies together. They also provided Russian citizens at large with an arena in which they actively fought for their ideologies; thus, the ideologies of revolution were kept alive in a world largely dominated by capitalism.

“Revolutionary spectacle, emulating religious history and revelation, offered a train of martyrs and a row of messiahs- all marching toward the epiphany of October.”<sup>69</sup> Historical reference allowed the Party to tie together factions that did not wholly agree on Bolshevism, but most certainly believed in Russian nationalism and revolution. It also provided for a grounds of legitimacy by tying the newborn Bolshevik regime to the people’s collective memory of the past, albeit while altering that memory at the same time.<sup>70</sup> For Soviet citizens, these mass spectacles served as a forum for worship during which they gave thanks to the revolution’s martyrs. The theatre had thus become a church of Bolshevism in the face of Civil War. Mass spectacles instructed citizens in the process of theatre and satisfied their hunger for an active role in the performance of statehood. Out of this interest, knowledge, and experience came the powerful and iconic workers’ theatre of the twenties.

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<sup>68</sup> Golub, *Evreinov*, 192.

<sup>69</sup> Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 97.

<sup>70</sup> Golub, *Evreinov*, 191.

## The Workers' Theatre of the 1920s

If the mass spectacles of the Civil War years were meant to validate the legitimacy of the newly established Soviet government, then aim of the workers' theatre movement was clearly to give form to it.

With the end of the Civil War in 1921 and the scaling down of the military budget experienced under the first few months of the New Economic Policy, state funds and mobilized troops were not as available for such mass demonstrations. Thus, it fell to the workers' clubs, factory committees, and unions to organize holiday festivities.<sup>71</sup> This transference of responsibility is accountable for the growth of the first independent theatrical organizations under the umbrella of the workers' movement.

Growing out of a Party school in Capri in 1908, the Proletkult Theatre was founded in 1917 by Alexander Bogdanov. Its theories were largely based on Platon Kerzencev's book *Creative Theatre: The Paths of the Socialist Theatre*.<sup>72</sup> By 1920, this theatre involved more than 80,000 people. The Proletkult Theatre also gave performances at the Front to strengthen the Red Army's morale. They worked mostly with "conventional plays dealing with approved Socialist topics."<sup>73</sup> Proletkult was "more concerned with expressing the new psychology and theatrical instinct of the working class so as to make theatre more democratic."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 211; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> Golub, *Evreinov*, 196.

<sup>73</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 45-46.

<sup>74</sup> Golub, *Evreinov*, 194.

The ROSTA organization provided another example of proletarian theatre inspired by social responsibility. Between 1919 and 1922, Mayakovsky created about 400 posters for the Soviet government.<sup>75</sup> More than 3000 ROSTA posters were produced between 1918 and 1921.<sup>76</sup>

Unfortunately, the fairly low level of literacy among the workers and peasants rendered many of these posters useless.

To combat the literacy problem, Terevsat (the Theatre of Revolutionary Satire) was begun by Pustinin, the director of the Virebsk ROSTA agency in 1919. The group was commissioned by the agitprop department within the Party's central committee to act out the message of the posters in order to "reach both literates and non-literates."<sup>77</sup> They performed in the streets and drew on popular Russian forms such as the operetta, musical revue, vaudeville, and *tchastuchka* or *chastushki* (rhymed popular songs to rhythm).<sup>78</sup> The performances were meant to transmit the government's stance on issues pertinent to citizens and were also used as a means of motivating young men to join the Red Army. Terevsat created the living newspaper form that was later taken up by the more advanced Blue Blouse movement.<sup>79</sup>

The first Blue Blouse troupe was founded by S. Yuzhanin in October 1923 in Moscow.<sup>80</sup> It was taken under the auspices of the Moscow City Council of Trade Unions (MGSPA) in 1924,

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<sup>75</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 46.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain, 1917-1934* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Inc., 1986), 10.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 46-47; Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 46-47.

<sup>80</sup> F. Deak, "Blue Blouse (1923-1928)," *The Drama Review: TDR* 17 (1973): 43.

making the Blue Blouse the official representative of the trade unions' cultural ambitions.<sup>81</sup> In 1928, there were 484 professional troupes and 8,000 amateur ones.<sup>82</sup> Each troupe usually consisted of about twelve actors.<sup>83</sup> At the height of the movement, the Blue Blouse probably involved more than 100,000 people.<sup>84</sup>

As these numbers show, the Blue Blouse, although guided by professionals, was a movement perpetuated by amateurs.<sup>85</sup> Their very name referenced the uniform of the proletarians that filled their ranks. It was the uniform of the worker that was the base costume of the Blue Blouse as well. Although other pieces may have been added as accents occasionally, the blue blouse always remained visible as a symbol of proletarian cultural triumph.<sup>86</sup>

In 1924, Yuzhanin founded the group's bi-weekly magazine, *Sinyaya Bluza* (Blue Blouse). This supplied troupes across the nation with material for performance. The materials provided were always frameworks or scenarios. Importantly, they did not prescribe established bodies of text for performance.<sup>87</sup> The magazine also provided a forum for public discussion of distinct theories that would allow Blue Blouse to make unified decisions on performance forms. Local groups were encouraged to write in to receive published feedback on questions. *Sinyaya Bluza* was the first written community for amateur theatre artists to ever exist in Russia.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>82</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 47; Deak, "Blue Blouse," 46.

<sup>83</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Deak, "Blue Blouse," 36.

<sup>85</sup> Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon*, 43.

<sup>86</sup> Deak, "Blue Blouse," 39.

<sup>87</sup> Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon*, 47; Deak, "Blue Blouse," 46.

The Blue Blouse was geared toward the theatrical clubs that had been popular in the last years of the Russian monarchy. In 1905, there had been about 50,000 of these clubs.<sup>88</sup> The Blue Blouse began performing in these usual union clubs and then moved onto pubs and beer houses where they developed slightly different variations on their forms called “polit-petrushkas,” political Punch and Judys, and “polit-tricks.”<sup>89</sup>

The Blue Blouse pledged to “stir up the feelings of the masses... to agitate... to illuminate their consciousness with the ideals of scientific socialism... to propagandize.”<sup>90</sup> The self-stated goals of the Blue Blouse were to help the worker become fully conscious of his own position, his aims, and the tasks of his class within socialist society; to fill the worker with proletarian solidarity and comradeship; and to draw the worker into the social struggle for the interests of the working class.<sup>91</sup> In many ways, the Blue Blouse used as its rallying call the mission of many groups before it. Bolshevik festivals had been aimed at filling the worker with solidarity and comradeship. The Blue Blouse also adopted many of the staging, acting, choral speaking, singing, visual form, and satirical comedic practices developed in the spectacles. Though the Blue Blouse journal (*Sinyaya Bluza*) claimed in 1925 that the Blue Blouse was the only movement of social significance with respect to ideological influence on the working classes, it drew much of its inspiration in the way of form from its recent predecessors, the Proletkult and Terevsat theatres.<sup>92</sup> The Proletkult had focused intently on recruiting members of the working class. Also the Blue Blouse’s main dramatic form, the living newspaper (which also became

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<sup>88</sup> Bradby, *People’s Theatre*, 47.

<sup>89</sup> Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 3; Deak, “Blue Blouse,” 36.

rampantly popular in the United States around the same time), was taken from the experimentations of the Terevsat. So what made the Blue Blouse troupes special? There are two main characteristics that are unique to the Blue Blouse's development: professionalism and a commitment to experimentation and emphasis on variety.

The Blue Blouse also welcomed many young writers who had been shunned by the "old and backward" theatres of tradition.<sup>93</sup> The years of repression following the 1905 uprising led many artists to a retreat from reality in the arts in favor of writing concerning "dreams [and] illusions" as they sought "transcendence of the real world."<sup>94</sup> These writers helped iron out the theories of the Blue Blouse and provided many frameworks for performances.

Blue Blouse performances lasted about an hour and a half. Dramatic forms employed by the troupes included the monologue; dialogue; mass declamation; domestic and international comic sketches; and the *oratorium*, a dramatic singing at the end of which actors constructed symmetrical forms or symbols such as stars or a factory complex with their bodies. The dance and gymnastics forms included acrobatic and physical dance; complex gymnastic numbers; physical exercises; and collective dances based on the movements of machines. These were usually accompanied by jazz and were performed by two actors. Some skits were organized entirely around posters. Popular folk songs involving topical satire were frequently played during performances. Film was rarely used, but sometimes they experimented with "kino reviews" in which a flickering projector gave the images of motion pictures onstage. Clearly, the emphasis

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<sup>93</sup> Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

was on variety in performance. Also, their easily transformable pieces made their troupes extremely mobile because performances could be re-worked to fit nearly any space.<sup>95</sup>

The prowess of the Blue Blouse was affirmed by its explorations abroad. A Blue Blouse group was sent to perform at the International Workers' Aid Congress in Berlin in October 1927. This performance was said to have inspired groups of workers' theatre in Germany to band together under the name of the Blue Blouse as an act of solidarity between communists.<sup>96</sup>

Despite the far reach of their movement, the Blue Blouse was said to have declined in the early 1930s because their "performances were repetitive, schematic, and superficial."<sup>97</sup> In reality, the decline of the Blue Blouse probably had more to do with Stalin's discomfort at their growing ranks. As the movement grew, amateur groups were out of the control of the government. Their highly politicized subject matter could be destructive to the precious proletarian mindsets the Soviet government sought to control. In order to undercut the movement, government reallocated funding to support the Theatre of Working Class Youth, otherwise known as TRAM, a group that had grown out of the Blue Blouse in recent years. Thanks to the supportive financial backing of the government, there were 60 to 70 TRAMS in the USSR in 1929. By 1932, there were 300.<sup>98</sup> Compared to the nearly 8,500 troupes of the Blue Blouse, this was a much more easily manageable movement. In the end, the Blue Blouse fell into decline specifically because of its popularity and highly political nature. Ironically, these were the very same things that had

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<sup>95</sup> Deak, "Blue Blouse," 37-38.

<sup>96</sup> Bradby, *People's Theatre*, 47; Deak, "Blue Blouse," 46.

<sup>97</sup> Stourac, *Theatre as a Weapon*, 68.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

made it admirable in the decade before. In the swiftly changing political tides of Stalinist Russia, however, no political message could remain unchecked for very long.

The formation and dissemination of Blue Blouse performance and ideology was the crowning achievement in nearly three decades of growing proletarian awareness in the Russian theatre. TRAM was never granted the artistic freedom that proliferated during the time of the Blue Blouse. The workers' theatre movement, which had begun with such promise and enthusiasm, soon became a centralized instrument charged with disseminating official Party rhetoric.

### **The Soviet Avant-Garde**

The workers' theatre movement was largely inspired by theatrical experiments being carried out by the more concentrated avant-garde artists who worked mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the early years of the Revolution. These artists had been experimenting with non-traditional forms such as Futurism and Cubism since around the turn of the century (see Chapter One); however, the Revolution of 1917 had thrust upon them a momentous responsibility. The common hope or belief during the early years of the Soviet Union was that the acceptance of revolutionary culture would result in a new world and new people.<sup>99</sup> In a world of revolutionary change and social upheaval, it was up to the artists of the fledgling Soviet state to define these new people and this new world, and in pursuit of the creation of that definition, theatre itself was revolutionized.

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<sup>99</sup> Christopher Read, "Values, Substitutes, and Institutions: The Cultural Dimension of the Bolshevik Dictatorship," in *Bolshevism in Russian Society*, ed. by Vladimir N. Brovkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 304.

For the purposes of this investigation, theatrical innovation during the pre-Stalinist period will be represented as a spectrum. On one end of the continuum are the established theatres and practitioners of pre-revolutionary Russia. These include the Alexandrinsky theatre, the Maly theatre, and, of course, the Moscow Art Theatre. While in the years following the revolution, the Alexandrinsky and the Maly returned to the classic works of Ostrovsky, Gogol, etc., the M.A.T. retained their standard repertoire consisting primarily of Chekov's work. It was as though the M.A.T. had nothing new to say. Despite the fact that the entire social strata of the country had been turned upside down, it appeared as though Moscow's most well-established theatre remained unchanged. In this way, the M.A.T. came to be seen by many as a respectable, but dead, symbol of traditional pre-revolutionary theatrical practices. Even Yury Sobolev, a critic who was loyal to the M.A.T., wrote,

A Revolution occurred in Russia, it swept by in blizzards and storms, shattering and headlong, but the Art Theatre remained just as it was under the pressure of the threatening waves. It gave very few signs of its participation in Revolutionary contemporaneity. Too quickly it has become a sort of museum, a monument to past culture, carefully preserved and protected.<sup>100</sup>

The naturalistic productions of the M.A.T. stood oddly in contrast with the extreme violence and revolutionary fervor of the Civil War period. In the face of several box office failures including a production of Byron's *Cain*, Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, and Blok's Symbolist drama, *The Rose and the Cross*, Stanislavsky retreated into his studios to continue his experimentations with psychological realism, forsaking the M.A.T. which had relegated itself exclusively to the tradition of the past.

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<sup>100</sup> Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 52.

On the other side of the spectrum, more and more artists were arguing for the liberation and independence of the theatre from the very traditions that the established theatres were commemorating. These artists saw the established theatres as belonging to an outdated era, an era that was irrelevant in the face of the glorious revolution that had taken place in Russia. This spirit of iconoclasm permeated all levels of society, including art, literature, and even architecture. The movement went so far as to reject names associated with religion and the imperial family; new names like Ninel (Lenin spelled backwards) and Marks, Bukharina, Stalina, and Engels were inspired by revolutionary mythology.<sup>101</sup> The violent nature of the iconoclastic spirit can be seen in this poem by V.D. Alexandrovsky, written in 1918, during the height of the Civil War:

Blow up  
Smash to pieces  
The Old World!  
In the heat of battle of the Universal Struggle  
By the glow of flames  
Show  
No mercy--  
Strangle the bony body of destiny!<sup>102</sup>

This kind of iconoclasm can be understood historically as a continued tradition itself. The Nihilist movement of the 1860s and 1870s would have greatly influenced revolutionary iconoclasts, which were only one generation removed from this movement. The Nihilists rejected all past knowledge in favor of the knowledge of science. They virulently rejected any traditions

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<sup>101</sup> Richard Stites, "Iconoclastic Currents in the Russian Revolution: Destroying and Preserving the Past," in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Abbot Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 9.

or cultural customs stemming from the past. The early Soviet avant-garde artists were, in fact, the heirs of the Nihilists, though they themselves would never have seen their own movement as stemming from a pre-existing value system.<sup>103</sup>

It should be mentioned, however, that although the iconoclasts shared a common distaste and disregard for the past, they also consistently measured themselves and their art against the monumental greats of old such as Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Gogol.<sup>104</sup> Also, interestingly enough, many of the most radical theatre-makers frequently turned to the work of Nikolai Gogol for content, despite their apparent abhorrence of classical literature and the spoken word. It is easy to see how Gogol's characteristic style of fragmented and colorful narration, termed *skaz* by the Russian Formalists, lends itself to the expressionistic designs of the early Soviet avant-garde. Productions of classic texts that highlighted and emphasized sympathy for the exploited parties as well as burning contempt for the tyrants were considered to be "in tune with the Revolution," despite the fact that they were texts written and conceived of in the past, a world and time viewed as obsolete by the revolutionary iconoclastic artists.

No other director epitomized the revolutionary spirit of iconoclasm as did Vsevolod Meyerhold. As a young, fresh, highly political, and thoroughly iconoclastic theatre-maker, Meyerhold was diametrically opposed to his former teacher. In fact, the two sustained a long-standing personal feud that lasted until a short time before Meyerhold's death in 1940.<sup>105</sup> Despite their many

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>104</sup> Nicholas Rzhevsky, *The Modern Russian Theater: A Literary and Cultural History* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 51.

<sup>105</sup> *Meyerhold's Theatre and The Biomechanics* (Contemporary Arts Media, Mime Centrum Berlin, 1997).

differences, however, the two men's ultimate goals in the theatre were not all that contrasting. Both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were interested in the external revelation of the truth of the character in relation to society and themselves, however, while Stanislavsky focused on the actor's psychological interpretation of the character, Meyerhold became more and more interested in the connection between external physical conditions and internal emotions. Unlike Stanislavsky, who was reverent of the text and saw it as the originating point for all action and characterization, Meyerhold sought to break all ties with tradition and establish a new theatre of the revolution that embraced the need for wordless action because it created the possibility of a theatre completely independent of literature.<sup>106</sup>

To this end, Meyerhold drew upon the arts of Japanese Kabuki, Italian commedia dell'arte, and mime in his own studio on Borodinskaya Street, established in 1913. His focus was not on "life-like" movement, but rather on deliberate action, action that creates its own rhythm that, in turn, provides both content and form for the piece.<sup>107</sup> In order to better understand the practice of Biomechanics, we will engage in a brief discussion of its parts.

Etudes named after the simple actions they depicted (Throwing the Stone, The Stab with the Dagger, Shooting from the Bow, etc.) were created to develop the desired deliberate movement in the actor. Each etude consisted of four main segments: *dactyl*, *otkas*, *posyl*, and *stoika*. *Dactyl* is essentially a double clap that centers the actor(s) and sets the rhythm of the etude. *Otkas*, meaning resistance, is the preparatory movement in an opposite direction that begins the action. *Posyl*, or, sending, is the execution of the action while *stoika*, meaning stance, is the fixation of

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<sup>106</sup> Meyerhold, *Theatre and The Russian Avant-garde* (Copernicus Films, 2006).

<sup>107</sup> Meyerhold, *Theatre, and The Russian Avant-garde* (Copernicus Films, 2006).

the movement that ends the action. The *dactyl* is then performed again to signal the conclusion of the etude. These elements of the etudes are practiced separately at first and are later joined to create a continuous flow of action. Throughout the etude, actors must maintain *tormos*, personal control of the speed and dynamic of the movement. This control is achieved through conscious weight shifts and muscular tension.<sup>108</sup>

Only after mastering the technicalities of the movements are the actors allowed to add emotion to their movement. Music is added at this point; later masks and text are added to more clearly communicate content. The etudes are, at all times, guided by the principles of space, command of physical objects, and partner sensitivity which are subject to the law of totality, meaning that the entire body works to create each movement demonstrated by the actor. This form of training was, to say the least, intense. The actor practiced the etudes until he internalized the principles of biomechanics as fundamental psycho-physical paradigms, thereby restructuring his entire conception of expression onstage.<sup>109</sup>

Meyerhold's system of Biomechanics was revealed in his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* on April 25, 1922. The production was very well-received. The uniform costumes of the actors were, in fact, adopted as permanent costumes for the members of the national Blue Blouse troupes of workers' theatre.

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<sup>108</sup> *Meyerhold's Theatre and the Biomechanics* (Contemporary Arts Media; Prod by Mime Centrum Berlin, 2007).

<sup>109</sup> *Meyerhold's Theatre and the Biomechanics* (Contemporary Arts Media, Mime Centrum Berlin, 1997).

Meyerhold's emphasis on a theatre grounded in the physical form was carried on by his student, Sergei Radlov, in a slightly less regimented manner. Radlov studied at Meyerhold's studio on Borodinskaya Street from 1913 to 1916, having originally joined the group, interestingly enough, as a poet. After having been instilled with a passion for nontextual-centered theatre, Radlov left the Studio in 1918 to begin teaching himself at the Classes for Mastership of Scenic Productions.<sup>110</sup>

After spearheading the short-lived Theatre of Experimental Productions and organizing several theatrical events in conjunction with and in honor of the Red Army, such as the verse production *The Sword of Peace*, Radlov established what was to be his greatest legacy, the Popular Comedy theatre. Popular Comedy can be understood as the transference of Meyerhold's emphasis on movement and gesture to the spoken word. Unlike Meyerhold, who seemed to declare war on the written word with his expressionistic production design and physicalized staging, Radlov sought to promote actor ownership of the written word through physicality.

In some ways, Radlov's work can be considered an attempt to move new Soviet theatre aesthetic closer to the people. Radlov's audience was comprised of workers; performances took place in the "Iron Hall," an auditorium not intended for formal theatrical performance. It was called "barbaric theatre" by Radlov himself; however, it is probably far more accurate to refer to Radlov's techniques as a "circusization" of the theatre. Clowns, acrobats, and jugglers were invited onstage to perform to audiences' amusement. The stage built within the Iron Hall was actually split into six separate stages by designer Valentina Khodasevich in order to facilitate

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<sup>110</sup> David Zolotnitsky, *Sergei Radlov: The Shakespearian Fate of a Soviet Director* (New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 5.

lightning fast transitions between performances. The effect must have been similar to that of 20<sup>th</sup> century American vaudeville, in which many brief acts follow one another in quick succession.<sup>111</sup>

Radlov perceived himself to be building a theatre that was relatable for the common proletarian. The performance forms included in his productions referenced those of the festival culture present in Russia for many hundreds of years. Contemporary critics, however, alleged that Radlov's theatre of spectacle was greatly at odds with contemporary political life. The early twenties were, after all, a period of great change and violence in Russia, as the devastating Civil War dragged on to a close.<sup>112</sup>

Radlov's theatre masqueraded as a popular theatre with well-defined roots within the culture of the Russian people. What this theatre truly was, was an abstraction of popular culture. Radlov extracted performance aesthetics and even whole forms from the Russian popular theatre and then placed them in the entirely separate context of iconoclastic revolutionary theatre. Without their context, these performance forms appeared hollow to popular audiences, who were familiar with the cultural roots of the forms. In divorcing the circumsized performative elements in his work from their traditions, Radlov effectively nullified the "popular" nature of his theatre.

Arguably, the avant-garde artist whose work was most accessible to the common man during this period was that of Evgeny Vakhtangov. Subscribing to neither the rigid traditionalism of the M.A.T. nor the fiery iconoclasm of the more radical artists of the revolutionary theatre,

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<sup>111</sup> Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 57-58.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

Vakhtangov stood in the center of the spectrum, committed to creating a new and relevant theatre that was also cognizant of its roots and traditions in the past. Vakhtangov did not make it his goal to lobotomize the theatre and create an entirely new entity out of pure revolutionary fervor, but, rather, he elected to utilize his understanding of the cultural roots of the revolutionary theatre to allow him to pull from both tradition and innovation, thereby connecting his performance aesthetic to a deeper consciousness and significance.

Vakhtangov was born in Vladikavkaz in 1883 and worked in student theatre at Moscow State University during his time as part of the Natural Sciences faculty. Vakhtangov pursued his interest in theatre further by attending the Adashev School of Drama in 1909, after which he joined the M.A.T. in 1911. In December of 1918, Vakhtangov established the Third Studio of the M.A.T. in order to carry out his own theatrical experiments.<sup>113</sup>

While it is clear from his personal writings that the artist greatly revered his former teacher, it is obvious that Vakhtangov did not completely agree with Stanislavsky's ideas. In his personal diary entry on March 26, 1921, Vakhtangov exclaims vehemently, "Let naturalism in the theatre die!" But though the language in his entry is similar to the passionate rhetoric of artists like Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, it is clear from his work that Vakhtangov is decidedly not an iconoclast. Importantly, Vakhtangov characterized the revolution not as a definitive break with all tradition, but rather, he conceived of the revolution as an event that was rooted in the Russian past. These beliefs are evident in the artist's desire to explore Meyerhold's ideas of a

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<sup>113</sup> Rebecca B. Gauss, "The Third Studio: The Rebellion of Vakhtangov," in *Lear's Daughters: The Studios of the Moscow Art Theatre from 1905-1927*, ed. Rebecca B. Gauss (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 89; Vera Gottlieb, "Vakhtangov's Musicality: Reassessing Yevgeny Vakhtangov, 1883-1922," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15, no. 2 (June 2005): 260-262.

physicalized, aesthetic centered theatre in order to give the theatre “sharper outlines” without falsifying its truthfulness to the spirit and, importantly, without breaking from Stanislavsky’s ideas concerning the importance of text and character.<sup>114</sup> To this end, Vakhtangov equated actor training to the freeing of the unconscious as well as a cultivation of physical expressiveness.

An actor’s education should enrich his unconscious with a diverse variety of skills; ability to free oneself, to concentrate, be serious, theatrical, artistic, active, expressive, observant, easily adaptable, etc... The unconscious, armed with such an arsenal of means, will forge from the supplied material, an almost perfect product.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, we can understand Vakhtangov’s conception of the physically well-trained body of the actor, as well as the physical aesthetic of the production, as the means and apparatus by which unconscious creativity expressed.

In no other production is Vakhtangov’s theatrical creed more expressive than in his 1922 production of Carlo Gozzi’s *Princess Turandot*. Vakhtangov very consciously utilized the commedia dell’arte form for which the script was written, but revolutionized the approach by having his performers slip in and out of their respective characters in front of the audience. In fact, the play actually began with the curtain drawn. Actors lined up facing the audience and simultaneously changed into the costumes of their characters. In this production, it was clear that the goal of the actors was not only the performance of the story of *Princess Turandot*, but also the illumination of the theatrical illusion they were simultaneously creating. The production was extremely well-received, earning the acclaim of both critics and audiences alike. It was

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 264; Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 53.

<sup>115</sup> Aviv Orani, “Realism in Vakhtangov’s Theatre of Fantasy,” *Theatre Journal* 36, no. 4 (December 1984): 467.

performed over a thousand times after its original opening and is maintained in the repertoire even today.<sup>116</sup>

Ironically, Vakhtangov's crowning moment of achievement in the theatre occurred at the same time as his corporeal demise. For years, he had battled cancer, and the opening night of *Turandot* found him at home, confined to what would soon become his deathbed. The director allegedly sent messengers back and forth to the theatre to report on the audience's reception of the production. After the performance, Stanislavsky commended the members of Vakhtangov's Studio, saying, "In the course of the twenty-three years of its existence the M.A.T. knew very few such victories. You have found, what was for so long and in vain sought by the other theatres." In a message to Vakhtangov, he added, "I am proud of such a student if he is my student. Tell him 'Please wrap up in the blanket as if it were a toga, and sleep with the sleep of a conqueror.'" Sadly, Vakhtangov died just three months later, on the evening of May 29, 1922 at the young age of 39.<sup>117</sup>

Unfortunately, much of the communication between the two ends of the theatrical spectrum ended with Vakhtangov's death. What followed his demise was a steady trend toward abstracted popular theatre and expressionist aesthetic tendencies that were far outside the realm of relatability for most Soviet citizens. Circusization became increasingly physical, and many artists turned to it as a way to get a message across easily. This propagandist element of circus performance became increasingly important in the years leading up to Stalin's Cultural

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<sup>116</sup> Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 55.

<sup>117</sup> Orani, "Realism in Vakhtangov's," 479-480.

Revolution of 1928 when cultivating proletarian consciousness among the largely illiterate peasant farmers became a secondary goal of collectivization.<sup>118</sup>

The avant-garde was represented as the theatre of the revolution, entirely different and modernized. It was supposed to be a theatre of the people, raised, created, and administered by the proletariat. Frankly, however, much of the avant-garde's experimental work was out of the reach of understanding for the common Soviet worker, who didn't really have a taste for it.<sup>119</sup> Popular forms suffered from their extraction from pre-revolutionary cultural context, and thus became strange distortions onstage.

Doctrinally, the avant-garde tended to be vague and rhetorical because it allowed them to refuse association with any kind of roots in tradition. They advocated the development of proletarian culture and ideals, and yet, the actual fraction of avant-garde artists that arose from the proletariat was laughably miniscule. Despite their desires to foster proletarian concern for the theatre, the avant-garde remained an arena for those of the intellectual class.

However miraculously, proletarian culture did develop, with or without the assistance of the avant-garde, and its desire to communicate itself among the working class necessitated "realistic" content and form in order to create an easily understandable message. Whereas the avant-garde worked primarily within the arcane language of modernism and absurdism, proletarian culture yearned more and more for an easily approachable theatre and the

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<sup>118</sup> Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 52.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

government came to desire a more standardized method of indoctrination. Thus, socialist realism was born out of the twin flames of popular discontent and governmental regulation.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Stites, "Iconoclastic Currents," 13.

### **Act III: The Blame Game and the Innovative Legacy of the Revolutionary Soviet Avant-Garde**

#### **The Construction of Cultural Revolution**

It is a great folly within the historiography of the Stalinist era that initiatives, movements, and mandates are commonly over-personalized, particularly those that relate to culture and cultural reform. In a regime in which so much personal harm has been done, it is easy to understand how these personal approaches to understanding cultural development become prevalent. By virtue of Stalin's dominant personality, it is easy to perceive him as the driving factor in Soviet policy-making and cultural development. But furthering such an assumption would be relegating oneself to the cultural constructs that define the period which one is studying, and essentially falling prey to the cult of Stalinism oneself. This is the problem inherent in the works of historians such as Robert Conquest and, to a degree, Sheila Fitzpatrick. Too much agency is given to the singular figure of Stalin in the discussion of 1930s cultural reform in the Soviet Union.

This identification of the fallibility of this historiographical trend, however, is not meant to be accompanied by an insinuation that Stalin had no hand in cultural development whatsoever. Rather, what is sought is a hybridization of approaches. Scholars such as Katerina Clark have argued that Stalin, rather than originating and initiating Soviet culture of the 1930s, selected the main ideas he found politically efficient from an existing pool of thriving cultural strains and supported the continuance of those concepts at the expense of others. Thus, Stalin can be understood to be operating from *within* the cultural system—not *above* it. This concept of Stalin's political editing of existing cultural ideas, is identified by Clark's general body of work

and, more specifically, in her 2011 work, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*. I intend to apply Clark's broad theoretical statement about the political editing of culture to my specific study of the decline of Soviet avant-garde theatre in order to illuminate the parties responsible for the rise and established dominance of socialist realism in the theatre.

Any good student of the Soviet Union should recognize that the year 1928 signaled a turning point in the course of revolutionary culture. It was in this year that Stalin introduced his first Five Year Plan, and, many historians have argued, his intentions for Cultural Revolution. Exactly what this cultural shift which would provide for unparalleled production would be was uncertain. In his speech in June of the same year, Stalin stressed the importance of self-criticism with regard to nation-building, a cultural strain that was extremely prevalent across all revolutionary art forms, saying,

The slogan of self-criticism must not be regarded as something temporary and transient. Self-criticism is a specific method, a Bolshevik method, of training the forces of the Party and of the working class generally in the spirit of revolutionary development.<sup>121</sup>

Stalin's praise of self-criticism seems to foreshadow the evolution of a cultural construct in which the arts could function as a critical element of self-reflection and introspection within the national context. The artistic environment that actually emerged during the 1930s, however, was far from this insinuation of free and deliberate doctrinal discussion. So how did this happen?

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<sup>121</sup> "Against Vulgarising the Slogan of Self-Criticism," J. V. Stalin Internet Library, accessed February 3, 2013, <http://marx2mao.com/Stalin/Index.html>.

The Civil War was well over in the mid-twenties, but the revolutionary spirit lingered. Although the memory of the brutal fighting and the personal sadness of many who had lost loved ones was certainly still present, especially in the countryside, where most of the fighting was at its worst, Lenin's New Economic Policy had created a stable enough state to legitimize power and center authority in the Party. However, revolutionary culture kept alive the fires of the revolutionary temperament, calling upon citizens to remain active in their pursuit of universal revolution, to tear down bourgeois institutions, and to build up the strength of the proletariat.

After Lenin's death in 1924 and the scramble for power amongst certain Party elites that followed his passing, there was a definite need for a reorganization of power and a rejuvenated legitimization of the government. Lenin had been a godlike figure of the revolution, appearing on countless revolutionary posters and pamphlets. His passing was a devastating blow to the revolutionary spirit.

Josef Stalin, through a series of complicated political intrigues, seized power in the late 1920s and proceeded to administer a reorganization of society. Claiming to be Lenin's chosen successor, Stalin earned legitimacy by aligning himself as closely with the revolutionary leader as possible. Stalin, in a move that was against all of Lenin's beliefs in a revolution disconnected from specific personalities and idol-worship, created the cult of Lenin, turning the revolutionary leader into a symbol of international revolution. He concurrently began working on his own cult of personality, which he connected to Lenin's supposed selection of him as leader. If Lenin was God of the revolution, Stalin marketed himself as its Jesus. In truth, Lenin had been highly suspect of this young upstart before his death.

Regardless of Lenin's personal will, Stalin was able to consolidate power in his personage and in 1928, he launched his first large modernizing initiative in the Soviet Union. In order to achieve such a monumental task in a country that was decades behind the rest of Europe, Stalin saw a definite need for cultural order, stability, and uniformity within society. Thus, the Stalinist Cultural Revolution had its motive.

The difference between revolutionary and Stalinist cultural ideology can be summed up fairly simply in the latter's lack of action verbs. Revolutionary propaganda displayed figurative representations of the peasantry and proletariat *in action*. This stress on *active involvement* in the process of nation-building distinguishes revolutionary propaganda from that of later periods. These posters are organized and well-balanced in their aesthetic and rely not on the active motions we see in revolutionary posters, but rather, they portray a stoic, solid, statuesque visage. This stance mirrors the intended solidity of the ideal Soviet citizen under Stalin. The societal order, organization, and uniformity reinforced by such propaganda were necessary in order to support Stalinist modernization and industrialization.

As the concept of the ideal Soviet man and woman hardened into Stalinist political dogma, more and more responsibility was placed on cultural arenas as a place of instruction in societal roles. Stalin himself called upon artists as "engineers of the human soul" in a speech made to the Union of Soviet Writers in preparation for their first Congress, stating that "the production of souls is more important than the production of tanks."<sup>122</sup> Clearly Stalin understood well that the production of tanks was entirely dependent upon the production of souls. The theatre, too, was

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<sup>122</sup> Joseph Stalin, "Speech at the Home of Maxim Gorky: 26 October 1932," J. V. Stalin Internet Library, accessed February 3, 2013, <http://marx2mao.com/Stalin/Index.html>.

pulled into the struggle for the souls of the Soviet citizen and in late 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet theatre experienced a dramatic shift from experimental, avant-garde aesthetics to the doctrine of socialist realism.

The development of socialist realism as an artistic philosophy is attributed to Maxim Gorky (28 March 1868 – 18 June 1936). Persecuted and even exiled under tsarist rule, Gorky found more acceptance under Stalin as the doctrinal leader of the socialist realist movement in the arts. His “On Socialist Realism” pamphlet, a result of a speech given at the 1934 Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, inspired the entire genre of socialist realism, which fully permeated the literature, theatre, film, and visual arts of the Stalinist period.

Socialist realism in the theatre effectively signaled a turn toward the aesthetics of the tsarist period. Experiments with theatrical form both conceptually and aesthetically, were abandoned. Meyerhold’s Biomechanics and constructivist explorations came to a screeching halt when, on June 20, 1939, he was arrested and internally exiled to the Gulag prison camps for questioning. Several weeks later his second wife, Zinaida Reich, was found stabbed to death in the couple’s home in Moscow. Meyerhold was sentenced to death on February 2, 1940 and was executed by firing squad the next day. Meyerhold’s arrest and execution was indicative of a large wave of purges, initiated in 1937, that targeted members of the ‘bourgeois’ intelligentsia and sent millions of artists, writers, and theatre-makers to the Gulag work camps where they would toil in poverty and starvation.

Meyerhold's experience can be seen as a metaphor for the death of the avant-garde in Stalinist Russia. Throughout the '30s avant-garde theatre was falling increasingly out of favor as socialist realism gained popularity amongst the proletariat.<sup>123</sup> Because the Moscow Art Theatre's naturalistic approach adapted well to the aesthetics of socialist realism, it, in a sense, reclaimed its pre-revolutionary popularity during the 1930s.<sup>124</sup>

Both the product and process of these productions differed greatly from what was observed in the revolutionary theatre. Scholars agree that the theatre of the late 1920s and early 1930s heralded a definite shift in cultural dominancy. What is heavily debated, however, is the issue of who is responsible for this shift. Historians such as Robert Tucker, for instance, would likely argue that Stalin himself imposed the change, that the doctrine of socialist realism was forced upon the backs of unwilling theatre-makers. However, to further such a concept would be to agree that Stalin had complete control over all aspects of life in Stalinist Russia, which, when one studies the entire period in its minute, personal detail, would be a fallacy. Rather, socialist realism was one of a multitude of extant cultural philosophies that Stalin selectively favored and for which he provided opportunities through special government aid and support. Stalin did not invent socialist realism, but he did give it plenty of assistance.

The evidence for an evolutionary theory of the emergence of socialist realism stands in defiance to Stalincentric interpretations of the Cultural Revolution. Gorky's famous novel, *Mother*, is considered to be the first novel of the genre of socialist realism. This novel was originally written

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<sup>123</sup> Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 266.

<sup>124</sup> Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, 270.

in 1906 and contributed to Gorky's exile under tsarist rule. The novel, importantly, was written well before the era of Stalinism, yet, it contained significant elements of socialist realism.

The larger evidence of the evolutionary development of socialist realism remains more abstract and lies within the credo of the revolutionary avant-garde. The spectrum of iconoclasm in avant-garde theatre created a polarized conception of revolution and tradition. The virulent iconoclasm embraced by much of the avant-garde distanced their work from the comprehension of the masses. In order for audiences to understand the deconstruction of a traditional concept, they must first have a grasp of the tradition itself. In their attempts to eradicate tradition and abstract their work from the Russian theatrical legacy in order to build a new theatre of the revolution, these artists largely fell short of inspiring the masses. Thus, the tragedy of the avant-garde is seen through their partial responsibility for their own demise.

Gorky highlights this lack of tradition in culture in a speech, given in August of 1934 to the Union of Soviet Writers.

We should know about everything that existed in the past – not in the way it has already been narrated, but as this illuminated: by the teaching of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, which is being realized by work in the factories and on the farms, work which is organized and guided by a new force in history – by the will and reason of the proletariat of the Union of Socialist Republics.

Such, in my view, is the task of the Writers Union. Our congress should be not only a report to our readers, not only a parade of our endowments; it should take upon itself the organization of literature, the training of young writers on work of nation-wide significance, aimed at a full knowledge of our country's past and present.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Maxim Gorky, "Soviet Literature: 1934," Marxist Internet Archive, accessed February 13, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm>.

Gorky's speech refers to a culture that does not reject the past, but rather reinterprets and recontextualizes it in a manner that is understandable and educative for the proletariat. This is what the ambitious avant-garde had failed to do.

### **The Path of Innovation**

The death of the avant-garde did not signify the complete disappearance of its innovations. The experimental forms explored by revolutionary artists lived on through subversive means during the Stalinist period. Although socialist realism remained unchallenged as the official artistic doctrine of the state, forms similar to and inspired by the work of the revolutionary avant-garde continued to be explored in several important Stalinist subcultures.

The first, and probably most astounding of these subcultures is that of the Gulag. Prisons had existed in Siberia ever since the first Russian expeditions discovered and conquered this remote territory in the name of the empire in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Tsars utilized Siberia as a land of exile to which they could relegate the most dangerous of political criminals who threatened their rule. However, during the Stalinist period, the number of Siberian prison camps multiplied and expanded into a chain known in modern times as the Gulag.

Various waves of purges, not the least of which being the Great Purges of 1937, populated these prisons with various political prisoners identified by authorities as enemies of the people. These new prisoners were unlike others that had previously occupied the prisons of Siberia in that many of them were members of the former upper class or educated professionals belonging to the intelligentsia. Many of the Stalinist political prisoners had been privileged, cultured

individuals belonging to the upper crust of Party society. Thus, it is not entirely unbelievable that a special kind of theatre emerged even there, in the midst of the Gulag prison camps.

It is believed that prison theatre arose from a tradition. Fyodor Dostoevsky mentions the existence of theatrical productions within Siberian prisons in his novel, *The House of the Dead*. Published in 1861, this work functions as a loosely knit memoir of Dostoevsky's own time in prison exile during the tsarist period. The book is a conglomeration of fact and fiction detailing the lives of Siberian convicts. An entire chapter is dedicated to the subject of a certain Christmas day performance of "The Theatricals."<sup>126</sup>

Though it is known that this theatrical culture did apparently continue and develop further within the Gulag prisons of the Stalinist period, there has been very little written about its specific nature. It remains a vastly underexplored area of Stalinist historiography, most likely due to the lack of available source materials. Due to harsh prison conditions, the number of extant texts that mention such theatrical events are few. However, several memoirs have been written that allude to the existence of a Gulag theatre tradition, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and Tamara Petkevich's *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress*.

As of yet, there are no extant Gulag theatre scripts. Much of what we know about these performances has been gleaned from what can be found in memoirs, such as those listed above, which have been written after the author has been released. Texts of this sort are almost always

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<sup>126</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead and Poor Folk* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2004), 149.

affected by the flashback effect, a distortion of memories due to the time that has passed since the initial event and the experiences of the individual since the event took place. Authors' personal biases must be considered as well. Scholars must be wary of these weaknesses inherent in these kinds of sources; however, that does not mean that these personal recollections are not our most valuable assets in the investigation of Gulag culture.

Èmigrè theatre, too, carried on the legacy of the revolutionary avant-garde. Laurence Senelick studies this phenomenon extensively in his *Wandering Stars: Russian Èmigré Theatre, 1905-1940*. Senelick's study details the contributions of émigré artists, such as Sergei Eisenstein, to their host countries. In the case of Eisenstein, as in the case of many others, the revolutionary avant-garde aesthetics inherent in his work enjoyed a fair amount of success abroad.

## Conclusion

The Russian theatrical tradition was a strong one, heavily influenced by governmental authorities, and providing little agency to independent theatre-makers. The monarchical theatrical system established from theatre's earliest beginnings in tsarist Russia did not provide for artistic freedom and indigenous Russian nationalist spirit because of its preoccupation with the Westernizing and Enlightenment agendas of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. Once tsarist control was removed through the course of revolution, the following period was bound to explode with innovative potential and avant-garde experimentation.

The monarchical theatrical system that had strained for its own independence and indigenous pride under the old aristocracy burst wide open during the revolution. Due to the desperate need of the Bolshevik party to rally support and create some kind of legitimization among the people and the Party's preoccupation with the seizure of power and the bloody, ongoing Civil War, theatre was afforded unprecedented opportunities for experimentation and growth. The revolution had created a new world in which the monarchy had been overturned in favor of rule by the people.

This was a world in which the popular, indigenous Russian art and culture that had so long struggled under the tsarist structure could finally flourish due to the intense Russian nationalism associated with the revolution. Russia was now an advanced state of the future, destined to bring the rest of the world to the light of communism and rule by the proletariat. Revolutionary theatre was infused with a sense of a new beginning, and it was this excitement, coupled with a great

responsibility to educate the new proletarian rulers of the world that inspired the experimentations of the revolutionary avant-garde. Interestingly enough, this sense of theatre as a tool for the education of the public seems to be a direct ideological inheritance from the pre-revolutionary theatre tradition and Catherine's efforts to cultivate the theatre as a school of moral education.

In the end, revolutionary artists' own desires to separate themselves from the past through virulent iconoclasm and rejection of the Russian theatrical legacy resulted in the alienation of the people whom they strove to educate. In short, the avant-garde moved too quickly. They hadn't prepared their audiences for the work they were creating and thus, they unintentionally estranged them. In an ironic twist of fate, the same theatrical system that had, just, forty years earlier strained and struggled for its own professional autonomy, fell victim to a strikingly similar system of monarchical governmental censorship and control that it had experienced under tsarist rule. Under Stalinism, theatre was, once again, placed under the yoke of the government as a tool for political indoctrination.

Although the nature, inspiration, and devastating effects of extreme revolutionary iconoclasm have been illuminated by the research presented here, many questions remain for scholars to investigate. Though the literature on the aesthetics of the revolutionary avant-garde abounds, significant scholarly research on the paths of these innovations after the Stalinist Cultural Revolution has yet to be seen. Gulag theatre, to which I have alluded in my own research, is a rapidly expanding field of study that is just now beginning to be accessed by Western historians. However, much of the material has not been translated into English and, thus, remains out of

reach for the vast majority of Westerners. In addition, children's theatre in Russia has yet to be fully analyzed and investigated for its connection to revolutionary avant-garde aesthetics.

Though they are sure to yield satisfying new discoveries regarding the perseverance of artistic ingenuity and innovation, any scholar interested in entering these fields of research should be aware of their inherent difficulties. The Soviet state's censorship and destruction of materials that were deemed dangerous provides an almost ceaseless source of frustration to researchers. Because of this practice primary sources can appear disconnected and sometimes do not exist at all.

Despite all of these challenges, the subculture of theatrical innovation in Stalinist Russia is a burgeoning field that is attracting more and more scholars. The findings of these researchers are capable of expanding our knowledge of the true cultural climate of Stalinism and the theatrical legacy created by the avant-garde independent of the Russian theatrical tradition. Though there are obstacles to be faced, today's theatre and cultural historians may well be capable, through a study of the subverted theatrical innovations of the revolutionary avant-garde, of greatly expanding our understanding of the rebellious, innovative theatrical subculture of Stalinist Russia as well as the expanding trajectory of the Russian theatrical tradition.

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