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Socialist Realist Theatre in the Soviet Union in the 1930s: Forming a Social Identity

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to use the socialist realist theatre example to examine the theatre's ability to form social identities.

This is a difficult task because, for a start, the theory has failed – thus far – to give socialist realism a single definition. Very often, socialist realism was solely related to its political connotations and judged as such, a fact that often compromised research findings and underestimated the complexity of the phenomenon. This thesis addresses this shortcoming and follows more recent research, which indicates that early post-revolution socialist realism constituted a distinct artistic movement with its distinguishable traits.

From this perspective, the present thesis reports on whether the critical analysis received by socialist realist theatre during the first decades after the Revolution constitutes evidence of the formative power of theatre. In other words, the thesis investigates to what extent the debate on the aesthetics of the new socialist theatre – during the 1920s and 1930s – shaped the social characteristics of the public.

The thesis aims to enable theatre practitioners and theorists today to understand the relationship between the social needs of people and theatre's ability to function as the vehicle for achieving them. Using two leading theatres (the Meyerhold Theatre, and the Moscow Art Theatre) of the time (1928-1939) as case studies, this thesis demonstrates that – in both cases – the theatre directors were both implementers and interpreters of their understanding of this new socialist world, and examines the role of the reviews received in light of this interpretation.

Finally, the significance of this study is that it expands our theoretical understanding of how theatre operates as the driving force in the formation of the social identity of any given audience, at any given historical time.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines the correlation between society and theatre. It tries to determine the extent to which theatre is capable of forming specific social characteristics to its audience, in relation with its contemporary economic and social changes. Thus, from a more general viewpoint, it attempts to understand how economic and social changes affect the way we see theatre and our expectations from it. The thesis uses the cases of the Meyerhold Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre to understand how the critical reviews of socialist realism and the aspirations of its theorists managed to shape the social traits of the public.

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Note on transliteration

The transliteration system used throughout the main text is ISO 9:1995. This does not, however, apply to the well-known names where there is an existing accepted English form.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and literature review

Introduction

Over the years, the issue of socialist realism has received considerable critical attention and has led to innumerable definitions, often highly contradictory to each other. The literature review that follows shows that scholars still do not conform to one commonly accepted description of socialist realism. From terms such as ‘method’, ‘doctrine’, ‘dogma’, ‘movement’, to different theories on how it has been formulated or what its connection is with the great Russian cultural past, different wordings created contradictions that often hindered its investigation. As Gary Saul Morson observes: ‘for understandable reasons, most discussions on socialist realism resemble elegies more than analyses. [...] There is, or should be, room for the sort of analysis that would treat socialist realism as a literary fact, not simply an unfortunate political consequence, without being accused of apologizing for it’¹. In addition, in more recent years, and from a socio-political perspective, the dissipation of the Cold War atmosphere, which had polarized every aspect of social life and seemed like a permanent fixture in global politics (Service, 2015), along with the overthrowing of the socialist system in the former U.S.S.R., have encouraged new approaches to socialist realism and stimulated new efforts in systematizing this highly complicated and composite phenomenon.

¹ Morson, p. 121.

Apart from political and historical constrictions, however, the theatre of socialist realism, in particular, has been even more understudied. For diverse reasons, its research has been in and of itself highly challenging. ‘As distinct from painting, architecture, sculpture, poetry, prose or music’ says Konstantin Rudnitsky in the preface of one of the most essential works on the Russian and Soviet theatre *Russian & Soviet Theatre: Tradition & Avant-Garde*, ‘the art of the theatre is always, by its very nature, contemporary and cannot live a full-blooded existence outside its own time’². Except from its contemporaneity, other practical reasons, such as the lack (until recently) of scientific tools in examining performances, along with the controversial and much disputed subject of socialist realism itself, added up to this challenge. However, models of analysis of a theatre performance that have been inserted in the academic field in the last few decades, such as Patrice Pavis’ *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film* (2003) and Erica Fisher Lichte’s *The Semiotics of Theater* (1992), have provided scholars with new methodological tools that improved the examination both of the final production of a mise-en-scene but also of its roots of elaboration. Peripheral components and supplementary documents such as theatre programmes, production books, press releases, photographs, videos have been set forward as integral parts of the examination of a theatre performance. In addition, the development of theatre studies not only systematized the study of each part of the theatrical phenomenon but, more significantly, showed the importance of studying them as a whole. It enriched the reception of the final product with more aspects, such as the building of the theatre, the space of the stage, the actors’ bodies, movements, and expressions, and the dramatic structure and form as a whole. It also examined the performance as part of its historical moment and as a social event. Finally, it turned the gaze of researchers from the stage to the auditorium, paying detailed attention to audience perception of the performance, identifying its presence as the ultimate trait of any performance. Above all, it established the significance of studying all these aspects in an interdisciplinary way, as this is exactly what theatre is. In the *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, Christopher Balme notes that:

This change in nomenclature reflected a shift in focus towards the theatrical performance as the central object of study, from both contemporary and historical perspectives. The name change [theatre studies] also signalled a break away from literary studies, of which drama was seen as a part. This did not mean that dramatic

² Rudnitsky, p. 7.

texts were no longer studied (on the contrary), but it did indicate that they were just one—and perhaps not even the most important—part of a more complex cultural phenomenon.³

The present research combines these developments and attempts to form a new approach to socialist realist theatre viewing it as ‘a complex cultural phenomenon’. By combining interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, such as theatre studies, Literature, Russian History, and Marxist Philosophy, this research intends to illuminate how theatre can and does affect the formation of the social characteristics in any given society. With this approach, it is argued that theatre played such an important role in the formation of socialist identity that it became vital to understand how it did so, generating, in its turn, an investigation into contemporary Audience Theories⁴ too. In a broader context, this type of approach can enhance with significant knowledge the theoretical examination of how economic and social systems influence theatre and vice versa.

Chronologically, the research covers the years between the implementation of the First Five Year Plan by Stalin in 1928 until just before the start of World War II. During these years, the Soviet Union had undergone an outstanding economic and industrial growth that triggered major cultural changes⁵. This thesis focuses on two distinguished theatres (Meyerhold’s and Moscow Art Theatre - MAT) and their leading figures: Vsevolod Meyerhold, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.

It is divided into five chapters. The rest of Chapter 1 reviews the academic research on socialist realism published to date and introduces the readers to those theatre studies theories that may help them understand why theatre played such a significant role in the formation of the new socialist identity. Specifically, the literature review illuminates the gap in research on socialist realist theatre as an independent⁶ phenomenon (meaning as a movement with its own characteristics) and uses literary theories on socialist realism to portray the different concepts that it has been given by scholars. Chapter 2 portrays the social and artistic circumstances under which this new aesthetic current emerged and how its two main theoretical figures (Anatoly Lunacharsky and Maxim Gorky), in both their pre- and post-revolutionary work, shaped what

³ Balme, p. 11.

⁴ e.g., (i) Auslander, (ii) Bennett 1997, (iii) Bennett 2012, (iv) Boenisch.

⁵ This is manifested in works such as: (i) Lynn Mally 1996, and (ii) Bohlinger.

⁶ The term ‘independent’ refers to socialist realism as a movement with its own discernible characteristics.

was thereafter known as ‘socialist realism’. Chapters 3 and 4 follow the productions of Meyerhold’s Theatre and Moscow Art Theatre - respectively, the critical commentaries and observations to which they were subjected, and what they both did to improve their practice accordingly. The final chapter summarizes the findings and shapes our understanding of the significant role theatre plays in the formation of a social identity.

By recognizing the reciprocal influence between the state, as the official exponent of ideology, and the theatre, as a ‘complex cultural phenomenon’, the present study detects their dynamic relationship and their mutual cultural and ideological exchanges. Such an approach seems vital if we are to advance our knowledge of the various factors that affect and shape theatre, whether socialist or not, whether under socialism or not. It is also important in order to comprehend the very function of theatre in creating and cultivating consciousness, in educating, in entertaining, in evoking political thought. The study of socialist realism aims to provide an understanding of what political theatre means⁷, how are its goals defined, and how it could become more effective in achieving them.

The investigation of socialist realism in the USSR, in particular, is essential because it was the place where it was initially perceived as an independent phenomenon. It is of such great interest mostly because it was, from the very beginning, meant to support and nurture the socialist system, whilst outside the Soviet Union (and in non-socialist countries), it was a theatre in the hands of those who fought against the current (i.e., capitalist) system. The principal theme—class struggle—is common in both cases but it is clearly expressed differently when the class in power is the proletariat and when it is not. By establishing what socialist realism meant under socialism, it could be further developed into an investigation of the differences between socialist realism when being created under socialism and under capitalism.

Literature review

To date, the studies that have investigated socialist realism have focused on examining by large other kinds of art. For instance, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the Soviet socialist realist novel (Clark 1981; Gutkin 1999). Other studies have focused on socialist

⁷ The term ‘political’ is being used as that kind of theatre that addresses current social issues and calls –either directly or indirectly– for action.

realist music, architecture, and fine arts, especially painting (Bek 2004; Paperny 2002; Rusnock 2010). So far, whilst extensive research has been carried out on the Soviet theatre (Rybakov 1967; Rudnitsky 1988) or drama (Roberts 1965; Kearns 1988), very little attention has been paid to the socialist realist theatre as an independent phenomenon. For the aforementioned reasons, the following review focuses more on literary theories than theatre, in an effort to portray the dialogue on how scholars have seen socialist realism so far; a dialogue, interestingly enough, which is still ongoing. In addition, this review largely constitutes a study of English language material. Regarding its time-scope, the literature was examined by taking into consideration when it was written, in order to assess the potential tone or even bias of the writer. In terms of structure, the review is divided into two main sections. The first section examines the limited literature dedicated specifically to socialist realist theatre. The second surveys the more general scholarship on socialist realism. By comparing, contrasting, and evaluating the major theories, this section seeks to illuminate the four different definitions with which scholars have related socialist realism. These definitions, as identified by the research that follows, are: (a) Socialist realism as a totalitarian art; (b) Socialist realism as the natural evolution of the nineteenth century artistic investigations; (c) Socialist realism as the Avant-Garde descendant and/or problem-solver; and (d) Socialist realism as a canon transcending time and place.

a. Socialist realist theatre

Starting this review from theatre, research on the existing literature revealed that a systematic understanding of how theatre contributed to socialist realism and vice versa is still lacking. Nonetheless, a seminal study in this area is Lynn Mally's 1993 article 'Autonomous Theater and the Origins of Socialist Realism: The 1932 Olympiad of Autonomous Art', which identified how socialist realism altered the Soviet theatre scenes. In this article, she examined an event formally called 'The Olympiad of Autonomous Art' that took place in Moscow in August of 1932. She noted that this Olympiad was the result of an ongoing discussion on the role of the autonomous theatre in the new Soviet society and, more importantly, that this 'Olympiad' initiated a debate on what that the role of theatre should be under the new banner of socialist realism. The latter was not to be officially presented until two years later, but it was already being inserted into the cultural debate. Mally suggested that the emerging and

⁸ Mally 1993, pp. 198-212.

enormously rich phenomenon of the autonomous theatre was in line with the need that occurred after the successful end of the first Five-Year Plan, for ‘centralization and professionalization’⁹. From this perspective, the autonomous theatre, which had won the reputation of being superior to professional theatre because of its innovative approach to current events and its absolute disengagement from the previous regime, was at the same time seen as inferior to the professional theatre because of its ‘poor preparation, miserable scripts and outright hackwork (*khal'tura*)’ [sic]¹⁰. These autonomous theatre groups were deliberately avoiding old plays, accusing them of being inappropriate for the new Soviet age. On the other hand, new plays were in short supply, hence the need to improvise and to create their own scripts¹¹. But these scripts were poor, shallow in political commentary and annoyingly similar to each other¹². A way out of this amateurism was not commonly accepted. Some officials, among them Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissariat of Enlightenment, proposed that the solution was to go ‘Back to Ostrovsky’¹³ and to seek inspiration from the classics¹⁴. Similarly, it was also suggested that if these amateur groups were working in close relationship with the professional ones, they could just “borrow” good scripts to work with¹⁵. Those who supported the belief that autonomous theatre was a different form and had to maintain its autonomy suggested that these theatres should turn to “small” theatrical forms—satire, the grotesque, mime, circus, and vaudeville¹⁶. After the Decree of April 1932, which replaced all artistic organizations with official equivalents, the debate over the autonomous theatre ended in a suggestion that these theatres, in order to overcome the poor quality of their productions, should focus on new playwrights and classical plays and that they should consider approaching the political themes more artistically¹⁷. Mally insightfully concluded that this decision had two sides. On the one hand, it substantially supported these small groups in their advancement towards professionalism, which would, in turn, help ‘to educate proletarian audience[s] to the

⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 200.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A campaign, launched in 1923 by Lunacharsky, that provoked the best directors of the period to make new creations of Ostrovsky's plays.

¹⁴ Mally 1993, p. 200.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 210.

classics'¹⁸. However, some of its authentic and experimental expression might have been lost forever¹⁹.

Interestingly, this article is amongst the very few which is exclusively dedicated to examining the relationship between theatre and socialist realism. Whenever socialist realist theatre has been examined previously, it was usually in the form of a brief presentation within a general study on Soviet theatre or, at best, it was a full chapter within a wider research agenda. Significant examples of this kind of approach are portrayed below and further prove the need for a research with a specific focus on the complexity of factors that created the socialist realist theatre.

The case of Marc Slonim is indicative, whose main focus was on the pre-revolution theatre, and who dedicated one chapter to the investigation of the socialist realist theatre (Slonim, 1963). Although the title of that chapter refers to “theatre” in general, the main proof Slonim used to link theatre and socialist realism was the plays, namely, the written scripts. He did refer to the performances as such too, but only in passing, eliminating again the study of theatre to only one of its aspects, i.e., the plays. What is interesting, however, about his extended commentary on the staged plays, is the illumination that this permutation of socialist realism brought to the repertoire of the academic theatres. Slonim used the plays to illustrate how socialist realism found its way into the theatre, meaning that socialist realism was firstly a theoretical investigation which was integrated into the plays first and then, by the act of staging those plays, into the theatre as a whole. Although limited to a single theatrical feature (the text), Slonim’s work is very well-informed. There is even evidence of this difficulty of defining socialist realism in the first place. However, Slonim’s book is also indicative of a commonly biased approach towards socialist realism. It seems rather easy to suggest, as Slonim does, that the censorship and the Party’s intervention was responsible for all the deficiencies in the Soviet theatre while the good plays were the ones evading this policy.

Going even further, other scholars employed extra-theatrical, almost irrelevant, tools to tackle the issue. For example, Inna Solovyova focused on convincing her readers that the interference of the Communist Party with the actual theatrical production led to the minimization of free

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁹ Mally also gives a much more extended look into the work of the amateur and autonomous theatrical scene in her book, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

creation²⁰. Besides missing the argument (examining the socialist realist theatre and its performances), she also weakens the proof of her own thesis (the elimination of free creation), as the facts and analyses of the performances she offers are inadequate. She states, for example, that free creation was impossible because one of the major tactics the socialist state employed to control the production was to set it under state financial control and, therefore, have the power to promote only what it found convenient²¹. This claim manifests, on the one hand, ignorance towards how a socialist state works. There was never any doubt that theatre would not have come under the state's financial control. On the other hand, it suggests that, it is only under Socialism that art falls under the state's financial control. However, the Soviet government was no less famous for its censorship than the Tsarist government was before it or even today's western governments when there is an openly pro-Communist play to be staged. The main disadvantage of studies as biased as Solovyova's is that it is often very hard to distinguish the reliable information from personal opinions.

Finally, Macleod, in examining the *new* Soviet theatre, researched theatre productions of his time, both big and small, quite extensively in an effort to describe and define what socialist realism in theatre is or is not. To establish a major difference between the theatre of socialist realism and any other 'middle-class' theatre, Macleod asserted that 'socialist realism in the theatre [was] only possible with a socialist audience'²². He advanced this argument as a proof that realism in socialist realism is different only because the audience is different. Only a socialist audience can turn the on-stage drama into socialist realism. Although he insightfully inserted the audience's perception in his investigation of socialist realism, a closer look at the subsequent literature shows that his main point—i.e., that the socialist audience determines socialist realism—is in fact hard to prove. In its context, however (the early 1940s), this misconception should not devalue the importance of his research on the Soviet theatre of socialist realism at that early stage.

The scholars that have investigated in the Soviet theatrical scene of the era in question and without specializing in socialist realism include Laurence Senelick's *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* and *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters* (both in 2014), Spencer Golub's *The Recurrence of Fate-Theatre and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (1994), Nikolai

²⁰ Solovyova, pp. 325-357.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²² Macleod, p. 21.

Gorchakov's *The Theater in Soviet Russia* (1957), and Andre Van Gyseghem's *Theatre in Soviet Russia* (1943). Robert Russell's *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism* (1990), and Robert Leach's *Revolutionary Theatre* (1994) studies focus only on the theatre of the first years after the Revolution. The Soviet and socialist realist drama from a literary point of view have been covered by—among others—Harold Segel, in his *Twentieth-century Russian Drama: From Gorky to the Present* (1993), and Robert Russell, in *Russian Drama of the Revolutionary Period* (1988). Especially focused on satire, two studies have been published by Karen Hayes (1996, 2009). Finally, a work that does not focus on socialist realism but should be included, as it serves as an extremely valuable reference material on drama until 1938, is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana's *Handbook on Soviet Drama* which, as its subtitle indicates, consists of *Lists of Theatres, Plays, Operas, Ballets, Films and Books and Articles about Them* (1938).

b. Socialist realist art and aesthetics

More extensive research has been carried out on socialist realist aesthetics in general. Socialist realism as an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement is characterised by its emphasis on several ideas that were in a significant extent common in all kind of art forms, such as the relation with the cultural past, the portrayal of the new Soviet man, the promotion of Soviet ideals and other²³. This section uses theories from art forms other than theatre to establish these similarities and investigate, in the chapters that follow, how they apply to theatre. The section particularly focuses on novel theories due to its connection with the laws of drama. Finally, the review of those theories is divided in four categories depending on the four major descriptions, as seen before, that socialist realism has been given by scholars: (a) Socialist realism as a totalitarian art; (b) Socialist realism as the natural evolution of the nineteenth century's artistic investigations; (c) Socialist realism as the Avant-Garde's descendant and/or problem-solver; and (d) Socialist realism as a canon transcending time and place.

²³ Nelson, p. 5.

b.1. Socialist realism as ‘totalitarian’ art: the impossible theory

Unfortunately, a significant number of the academics has been self-limited by focusing on socialist realism’s alleged totalitarian nature rather than trying to examine it in its entire social, cultural, and ideological context. In the pages that follow, it will be demonstrated that those theories which easily assume that socialist realism was a ‘totalitarian’ art, turn any deep understanding of the phenomenon into an impossible task. Besides, in almost all cases, such an assumption has led scholars to unsolvable contradictions and frivolous conclusions that did not always correspond to artistic reality.

Among the first extended treatments of socialist realism in the West was Kenneth Harper’s. Harper was among those who disapproved of socialist realism mostly for its political affiliations. However, he was also among the very few who enriched this field of research with a substantial presentation of what ‘dialectical materialism’ is and its application in art²⁴. This perspective is invaluable, given that this is after all what socialist realism attempts to express. But Harper particularly insisted that, in the Soviet Union, Marxism, as the only acceptable guiding principle, was turned into a dogma. If there was any controversy among the artists, he would argue that this was not over Marxism itself, against which no one could disagree, but over the interpretation of the Marxist thought²⁵. Everyone was, of course, free to express their opinion, but, ultimately, they had to toe the Party line. Harper, then, went on allowing this political theory (i.e., the dogmatic influence of Marxism on socialist art) to drive his literary theory, particularly his analysis of socialist realism. Inevitably, he ended up accusing the Soviets of lacking independence of mind, of writing and speaking as puppets, reflecting the will of their commissars, never being permitted to forget Socialist-Marxist theory²⁶. But again, this statement is an over-simplification that lead to deductions such as that all the Marxist and socialist realist artists were forced to act like puppets. Of course, the fact that this is a very early research not only is not being neglected but it is, on the contrary, it is being illuminated

²⁴ Examining socialist realism as a Soviet phenomenon rather than as a Marxist one was very common in the early literature. Harper’s attempt to examine socialist realism as the application of Marxist aesthetics is unusual. Seen as the manifestation of Marxist and not Soviet aesthetics is a proof that a socialist state is not a prerequisite for socialist realism to be created.

²⁵ Harper, p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

in order to expose how approaches on socialist realism have been changed throughout the years.

Yet, even more recent studies have adopted this nihilistic approach towards socialist realism. Jeffrey Brooks, in his 1994 article, 'Socialist Realism in Pravda: Read All about It!', asserted that socialist realism was not even a thing. What it was, according to him, was, in fact, a mass media production, a weapon in the hands of the 'Stalinist system', which had nothing to do with the actual artistic creation of the time but rather was imposed on the artists²⁷:

The phrase had one set of meanings as it was articulated in the newspapers, another at the congress and a third in the world of the arts, where it was gradually enriched with various practices and experiences²⁸.

He went on saying that, although it might have had some 'aesthetic conventions' particular to socialist realism, they became conventions only by force of habit. Thus, socialist realism could not be considered as art—and thus not examined as such—given that what it mainly was 'was a powerful mechanism by which the leaders and supporters of the Stalinist system enlarged the domain of their moral and intellectual claims'²⁹. Brooks' conclusion was that it is impossible to describe what socialist realism is, because it never really existed outside the press.

Another seminal, and yet deeply sceptical theory, on socialist realism is the work of Boris Groys. Groys' main argument was that modernism did not end when the State announced the dissolution of the artistic groups and the officialising of socialist realism, in the early 1930s. According to him, it survived through the 'Total Art' of the age of Stalin, adopting new forms (Sots-Art) and evolving in all kinds of unofficial and semi-official Soviet art. While taking for granted that socialist realism was an imposed scheme, he turns his gaze into other artistic movements of the time in an effort to examine what else was taking place at the same time, apart from the dogma of socialist realism. Groys traced the beginning of the Russian art paradox in Russia's continuous struggle during the 19th century to set itself apart from the western European culture. This chase had a side effect in the evolution of the Russian Avant-Garde movement which, from the moment of its establishment and empowerment, immediately set as its goal to halt any relation with the West (and therefore also the Russian past). Groys,

²⁷ Brooks, p. 978.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 975.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 991.

in one of his later works, also claimed that this violent disconnection from the Western culture, had as a result a difficulty in the dispassionate examination of either side's art (Groys, 2010). The parallel examination of the art of the West and that of the Soviet Union became even more problematic under Socialism, because the very notion of 'art' had changed. The very concept of art was different in the West where artworks were considered commodities that can be bought by individuals and in the Soviet Union where 'the only collector was the state'³⁰. In addition, the artist in the West was a freelance professional while in the Soviet Union was 'a partner of the state', member of the Union of Soviet Artists, [who] acted like a large cooperation delivering its products to the state authorities'³¹. Lastly, the very aesthetics were different. In the West, artists express themselves in freedom portraying an inner interpretation of the world, while in the Soviet Union, they create a collective aesthetic that should serve the goals of the higher hierarchy. However, Groys' theory did not go on examining socialist realism per se, to show its particularities. Instead, he rejected it as a whole and focused on the kinds of art that managed to flourish 'around it' in a semi-official way. Again, this thesis believes that rejecting the entire socialist realist movement as the 'Total Art' of Stalinism is highly simplistic. Nonetheless, Groys' theory gives an important insight that will be useful in our later examination of the evolution of the socialist realist theatre: he suggests that it was this rejection of the past, proclaimed by the Avant-Garde, that enabled the socialist realist to look back at it again. As the Avant-Garde was 'theoretically based on the method of "making strange" or "laying bare the device"', techniques that were supposed to reveal the mechanisms by which the work achieved its effects'³², the socialist realists could look back and be inspired by the old bourgeois art.

Other scholars focused on the comparison of socialist realism with Fascist art³³. Hans Günther, in his essay, 'Education and Conversion: The Road to the New Man in the Totalitarian Bildungsroman'³⁴, compared Karl Aloys Schenzinger's novel *Der Hitlerjunge Quex* (1932) and Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1932–1936), under the rubric of totalitarian literature, drawing parallels between a national socialist work and the socialist

³⁰ Groys 2010, p. 13.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Groys 1992, p. 43.

³³ e.g., Lehmann-Haupt, *Art under a Dictatorship* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971) and Igor Golomshtok, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* (New York, London: Overlook Duckworth, 2011).

³⁴ Hans Günther, *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (London: Macmillan in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1990), pp. 193-209.

realism of the Stalinist period. Günther claimed that these two novels are similar in that they constitute analogous forms; in other words, they look alike. However, it would not be difficult to show that the form of the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* is similar to that of hundreds of other novels by merely reframing the field of the investigation. To no one's surprise, Günther found similarities, not only in the *form* of these two novels, but in their content too, precisely because he examined the form and the content independently of each other, making it easy to prove almost any connection. He observed, for example, that both novels use common symbols (e.g., a flag) and central themes (e.g., martyrdom). However, the way this comparison is set is problematic because no general conclusions can be extracted. That is especially because no mention is made of fundamentally different ideological and social systems that these two novels defend (socialism and fascism), in which the intellectual activity is being made. To cover this profound gap, he added that any differences in ideology can be attributed to the more superficial elements such as 'the modes of narration' or 'the contrast between [the] openly biased judgment and [the] ideological didacticism of socialist realist world'³⁵. What he claimed, in other words, was that any artistic difference implies differences in ideology.

Above all, the question that a theory of socialist realism as a totalitarian, authoritarian, entirely propagandistic art raises this: 'then why the effort?'. If it is a strictly dictatorial kind of art, used only for reasons of propaganda, then every aspect of it would be merely the result of an imposed official decision. All the great theatre artists of the socialist realist era such as Maxim Gorky, Fyodor Gladkov, Nikolai Ostrovsky, Mikhail Sholokhov, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Nikolay Okhlopkov, Alexey Popov—they would all seem like merely carrying out orders from above. If not, however, then perhaps a new frame is needed; one that can explain how it could be both socialist realist but at the same time possess artistic freedom.

Accepting as a *sine qua non* that socialist realism was imposed from above, eliminates severely the research. It oversimplifies the great diversity of both the individual and the social creation that flourished during the first decades of Socialism in the USSR. As Slavoj Žižek observed, 'the notion of "totalitarianism, far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*; instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively prevent us from thinking'³⁶; this is more than evident in the research and the understanding of socialist realism.

³⁵ Günther, p. 197.

³⁶ Žižek, p.3.

Instead, more recent approaches, although very diverse from each other, have shown that, firstly, there is a clear connection between the literary conventions of the nineteenth century in Russia and the socialist realist art of the 1930s. Secondly, there is also a clear evolutionary progress between the intense theoretical discourse of the Avant-Garde and its equivalent in socialist realism. Lastly, socialist realism is not a Russian nor a Soviet phenomenon. It did not happen only in the Soviet Union. It did not happen only during Stalin's time. And although it originated there, it has been adopted by numerous artists and countries around the world. Thus, there is probably no single literary or cultural canon that could easily cover all socialist realism's manifestations. Three categories (as evolution from the Classical Realist past of Russian culture, as evolution from the Russian Avant-Garde, and as an open canon), constitute the next three definitions that socialist realism has been given (apart from a 'totalitarian art') and they are going to be examined in the next parts based on the different scholars that have focused on each of them.

It should be clear by now that it would be impossible to examine any of these assumptions (let alone to conclude with any of them) by taking as granted that socialist realism was the result of the imposition of the state's will on the individual artist. To the contrary, as the present study will examine socialist realism in a socialist state, it seems more reasonable to try to determine how individuals were influencing the officials and vice versa rather than to obstinately persist in hypothesising an one-way relationship. The next three sections examine the evolution of research on socialist realism according to the three categories mentioned above.

b.2. The origins of socialist realism in the theory and practice of nineteenth-century Russian aesthetics

Nowadays, labelling socialist realism as 'totalitarian' or 'manufactured by the Soviet state' verges on being anachronistic. That is because, in recent years, numerous studies have demonstrated that the Soviet aesthetics of the 1930s and its sharp political tensions originate, in fact, in the Russian culture of the nineteenth century.

Katerina Clark (Clark 1981), for instance, ascertained that the socialist realist novel was formed by the same laws that governed the Russian mode of myth making even before the Revolution (i.e., motifs such as 'the martyr', 'the family', 'the mentor and the disciple', 'the graveside oath', etc.). Without underestimating the importance of the state's intervention in forming

socialist realism, she confidently rejected the oversimplification that socialist realism was nothing more than a canon constructed by the Communist Party and then summarily imposed on the artists³⁷. Instead, she argued that such an interpretation was mostly used by the West in an effort to apply political pressure on their enemies³⁸. In Soviet Russia, however, socialist realism was more of a natural development, a form that survived in a ritualistic way in an effort to ‘personalize abstract cultural meanings and turn them into a comprehensible narrative’³⁹. Besides, in Andrey Sinyavsky’s words, there is no necessary connection between restrictive and normative controls⁴⁰, meaning that, although there was indeed official control over art, this could not and did not prevent in any way the evolution of art; a remark that could definitely be applied, for example, in the case of the Moscow Art Theatre and the relation between the officials and the artistic team (see in detail Chapter 4).

However, if it was not the restrictive measures that structured the socialist realist norm, then there must have been something else that did so, because, somehow, it did become a norm. According to Clark, when the exemplary novels were chosen and set by the officials in 1934, the writers started imitating their characteristics without fully understanding what it was about them that made them ‘socialist realist’. Consequently, as the new writers started copying the exemplars only externally and by replicating the form, more and more similar novels were being produced. Soon, the canonization of the features of the typical novel was simply a fact⁴¹. This raises, then, the question of how were the exemplars chosen in the first place. What were the criteria for choosing these specific novels? In answering that, Clark suggested that, if one seeks to understand how socialist realism was formed, it is crucial not to underestimate the power of the ferocity of the literary scene of the 1920s and the very complex alliances and antagonisms in a scene which was already ‘reasonably fluid’⁴². The aesthetics chosen were the aesthetics of the winners. Moreover, the (often unreasonably) extreme choices and directions of the Avant-Garde artistic groups, their utopian goals, and their struggle for dominance over Soviet art created a situation in which socialist realism came more as a solution than as a directive that would end the debate. Clark emphasized that there is no way that the features that were then declared as ‘socialist realist’ (such as, for instance, the positive hero, the glorious

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸ Clark 1981, p. 45.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Terts, Milosz, Hayward, and Dennis, p. 214.

⁴¹ Clark 1981, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

military history, or the theme of the ‘Great Family’) could have been manufactured by the state, as they already existed in the art of both the 1920s and the nineteenth century. The only thing that the Soviet state in 1932 did was the naming of the movement, which eventually allowed socialist realism to be considered as an autonomous phenomenon⁴³. From this perspective, Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* can, indeed, be considered socialist realist independently of the fact that it was published almost 30 years before socialist realism was even conceived. Clark’s study explains this by adding that: ‘the procrustean bed of socialist realism can accommodate strange bedfellows, but only if viewed *ex post facto*’. This is not only possible but also fundamental, given that ‘the process by which the many and disparate became the one is important for understanding not only the evolution of socialist realism but its very nature’⁴⁴.

With Clark’s study, our conception of socialist realism has moved forward to a new perception of it, as something genuinely inherent to Russian culture, from the pre-socialist past to the socialist state. This evolution of Russian culture and its linear continuity from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s and beyond is even more pronounced in Irina Gutkin’s research on the cultural origins of socialist realist aesthetics. Gutkin examined the connection between socialist realism and what preceded it. She did this in an effort to describe socialist realism in the particular Russian social setting in which it arose. To do so, she first identified a link between the vocabulary of the artistic Avant-Garde of the 1920s and the political avant-garde, both of whom used Marxist ideology to visualize and build the new Soviet society—the ‘new world’—they hoped to create⁴⁵. She asserted that the confusing and frequently schizophrenic nature of socialist realism originated in the parallel and fierce fight between these two philosophical avant-gardes and their expectation of simultaneously achieving two opposing goals: ‘maintain the status quo’ while marching ahead towards ‘the projected character of the revolutionary mentality [that] has not been entirely fulfilled’⁴⁶. Then, in her ‘broad and relatively longue-duree culturological approach to the question of the genesis of socialist realist ideology’⁴⁷, she investigated an assortment of political and aesthetic writings dating from 1890 to 1935. By comparing the work of Symbolist, Futurist, and Marxist theoreticians from approximately the same time, Gutkin detected a common revolutionary outlook that linked all of them under the same kind of aesthetical research, despite the differences in their approaches,

⁴³ Clark 1981, p. 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Gutkin, p. 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

goals, and results⁴⁸. Divided in two sections, Gutkin's analysis uncovered this association between the political and artistic vanguards in the first two chapters, while the last three explore the three main tropes of socialist realism: (i) the depiction of the new everyday life ('*byt*'), (ii) the formation of the new Soviet man, and (iii) the representation of the new woman as a result of the investigation of the new plot that will then establish the new love story⁴⁹. In a diachronic examination of the rise of the socialist realist philosophy, Gutkin demonstrated that socialist realism and its ultimate formulation emerged from the tensions between the political and the artistic avant-garde and from the utopian theories of a perfect society, which did indeed pre-exist and were not uncommon in the Russian tradition⁵⁰. In short, what she discovered was a rough, yet linear connection between the nineteenth century and the 1930s, through the avant-garde explorations of the 1920s, based on how the political and social surroundings of each era were affecting the formation of the contemporary aesthetic philosophy. In that sense, socialist realism is the continuation of what preceded it; but it could happen only in the USSR of the 1930s.

Along with these two pioneering studies, several other scholars have succeeded in proving this literary continuity. Andrei Rogachevskii, in the late 1990s, pointed out that 'many *topoi* of socialist realism were originally produced in the literature of the 1860s'⁵¹. He expanded the chronological background almost 30 years further back than either Clark or Gutkin and he proved that traces of the major themes of socialist realism can actually be found in 1865 (in Vasilii Sleptsov's *Trudnoe vremia*) and in 1863 (in Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *Chto delat'?*) as well as in the ideological controversies between the nihilists and the anti-nihilists that dominated the artistic field throughout the 1860s. He did, however, point out the differences between these theories and socialist realism:

Some nuances, though, separate quite firmly the recent period of the victorious reign of socialist realism from the past: there is no trace of the concept of socialist competition (emulation) in 1860s literature; bona fide socialist realism relies not on the vague

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴⁹ All three remarks can be seen in theatre as well. The productions mentioned below will be examined in the following chapters but they are also referred here in support of Gutkin's findings: (i) for the interpretation of the changes in everyday life, see for example Meyerhold's production of Erdman's *Mandate* (1925), (ii) for the new Soviet man, see Meyerhold's production of Selvinsky's *Commander of the Second Army* (1929), (iii) for the depiction of the new woman, see Nemirovich-Danchenko's adaptation of *Anna Karenina* (1937).

⁵⁰ Gutkin, pp. 4-5.

⁵¹ Rogachevskii, p. 36.

‘fourth class’ but on the concrete class of the proletariat-hegemon; it hails not the limited national liberation movement but limitless proletarian internationalism; it praises not the association of individual revolutionaries, but the Communist Party, united by iron discipline.⁵²

The above constitute additional proof that socialist realism did indeed evolve from the aesthetic debates of the nineteenth century. But it also proves the significant influence that Marxism had on the theory of art in general. Thus, Rogachevskii’s statement that there is ‘no trace of the concept of socialist competition (emulation) in 1860s literature’ comes as no surprise. *The Communist Manifesto* was translated into Russian by 1862 and yet it could not have become popular (as it was censored) before at least the 1880s⁵³. However, Rogachevskii’s conclusion that ‘the main departure [...] seems to consist in the emergence of a new balance between the truth of life and the truth of art, as reflected in the writer’s consciousness’⁵⁴ is surprising. This assertion sees the writer as the only one responsible for finding this *new balance* and the truth of art as independent from the truth of life, which are not Marxist and thus not socialist.

In a similar vein, Victor Dmitriev would argue that although socialist realism’s connection to the theoretical research of the nineteenth century is profound, it was the Revolution that changed everything. In an essay written in 1983, he examined the past, the present, and the presumed future of socialist realism. In linking these three time frames, he explained that one of the main issues of almost any artefact of the late nineteenth century was the unlikely reconciliation between dream and reality⁵⁵. In literary terms, this means that every hero suffers from the longing to become a hero in a country that does not need them to be one. This theme, although retained, changed radically after the Revolution. Socialism gave art new themes, such as the concern with the life of the working class and the peasants, new heroes with a new morality, and an optimistic new meaning to life⁵⁶. It then asked the artist to create new heroes (both fictional and real) in accordance with these new values⁵⁷. In other words, Dmitriev’s

⁵² Rogachevskii, p. 60.

⁵³ Marx 1985, p. 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

⁵⁵ Dmitriev, p. 96.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

study proved that the formation of the positive hero comes from this adaptation of the hero of the past to the new conditions.

Several historians have utilized the positive hero to establish this connection with the nineteenth century. Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr. found that this kind of hero originated far earlier, in Russian antiquity. However, it was in the 19th century that this kind of figure started adopting the features we now recognize⁵⁸. Defining who is a hero and following his example, says Mathewson, was a problem to be solved for centuries. But until the eighteenth century, the hero was merely an ‘uncomplicated representative of [a] specific point of view’⁵⁹. In nineteenth-century literature, this hero received much more ‘life-size dimensions’⁶⁰, while his tragic and fatal element became exaggerated. Although in Russian literature, the hero has always been an important figure of the literary discussion, in the nineteenth century it became the ultimate centre of it. The novel of character turned into an almost absolutely hero-centred investigation. And then, from Tolstoy to Furmanov, from Dostoyevsky to Fadeev, from Chernyshevsky to Plekhanov, from critical to socialist realism, Mathewson marshalled a vast assemblage of theorists and writers to prove that, although hard theoretical battles had indeed taken place between the radical critics and their socialist realist challengers, one can easily identify striking similarities in the way they defined and emulated the perfect hero. This, in turn, supports the case for continuity.

Chernyshevsky’s *Chto delat’?* is often used as proof of the origins of socialist realism in the 1890s. Almost all of the aforementioned scholars have examined it or at least mentioned it. But it was G. Zekulin, who, by focusing on this novel, which he called ‘a forerunner of socialist realism’, identified six features that define socialist realism and originate in this novel:

First, direct realistic form of representation; secondly, selection for representation of the phenomena of present-day reality, which affects the choice of themes; thirdly, affirmative (*utverzhda-yushchiy*) and critical character of the work of art, which provides for the introduction of the positive hero; fourth, evaluation of the phenomena that are accepted and used as relevant to the present day, on the criteria of ‘partyiness’ (*partynost’*), optimism and socialist humanism (*gumanizm*); without typification these criteria cannot be satisfied; fifth, reproduction of reality in its revolutionary

⁵⁸ Mathewson, p. 506.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

development as the determining factor of typification; and sixth, revolutionary romance (*romantika*) as a component part of typification and of socialist realism as a whole.⁶¹

Apparently, these features are valuable not only for proving the continuity of socialist realism, which was Zekulin's initial goal, but also for investigating socialist realism in its entirety.

b.3. Socialist realism: its traces in the Russian Avant-Garde and the transition of the artist

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may safely conclude that there is no solid basis for the argument that sees socialist realism as having been manufactured by officials under Stalin's dictate, as it pre-existed his regime. However, as the literature further shows, even the arguments -such as Groys'- that socialist realism violently ended the Avant-Garde's experimentation is invalid.

Firstly, let us recall that Gutkin has already observed that the ideological and aesthetical debates of the 1920s greatly influenced the final need and formation of socialist realism. Moreover, as Evgeny Dobrenko points out, the struggle was much fiercer because what happened was not just an exchange of readings, citations, or even manipulated pre-formed manifestoes⁶². It was actually a debate grounded in the very social and economic changes that occurred in the newly formed Soviet Union and were reflected in every aspect of life, including art. The question, 'what is the new art for the new man?' was in fact a question of 'what is new in this new society and how can art help it flourish?'. Dobrenko's main assertion was that it was exactly this theoretical exploration that eliminated, in terms of creativity, the art of the Avant-Garde. Artists, while turning into pure theorists, got alienated from their own creative work.

Dobrenko also maintained that scholars had overlooked the specific context within which socialist realism was born. In assessing how scholars have been approaching the issue of socialist realism, he detected four problems. First, it is almost impossible to find any impartial research. Second, by ignoring the ideological links between the theories, scholars fail to notice the existing system, making every theory look as if it is coming out a literary void. Third, the

⁶¹ Zekulin, p. 468.

⁶² Dobrenko 2005, p. xvi.

typical Western condemnation of socialist realism makes any attempt to understand its inner logic almost impossible. Fourth, researchers fail to recognize the inseparable relationship between politics and art, making politicians and artists alike look like puppets in the context of socialist realism⁶³. All the above factors have created a distorted image of socialist realism, especially given that, according to Dobrenko, scholars had mainly focused on taking sides in the debates, instead of trying to comprehend the issues. Thus, Dobrenko suggested that, instead of examining the theories themselves in order to understand how literary criticism worked in the Soviet 1920s, one should ‘discern the real social origins of these theories and ideas’⁶⁴. However, although Dobrenko did conduct a synthetic examination of these texts, he did not unfortunately expose the social conditions that led groups such as Prolekult, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), the Left Front of the Arts (LEF), and Pereval to compose their manifestos. Instead, his study constituted more of a traditional literary criticism of the period.

A hint of how the new social conditions might have affected the formation of socialist realism is clearer in one of his earlier studies (Dobrenko 1995), where he tried to determine who invented socialist realism. There he asserted that this relationship between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’, dominant in socialist realist art, was in fact the result of a ‘single creator’⁶⁵. This ‘single creator’ was the combination of the will of both the state and the masses⁶⁶. This claim gives a much more precise insight into how artists make art. According to this approach, artists—mainly writers—were basing their work on the popular response to art. This response was accessible due to the empirical and reception-related questionnaires that people—mainly workers and peasants—had to answer after they had read a novel. Analyzing these responses, Dobrenko asserted that this ‘single creator’ was capable of reconciling, to an extent, the super elite and extremely experimental avant-garde choices with mass taste⁶⁷. It is important, though, that this reconciliation must not be considered neither an artistic resignation to popular taste nor a forced mutation between the Avant-Garde and the mass aesthetics. The socialist realist

⁶³ Dobrenko 2005, pp. xiv-xv.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁶⁵ Dobrenko 1995, p. 135.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

aesthetics were not, according to Dobrenko, ‘*between* those two positions, but in their *synthesis*’⁶⁸.

Among those who held that socialist realism was not a directive but emerged from the turbulent discourses of the 1920s was also Herman Ermoalev. In his study of the ideological discourses between 1917 and 1934, he focused only on those that were (or were considered to be) Marxists—or at least not anti-Marxists—given that, as Ermoalev said, socialist realism serves the goals of the Communist Party and the Communist Party’s ideology is based on Marxism⁶⁹. In this way, he proved that the Jacobin debates that took place in Prolekult, RAPP, LEF, Pereval, and other venues were what eventually produced the goals of socialist realism. However, once socialist realism was announced and gradually crystallized, it became, according to Ermolaev, a method consisting of ‘theories [that] were created primarily by politicians, not writers, and were dictatorially imposed by the Party’⁷⁰. One interesting point that Ermolaev makes here is that, if socialist realism was problematic, this was because it was not the right people who defined and expressed it, i.e., the politicians, and not the writers.

Vladimir Paperny’s approach towards the same issue made a clear difference. Although he referred specifically to architecture, his theory can be more broadly sensed as social and cultural. In contrast to Ermolaev who set the officials as opposites to the artists, Paperny regarded politicians, theorists, and artists as being, in fact, the same people.

The approach adopted in this work presumes that the political forces themselves were manifestations of some other forces, more general in nature—namely, cultural forces. It is true that the Central Committee of the Communist Party on many occasion[s] ordered architects to turn to specific architectural styles or to specific planning solutions; but analysis of documents shows that these orders very often were drafted by the same architects who were supposed to carry them out. It would be idle to try to find out ‘who forced whom’. Instead, it may be more productive to concentrate on the general patterns of changes.⁷¹

This multi-functionality of artists, theorists, and officials, was also proposed by Mikhail Iampolski who further suggested that it is too narrow to consider the censors as the ‘bad guys’

⁶⁸ Dobrenko 1995, p. 160.

⁶⁹ Ermoalev, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 206.

⁷¹ Paperny, p. xxv.

and the artists the ‘cool guys’. In fact, their relationship, being far more complex than that, ended up becoming much more creative than how it is usually described (i.e., the enforcement of one’s will upon the other). Without trying to prettify or overgeneralize the situation, Iampolski noted that the major concern of a ‘well-meaning censor’ was to establish the ‘balance of good and evil’⁷² rather than to simply forbid things—something which they were already fully aware could attract much more attention than outright rejection⁷³.

But to return to Paperny’s theory, the key issue is not whether censorship existed. If there is a difference between the Avant-Garde and socialist realism, it is not in terms of how much freedom they each had or the extent to which the state interfered in each case. Rather, the difference was in the ‘cultural pattern’⁷⁴ that determined them both and that made this transformation almost unavoidable. To prove that, Paperny set as one of his main aims to counter with the ‘pseudo-significant tone’, as he names it, that many Western and Soviet scholars of the 1960s employed when referring to the transition that occurred in Soviet art between the 1920s and the 1930s. According to him, in a common attempt to characterize the art of the time as dictated, Western commentators openly accused the Communist Party (or Stalin himself) of oppression and manipulation, whereas Soviet scholars only implied this. Yet, Paperny’s question remained: ‘if the natural inclinations in the aesthetic process were disrupted by political interference, why did the majority of architects greet this change with such enthusiasm?’⁷⁵. He concluded that:

It was not the work of individual architects, critics, bureaucrats, and leaders who, through their efforts, made a radical turn in the direction of architecture (literature, cinema), but on the contrary, this movement existed prior to the efforts of certain individuals, that there is something that causes such movements, [...]. We shall call this ‘something’ culture.⁷⁶

To support his point, he explained that neither a synchronic view of the evolution of socialist realism nor a social one can sufficiently explain the advance from the Russian Avant-Garde to socialist realism⁷⁷. The first case, which contends that the rise of socialist realism coincided

⁷² Iampolski, p. 176.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 165.

⁷⁴ Paperny, p. xxiv.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. xviii.

⁷⁶ Paperny, p. xvii.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. xix-xxi.

with the growth of Nazi art, cannot support a theory of totalitarian synchronicity. In fact, as Paperny illustrated, Modernist movements were much more totalitarian than socialist realism. After all, it was not the socialist realists but the Communist-Futurists who called for ‘rejection of all democratic illusions’⁷⁸. On the other hand, the socialist approach is, according to Paperny, equally inappropriate in the examination of the two movements. To support his argument, Paperny gave the example of Adolf Max Vogt’s approach on radical political changes. Vogt argued that changes such as this inevitably cause radical changes in art too. Only when stability gets re-established, politics and art get more moderate. Vogt rested his case on the similarities between the art of the French Revolution and that of the Soviet Union. Being an opponent of this view, Paperny argued that, although true, it could not be applied to all cases⁷⁹. Paperny did not ignore the similarities of these two examples. On the contrary, he followed Vogt’s way of thinking in the transition from radical to moderate, and in the way these changes affected art. But he held that, instead of making arbitrary over-generalizations, the important issue was to explore how these common cultural elements were used by individual effort and how they were then transformed into local ideology. To do so, Paperny detected a cyclical process in the evolution of culture, a process that advances from a horizontal, egalitarian, individual, improvisational form, to a more vertical one, more hierarchical, collective, and rational. He, then, identified that the horizontal form characterizes the Soviet 1920s, while the second portrays the 1930s. He named these two periods Culture One and Culture Two, respectively, and focused on understanding the predominance of Culture Two over Culture One. Nevertheless, his Structuralist, Phenomenological analysis, although proving that it was not Stalin that influenced art but possibly the other way round, juxtaposes the ‘two cultures’ in a way that creates clear-cut lines between them, which perhaps does not correspond to the actual complexity of history. This ‘cyclic character’ of the alteration between the cultures, which ‘requires a great deal of further research’, described by Paperny, would have perhaps been more accurate if it were based on the spiral evolutionary pattern explained by Marx and Engel’s ‘negation of the negation’ (Marx, and Engels 1975), meaning that each culture can borrow elements from its past and simultaneously move forward by rejecting them⁸⁰. It is more of a

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. xix.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. xx.

⁸⁰ ‘Each new advance of civilisation is at the same time a new advance of inequality. All institutions set up by the society which has arisen with civilisation change into the opposite of their original purpose. [...] And so inequality once more changes into equality; not, however, into the former naïve equality of speechless primitive men, but into higher equality of the social contract. The oppressors are oppressed. It is the negation of the negation.’, (Marx, and Engels 1975).

give-and-take relationship between the past and the future than a constant repetition of two identical patterns.

Except from the scholars mentioned thus far in this section, the theory of an even continuity from the Avant-Garde to socialist realism has also been demonstrated by Régine Robin's work, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, which adduced historical material to prove that socialist realism was the result of both the various aesthetical discourses that took place during the 1920s and the 'obsession with realism'⁸¹ that occurred in the artistic debates of the 1890s. According to Robin, what in essence differentiated the artistic research of the 1920s from that of the 1930s was 'the substitution of the primacy of the political for the primacy of the content'⁸². However, this argument, besides contrasting seemingly incomparable elements (political/non-political; form/content), is only partially true. The importance of 'the political' was never overshadowed by other priorities. It merely became stabilized, in the sense that from a certain moment (late 1920s) onwards, Marxism-Leninism was not under question anymore and the artists' focus was free to find ways in which to better serve it. Essentially, the primacy of the political had already been established in general in society before the primacy of the content occurred in art. Thus, the changes in art came about almost naturally.

Robin had already supported this view in an earlier article of hers⁸³, in which she had claimed that a decade of devastating civil war, famines, ferocious political battles, a general resurgence of interest in realism that appeared in Europe between the wars⁸⁴, and the particularities of the Soviet culture were more than enough to naturally (and yet not accidentally) lead to socialist realism. It would be interesting, though, to examine what are these particularities of the Soviet culture that Robin referred to. The first particularity is linked to the relationship that Russian culture has with realism in general. Robin showed that this connection between the nineteenth century and Soviet art, examined in the previous section of the current review, is more important for Russian culture than it might seem. She argued that, for the Russians, realism was 'l'air même que l'on respire'⁸⁵ and thus it would be impossible for Modernism to flourish in Russia, at least in the way it did in the West⁸⁶. The second particularity is related to the fight

⁸¹ Robin 1992, p. 77.

⁸² Ibid., p. 211.

⁸³ Robin 1987, pp. 87-110.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 110.

⁸⁵ 'the very air that we breathe' (Robin 1987, p. 92).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

against illiteracy that characterized the first years after the Revolution. Although this effort was so enormous that it eradicated the number of the illiterate population in a very short time, combatting also ‘artistic illiteracy’ had to take into consideration the actual cultural level of its audience, even if that meant lowering its standards. This was another way to support the fight against illiteracy, given that art served as a means of mass education⁸⁷. Thirdly, for various reasons, related to the new organization of society during the late 1920s, a lot of artistic groups had already turned their interest towards more folkloric aspects of life, which afterwards were included among the main themes of socialist realism from the 1930s onwards⁸⁸. This new folklore, in the late 1920s, was the one that created heroes who were simultaneously everyday men *and* extraordinary humans; like Stalin⁸⁹. Stalin, during the 1930s, became ‘le symbole à la fois d’un surmoi régressif mais aussi de tout ce qui lute contre l’ancien monde et les anciennes valeurs’⁹⁰, serving as the example of the man who overcomes all his flaws and moves victoriously towards Communism. Stalin became the symbol of the new values⁹¹. Finally, this exaltation of Stalin, along with the need for stabilization, led the art of the 1930s to a more nationalist, chauvinist thematic. But to fulfil this thematic, neither naturalism, which presents reality just as it is⁹², nor modernism, which pays too much attention to form⁹³, were useful. Realism, as a form, was the only way to convey this semi-real, semi-romantic, typical, and yet extraordinary image of Russian life⁹⁴. All things considered, it is perhaps more obvious now, as Robin noted, that if the Avant-Garde eventually failed, this was because it addressed an audience that did not actually exist. The Avant-Garde was an elitist art from artists who, even when devoted to the communist cause, had been educated in a different system and were addressing an elite audience that had lost its previous status and eventually were absorbed by Socialism⁹⁵. The new audience, more familiar to an old type of realism, illiterate to a great extent, and adapting to a very new socialist organisation of life, needed something different from the -often- farfetched experimentations that the Avant-Garde proposed. And this is what it was given to it.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 95-96.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁹⁰ ‘the symbol of both a regressive superego but also of everything that fights against the old world and old values’ (Ibid., p. 98).

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 99.

⁹² Ibid., p. 105.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 104-105.

⁹⁵ Robin 1987, p. 107.

Before concluding this section, it is worth mentioning that, in recent years, two scholars have demonstrated that this natural transition from the Avant-Garde to socialist realism, which all the aforementioned scholars in this section have proven in their own way, not only happened theoretically but it did in fact come to pass in reality (or, more precisely, in practice). Christina Kiaer and Syrago Tsiara evidenced that the painter Aleksandr Deineka and the sculptor Vera Mukhina were among hundreds of artists who transformed their art from the private, abstract, form-centre art of the modernist 1920s to a new kind of art that ‘would serve the broad population’s needs for survival and improve their living conditions’⁹⁶. Tsiara asserted that Mukhina ‘transitioned easily into the next phase of socialist realism’s domination’⁹⁷, following the example of Lenin, who had claimed that the new art should be (among other things) monumental and highly symbolic in order to help the illiterate population understand the basic principle of dialectical materialism⁹⁸. Kiaer, in demonstrating how socialist realism influenced the work of Deineka and vice versa, concluded that ‘to understand the work of Deineka and others such as him in the 1930s only as forced labour is to strip the artists of their subjective will—to deprive them of their subjectivity through art history, just as we accuse Stalinism of having done in history’⁹⁹.

b.4. Identifying the canon

The studies presented thus far provide evidence that significant progress has been made in the study of socialist realism. However, we should note two key missteps. In order to narrow the limitations of their study, making it possible to access a phenomenon as vast as socialist realism, the majority of scholars accepted—to varying degrees—an equation of socialist realism and Soviet art, almost making them synonymous¹⁰⁰. In addition, a great number of them have taken for granted that, because in the cases they studied socialist realism was indeed realist in form, it could not have been anything else. Inevitably, these two deductions have

⁹⁶ Tsiara, p. 200.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 196.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 198.

⁹⁹ Kiaer, p. 345.

¹⁰⁰ The definition of socialist realism according to the Oxford’s dictionary of Critical Theory is that it is ‘the official, mandated style for all art and literature in the Soviet Union from 1934 until its collapse in 1991’, Buchanan. According to Britannica: *Socialist realism* is the officially sanctioned theory and method of literary composition prevalent in the Soviet Union from 1932 to the mid-1980s.

often led to false definitions of what socialist realism is, presenting it as *de facto* Soviet and *de facto* realist (in the old classicist sense).

The following section demonstrates that, more recent studies, however, have proven that socialist realism is not necessarily a Soviet phenomenon, as it occurred outside the USSR too. It is not a 1930s or 1940s singularity either, as it came into being long after the war too. In fact, it could even be happening right now. Finally, they have proven that not only did it not have to be realist but, it was never, as a matter of fact, meant to be considered exclusively realist. Jérôme Bazin, associate professor in History of Art and History at the University of Paris-Est, presented this development of socialist realism around the world in a very illustrative way. His article on socialist realism and its international models uncovered the way in which different peripheral models created a more general perception of what socialist realism actually is. For Bazin, the nationalist turn that socialist realism took in the Soviet Union during the late 1930s was completely contrary to the internationalist aspect that it was supposed to serve. Noticed and rejected by Communist artists around the world (Italy, France, GDR, and Mexico), a different form of socialist realism occurred outside the USSR, reasserting that internationalism¹⁰¹. From Bazin's article one can extract four main points. Firstly, socialist realism was not an exclusively Soviet phenomenon (much less a 1930s Soviet phenomenon). Secondly, the nationalist aspects that characterized the Soviet socialist realism were not *de facto* elements of socialist realism in general. The third point is related to the political identity of the artist. In his investigation, Bazin referred only to communist artists because, according to him, this constituted a prerequisite of creating socialist realism, especially in non-socialist countries¹⁰². Furthermore, Bazin argued that, if one is to investigate socialist realism outside the Soviet Union, they must look 'uniquement [aux] artistes qui se déclaraient communistes' ¹⁰³. To examine socialist realism inside the USSR is more difficult, he claimed, because in the Soviet Union art had become the product of directives¹⁰⁴ and, thus, it made little difference whether the artists were communists or not. Moisei Kagan would argue on the contrary that, in fact, it is only under Socialism that:

¹⁰¹ Bazin, p. 75.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁰³ 'only [to] artists who declared themselves communists', Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

Socialist realism begins to win a dominant position in the artistic development of the country. This is guaranteed not by any outside factors, such as the support of the government or ruling party, but chiefly by the operation of the objective law of correspondence of social consciousness to the character of social being. In a social system in which the working-class rules, its dominance in spiritual life is inevitable.¹⁰⁵

Thus, if under socialism artists do not have to be communists to express the objective reality of socialism, Kagan observed, that is because they are already surrounded by and live in a socialist world undergoing the transformation towards communism. Therefore, all the stimuli and inspiration socialist realism needs would be naturally extracted from this environment. It is worth mentioning, though, that, in Kagan's view, artists might be able to create socialist realism without being communists even under capitalism, precisely because they can express the revolutionary struggle of the working class and artistically understand 'the basic social conflict of the epoch—the collision between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat', as Gorky states¹⁰⁶. Lastly, the fourth important point of Bazin's study is that he suggested that artists inside and outside the USSR worked differently because only the Soviets were so attached to realism, a realism he called '*stalinien*'¹⁰⁷. But, again, although socialist realism in Russia ended up being merely realist in form, this does not mean that it was intended to be so. From its first official introduction in 1934, socialist realism requested many a thing from the artists but never a specific form¹⁰⁸. Thus, it is difficult to agree with Bazin's opinion that non-Soviet artists rejected Soviet realism¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁵ Kagan, p. 169.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰⁸ Zhdanov's call was 'to depict reality in its revolutionary development', for 'truthfulness and historical concreteness' and 'ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism'. (Scott, and Gorky, p. 21.)

Stalin asked for a culture to be 'national in form, socialist in content'. (Lahusen, and Dobrenko 1995, p. 91.)

Even Boris Veimarn's explanation of *national in form* as 'a realistic reflection of socialist reality' prove that realism was never directly asked as the form of socialist realism. (Cullerne)

¹⁰⁹ 'It soon becomes clear that the vast majority of artists in the GDR did not take up the Soviet model. Defiance toward this form of art following Stalin's death can be found in the archives, with artists giving voice to their hostility. When in 1956, the Communist Party in Dresden surveyed artist opinion on Soviet painters, it concluded that the Soviet model was almost unanimously rejected, with the exception of the atypical interwar Realists Deineka and Petrov-Vodkin.', (Bazin, p. 74.)

Bazin's claim that artists from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) disliked and were opposed to realism¹¹⁰ is not corroborated by the artists' personal opinions, which were presented in 1976, during the Ninth Congress of the Central Committee of the Association of Visual Artists in Berlin. The key speeches of the Congress reveal that the artists' relationship with realism was much more creative than it might seem to us today. Among the various topics that were discussed, the principal was indeed realism: what it is and how it can be (re)approached—definitely not in terms of rejecting it, though (Blower). Quite to the contrary, the artists' approach was one of understanding and applying it in the (for them) new temporal and national frame. 'New phenomena, achievements, and experiments within our art scene', said Ullrich Kuhirt, 'have recently been provoking questions regarding the nature, the internal dialectics, the appearance, and the perspectives of realism'¹¹¹. This view certainly does not allow us to believe that East German artists had rejected realism. Instead, what they did was try to define it 'in its revolutionary development', as Lunacharsky had proclaimed¹¹².

From this perspective, it is difficult to define realism without risking to transform it into a dogma, exactly because it keeps changing. As Kuhirt observed, 'the nature of realism lies in the fact that this concept is always an open concept'¹¹³; More importantly 'realist art always includes the element of reception. Simply, it must be capable of being grasped, experienced, understood, and received'¹¹⁴. In other words, an artist is a realist artist simply when he tries to understand reality and simultaneously expresses it in such a way that will help his audience understand it too. Particularly for the role of the artist, Kuhirt claimed that he must not only mirror reality, but moreover reflect it, meaning not only show both problems and contradictions (a true reflection will do that anyway)¹¹⁵ but also evaluate what is important enough to be reflected¹¹⁶. This approach to realism is definitely closer to the Marxist perception of art and thus can be more helpful in the examination of Soviet socialist realism, which is intended after all to be the application of Marxism-Leninism in art. Finally, this 'open concept' idea was meant to be the key that would initiate a more unbiased investigation of socialist realism and that would influence a lot of later theorists in their approach.

¹¹⁰ Bazin, p. 75.

¹¹¹ Blower, p. 128.

¹¹² Lunacharsky's theory is extensively described in Chapter 2.

¹¹³ Blower, p. 129.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Among the latest concepts relative to socialist realism is the ‘open form’. In this regard, a very insightful approach is that of Tanel Pern, who in 2010 suggested that, as no existing canon can be applied to socialist realism, it can be described as ‘an anti-canonical art’. Pern’s review of the most significant theoretical works on socialist realism (Clark, Gutkin, Dobrenko, Groys, Paperny, etc.) assisted him in making the critical conclusion that there is neither a literary nor a cultural canon that could describe socialist realism:

Finding and completely describing a ‘mature’ canon of socialist realism proves to be quite difficult, if not impossible, as the demands keep shifting. For instance, different ideological postulates were activated at different times, sometimes contradicting each other (for instance, ‘class-mindedness’ with ‘Soviet patriotism’)¹¹⁷.

According to Pern, all previous studies that tried to prove the existence of a particular socialist realist canon not only failed to do so but, instead, succeeded in proving the exact opposite. What they showed, Pern argued, was that socialist realism is in fact an ‘empty signifier’¹¹⁸. But make no mistake: ‘empty signifier’ does not mean a mere name¹¹⁹. It is not that it does not mean anything, but rather that it includes what essentially gives it its meaning: ‘Socialist realism only gained its existence through the act of naming’¹²⁰, he claimed, and went on to say that:

The unity of an object is created through antagonistic exclusion. [...] [Socialist realism’s] canonicity is in fact anti-canonicity, as it needs to actively antagonize other canons in order to prove its own coherence. [...] Anti-canonicity in this sense does not allow one “correct” mode of writing or style to dominate. ¹²¹

He narrowed his view to the potential forms that socialist realism could receive under different literary or cultural canons, concluding that, open as it is, it could be expressed in any form. Although Pern’s approach is significantly insightful, it would be difficult to entirely agree with this view. Yuri Andreev’s opinion on this is indicative of why. Andreev’s views are presented in Lahusen’s essay ‘Socialist Realism in Search of its Shores: Some Historical Remarks on the “Historically Open Aesthetic System of the Truthful Representation of Life”’. In a theoretical

¹¹⁷ Pern, p. 535.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 540.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 541.

conflict with Markov on the same issue, Andreev accused Markov of being formalist because he later asserted, just like Pern, that socialist realism is open because it can be of any form. Given that socialist realism can be so diverse in terms of forms and styles¹²², Markov claimed that as long as it is ‘truthful’, there are no limits to its ‘openness’. It could be realist, but it could be modernist too. In fact, it could be anything. Andreev’s counter-argument was that, although socialist realism might indeed be of any form, to prove its openness by means of this argument is a completely thought process. Firstly, it contradicts the fact that even non-realist literary styles need some kind of canon (e.g., ‘image, impression, renewal of device, individual subjective opinions and dreams’¹²³). Thus, they are not as open as Markov or Pern would think. But more importantly, Andreev emphasized that if the realist literature is open, it is because it is the only literature fully liberated from any kind of canon, the only one that ‘is tending only toward the cognition of objective reality’¹²⁴ and ‘changes with every change of focus’¹²⁵. That’s why socialist realism is open, he concluded, and not because it could be expressed in any style. Thus, returning to Pern, it should be noted that what he tried to prove was similar to Markov’s thesis. He even risked going to the opposite extreme, suggesting that because it is difficult to define what socialist realism is, it does not mean anything. Kuhirt himself, despite being the one who introduced the notion of an ‘open system’, would have disagreed too:

Our conception of realism, and thus also of socialist realism, has to be open to possible change, enrichment, development and deepening. But flexible does not mean unprincipled. The concept of realism is the theoretical generalization for a complex conglomeration of living factors, or, as contemporary aesthetics has it, the functions of artistic creation. Hence it is a generalization for a certain system of functions which, when taken together as a unit, make up a specific nature of the process of artistic creation.¹²⁶

Because socialist realism is tied to Marxism, it would seem to be possible after all to identify a canon, but one that is neither literary nor cultural; it is an ideological canon. Besides, as has been noted so far, it is much easier to link what primarily makes socialist realism to its function. According to Marxism-Leninism, the three functions of art (as presented by Kuhirt) are the

¹²² Lahusen, p. 7.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Pern, p. 130.

cognitive ('people produce art in order to make themselves aware of their standing, their place, their possibilities in life in order [...] to appropriate reality'¹²⁷), the evaluative ('the incidental is put aside, that which seems important to the artists is emphasized'¹²⁸) and the communicative ('artistic ideas need to materialize in order to become art. Only then do they become communicable'¹²⁹). He also added the functions of enjoyment¹³⁰ and the reification of creativity¹³¹. Therefore, to approach socialist realism from the point of view of its function might seem a more fruitful procedure. However, what Kuhirt described was not how it functions but rather how it is being created. Regarding socialist realism functional approach, more indicative is, perhaps, Gary Saul Morson's theory. By trying to explain the dual nature of socialist realism as being both diverse and united, Morson concluded that:

If we approach this problem in terms of functions rather than features, we can identify the unity of socialist realist art in different socialist countries as a common understanding of the proper interaction of the literary (or artistic) system with other social systems rather than, let us say, a common understanding of the doctrine of the "positive hero". To the extent that the literatures of two socialist countries were similar in features, that similarity could be seen to derive from their common definition of literature. The difference in their literature could be seen to derive from the fact that the other social systems with which literature interacts in those countries differ for a variety of reasons, including, of course, the differing histories of the countries.¹³²

Thus, what Morson suggested was that the functional approach can help us understand how socialist realist art can differ so much in different places and countries and still be socialist realist. It can also help us overcome the time-specific creation and thus realize that it can change and evolve throughout time and yet remain socialist realist.

In western analyses of Soviet socialist realism, for instance, it is usual to consider high Stalinist fictions as the socialist realism and to see literature of the twenties, fifties, and sixties as transitional forms between socialist realism and Literature. The result is often to attribute all features that resemble Stalinist fiction to unnatural government pressure,

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 131.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Morson, p. 125.

and to regard features that seem familiar to readers of Western literature as the real work.¹³³

But what exactly is socialist realism's function? Morson argued that its predominant function is the political one¹³⁴. We could expand this by adding Kagan's view, according to which socialist realism's function consists of simultaneously helping people obtain knowledge about reality, providing culture and education, establishing a common line of understating between people and offering pleasure¹³⁵. Thus, it is definitely more than strictly political. And yet, of course, functions and functionalistic systems, no matter how accurate, cannot describe the whole process of creating socialist realism. As Marx would say, in emphasizing the importance of the human in the production: 'The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously related by them in accordance with a settled plan.'¹³⁶In this case, it could mean that, beyond canons and functions, one should never underestimate the human factor, the personal and subjective perception of what socialist realism is, and especially the ability to associate with others in order to achieve a common goal.

Socialist realism and Theatre Studies

The present thesis emphasizes on this 'human factor'. In subsequent chapters, socialist realist theatre will be studied, incorporating the above theories. But if there is a clear reason why this will be done by focusing on theatre, it is precisely because we seek to examine and illuminate this 'human factor', namely, the artist, the critic, the official, and, most importantly, the spectator, in their active role of shaping society. As Balme notes, 'while theatre studies have until recently focused their attention on dramatic texts and their productions (both past and present), this isolation of one aspect or genre of the theatrical medium is increasingly coming under scrutiny and criticism'¹³⁷. It is true that, as we will see in the following chapters, the reviews of the time, focus majorly on the use of the theatrical text. Yet, despite of the way the Soviet reviewers scrutinised the theatre performances, above everything else, they showed an

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 127.

¹³⁵ Kagan, pp. 176-177.

¹³⁶ Marx 1906, p. 92.

¹³⁷ Balme, p. 4.

unprecedented focus on the public. In fact, the Soviet discussion of the problem of the theatre audience defined to a great extent subsequent theories of the audience's perception. In *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism*, Andrew Barratt and Robert Russell note that:

First, it has a general significance as an early attempt to define the object and methods of scientific audience research. In fact, those Soviet theatre specialists who participated in the debate identified and formulated problems (albeit without solving them) which theatre scholars of the West have only recently touched upon.¹³⁸

It is true that the study of the audience's experience remains even to this day largely elusive and there are several reasons for this. As Susan Bennett argues in her pivotal book, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, spectator research remained side-lined, firstly due to the semiotics that dominated theatre theory and analysis during the 1970s and 1980s. Another reason for this difficulty, according to Bennett, was that:

To study the spectator individually or collectively implies a shift from interpreting an aesthetic object to studying the cognitive and emotional responses of actual human beings. This is the field of empirical psychology and sociology, and most theatre scholars do not possess this kind of scholarly background and training¹³⁹.

And yet, as Bennett explains, current trends in the sociological approach to theatre suggest that not even the audience's experience should be studied in isolation. The performance itself is only a limited part of how the whole experience of theatre gets transmitted to and translated by the audience and eventually transformed into a social event as a whole. If anything, it demonstrates the difficulty that Soviet scholars and officials of the 1930s had in combining the sociological norms of Marxism and the potential reformative power of theatre, without having expertise simultaneously in both fields¹⁴⁰, a difficulty that remains unsolved to this day in non-interdisciplinary research. In addition, the main contradiction that still troubles scholars of both the history and theory of theatre is that, although it is much easier to insist on the importance of theatre spectators than to actually investigate their contribution to a performance in a given historical or contemporary case, it is exactly this historical framework that justifies the need for new approaches to the audience.

¹³⁸ Russell, and Barratt, p. 174.

¹³⁹ Bennett 1997, p. 150.

¹⁴⁰ See e.g., Lunacharsky 1965, 'Theses on the Problems of Marxist Criticism'.

The Soviets were aware of this correlation between theatre and social environment. From its very beginning, when Prolekult was using its proletarian audience as an ideological power station for the working class, it was clear that the audience's class consciousness was immediately related to the analogous on-stage stimuli. Thus, the first step for the Soviet intelligentsia was to determine a Marxist philosophy of theatre. The general idea, despite the many ideological disagreements, was that theatre as part of the super-structure of society is the result of certain material-economic forces¹⁴¹. Since all artistic results derive from the culture and the society the artists live in, if the artists are faithful to what they see and live, they will successfully describe socialism¹⁴². This was among the first proclamations of Lunacharsky, who in his early writings observed that what made great writers of the past so exceptional was the truthful depiction of life and their ability to portray the social laws at work in society. It was also what Gorky meant with the 'revolutionary attitude towards reality' in his speech in 1934's Congress of Soviet Writers, a speech upon which the norm of what socialist realism was supposed to be based (Scott, and Gorky 1977).

However, given that art, and especially theatre, do not have a vertical relationship with the economy, there are many phases in the artistic creation during which the initial plan of interrelating these two could meet potential constraints. Additionally, when it comes to the performance's effect on the public, things get even more inconsistent, since there are other factors at work too; among them, the state itself. From the administrative model of the state and private theatres, to financial and material support, the performances that would try to follow the official line would have from the beginning an advantage over all others. This implies that it was not always discernible whether a performance was good because it was aesthetically superior or merely because it was easier to get staged. Bennett recognizes this issue as a major concern when the audience's reception is analysed. She notes that 'while state support might make cultural products available to more people, the range available for

¹⁴¹ Prolekult, Kuznitsa, October and their gradual transition into RAPP, LEF, Pereval and the Methodological School of Pereverzev were the main theoretical groups that influenced the literary theories of the art of the new socialist era. Pereverzev, in particular, although starting from a sociological point and using basic Marxist terminology, tried to explain any given work of literature as 'the result of the imprinting of social experience' based on the Marxist axiom that existence determines consciousness. 'The task of the Marxist scholar was to ascertain the socio-economic process by "reading-out" the economic basis directly from a superstructure, in this case from literature, since every superstructure, is a specific embodiment of its economic basis'. Quoted from: Ermolaev, p. 93.

¹⁴² See for example, Gorky's and Lunacharsky's theories in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

consumption will be limited by the state's conception of what constitutes (suitable) art'¹⁴³; a comment that pictures the state support as a form of control. At the same time, as Bennett points out, to try to gauge the will of 'the theatre audience' in general by examining the same audience that was attending particular performances is again of limited value. Such examination can only 'establish the particular cultural construction of mainstream audiences'¹⁴⁴, which is already discernible from the official support of particular performances. In other words, we cannot assess the audience's preferences in general because the only audience we have access to is the one that actually attended the performance.

The present thesis deals with this paradox in a different way. The main 'spectator' that it has access to is the reviewer. Of course, the reviewer is not merely any spectator. However, the reviewer's opinion receives extra importance in the Soviet system, as it stands between the official and the public opinion. The reviewer has the power, without always acknowledging it, to actually form the public opinion. Bennett, in her survey, also refers to the Coppieters Project, based on two performances of *The People Show*, to illuminate that, among Coppieter's conclusions about the audience's perception was the fact that 'one's attitude toward/perception of/relationship with the rest of the public is an important factor in one's theatrical experience'¹⁴⁵. Thus, in the case of the Soviet theatre, instead of telling people what is right and what is wrong, it was important to create a miniature social environment that would provoke discussion. The wide variety of important political, social, national and other issues that needed to be addressed to a public of varying (usually low) educational background found in theatre not only a means of expression but also, from within it, to its greater extension: the society. Independently of people's opinion, the topic was already set. Even more important is Coppieters' second conclusion, that 'perceptual processes in the theatre are, among other things, a form of social interaction'¹⁴⁶. Fifty years before Coppieters' findings, the Soviets were using theatre as a form of establishing the new socialist way of life by re-defining social interaction under socialism. 'Many of the audience's receptive processes', says Coppieters 'are pre-activated by their anticipation of a particular kind of event'. But this is a reciprocal relationship. The audience is activated by but also activates social processes. Even if any particular night's performance belongs solely to the ones who witnessed it, the production does

¹⁴³ Bennett, p. 150.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁴⁵ Coppieters, p. 37.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

not. The production becomes a popular topic of discussion even among people who have not seen the performance, aiding in the creation of new forms of communication. Theatrical performances are, according to Turner, deliberately structured experiences, ‘which probe a community’s weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desacralize its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situations in the known “world”’¹⁴⁷. In the new socialist realist world, where everything needs to be re-defined, the passionate preoccupation with theatre is an indication of an ardent struggle for identity. As Pamela Decker states in her dissertation on the *Theatrical Spectatorship in the United States and Soviet Union, 1921-1936*, ‘comedy is uniquely suited to reveal a specific culture’s values and identities; we understand who we are by what and whom we laugh at’¹⁴⁸. The present thesis claims that the same goes for theatre in general. What we are is formed by what we watch, and what we watch and how we reflect upon it shapes society. By employing this theory, this thesis will try to portray how Meyerhold’s and Stanislavsky’s theatre helped in forming the theatre of the new socialist era even further than they might have anticipated, by activating public discussions on the difficult topics of the time such as new economic policies, new attitude towards everyday life, industrialisation, collectivism, war and, communism.

Objectives, methods, and future plans

Following the more general aims that were set forth in the first part of this chapter, and enriched by the critical review of the existing literature, the present research intends to use the study of the socialist realist theatre in order to discover:

- i. The connection between the theoretical (Marxist) paradigm and the Soviet approach towards realism;
- ii. How theatre practitioners (more precisely the directors Vsevolod Meyerhold, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko) responded to the call for socialist realism, given that, unlike the novel, no single performance could be held up as exemplar;

¹⁴⁷ Turner, p. 11.

¹⁴⁸ Decker, p. ii.

- iii. How the same practitioners contributed to the evolution of the theory and vice versa; how the theory, including the complex role of the censorship, assisted the practice in achieving the aims of socialist realism; and
- iv. The transition to socialist realism throughout the years on the part of specific directors and theatres (e.g., Meyerhold and MAT).

Taking into consideration that socialist realism constitutes but a part of Soviet art, that it is at the same time a much wider phenomenon in terms of time and place, and that it relies entirely on the socialist ideology and dialectical-materialist understanding of reality, the present research focuses particularly on those productions, directors, and theatres that, despite faults, flaws, and misconceptions, were in open dialogue with socialist realism. It might be true that in some cases different theatrical aspects were the predominant socialist realist ones. There are, for example, productions that were considered socialist realist because the director was a member of the Communist Party and others that were so considered because they staged a play that was known for its socialist realist theme. However, given that, as Patrice Pavis affirms, there is ‘very little to be gained by producing an “atomization” of a performance into minimal units’¹⁴⁹, this study intends to examine the theatrical phenomenon in the totality of its systems. By employing ‘analysis as reconstruction’¹⁵⁰, all information and evidence available are used in an attempt to shape the sociocultural context under which socialist realism was created and determine the process by which it was perceived, experienced, and delivered.

More specifically, the present research examines and compares all productions by Meyerhold and MAT (focusing on the productions directed by Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Sudakov) from the abolishment of New Economic Policy (NEP) until World War II (1928-1939). The thesis presents them side by side with their reviews, official statements, and directorial alterations, firstly in order to portray the sharpness with which criticism was being made, then, to identify this sharpness as an inevitable trait of a means of expression as influential to the public as theatre.

This thesis particularly focuses on the directors, given that the official call for the professionalization of the theatre created a new kind of director, who had to use all theatrical means to produce meaning no longer by chance but by method, system, and skill. More than

¹⁴⁹ Pavis, p. 21.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

that, the new director had to transform acting into a structured training and create and/or adopt an educational scheme that would help actors improve themselves and become able to evaluate their improvement. Finally, especially in the case of big academic theatres like MAT, the directors were additionally charged with the task of finding ways that would help the audience change its attitude towards the new Soviet man.

The investigation takes the form of a case-study, with the case-studies being the theatres of Meyerhold and Moscow Art Theatre, during the aforementioned period of time. The criterion for selecting these particular productions was the establishment of both a representative sample and a useful variation of theatrical practices, within the frame of socialist realism. The analysis of this small number of performances (relative to the width of the theatrical phenomenon of the time) intends to assist in an understanding of the larger class of similar performances and establish common ground regarding socialist realism. At the same time, the number of the productions is reasonably large to facilitate the collection of data and produce a clearer image of the phenomenon. I have decided to engage mostly with western sources because both Soviet theatre studies and socialist realism studies in general have received a more balanced treatment than Soviet theatre studies over several decades. The reassessment of socialist realism has begun in Russia in the 1990s but no significant studies in Russian, that offer a reassessment of early Soviet theatre, have been produced so far. However, primary and secondary sources are employed to collect data from archival records and documentation reviews, such as public written documents, letters, internet-based materials (such as official declarations of the Communist Party, the Commissariats of Culture and Education, speeches at congresses, studies on socialist realism, etc.). Tools from theatre studies are particularly beneficial too. Production tools (programmes, set and costume designs etc.) and reception tools (performance notes, theatre reviews, photographs, etc.) are used to give a detailed presentation of the productions. Finally, each chapter provides an overview of the main currents of the theoretical discourses on socialist realism of each period, in an attempt to initiate a synchronic assessment of the evolution of the theory and practice of socialist realism.

CHAPTER 2

The social framework and theoretical background of the socialist realist theatre

Introduction

In the history of art, the socio-economic background in which any movement was created has always played a significant role in its development. In the case of socialist realism, the social framework is even more important because socialism, as a socio-economic system, was being applied for the very first time. For this reason, this chapter examines the aesthetic theories that prevailed during the 1920s in the Soviet Union and preceded the discussion on socialist realism. Regarding theatre, in particular, the strong theoretical and ideological conflicts that took place during the same period make analysing Meyerhold's and Stanislavsky's theatre even more important. This is because understanding why the directors made the stylistic choices they did, and whether these choices have been affected by critique, can provide new insights into the relationship between society and theatre. In the following chapters, this research examines the reviews that the aforementioned directors and their theatres received, to identify what triggered their critical responses. However, it is first necessary to describe the aesthetic, political, and cultural setting upon which the two theatres and their critics flourished.

Apart from politics, the current chapter provides an overall survey of the theories that influenced the formation of socialist realism. The question of the history of socialist realism in

the theories of realism of the past is raised in this chapter, in the context of understanding the evolution of this particular form of art within a new social frame. In addition, the forms of realism in the past had to withstand radical changes, not only in terms of which part of society was being addressed but also with respect to the very question of the limits of the notion of realism. According to theories we surveyed in the first chapter (see, for example, Dobrenko 1995; Paperny 2002), and as is seen in the current one, after confronting the revolutionary approaches of the Avant-Garde, it became much more complex to identify a piece of art as realistic. Stanislavsky's and Meyerhold's productions are a clear manifestation of this struggle to identify which artists -if any- could define socialist realism and serve as its advocates. On the one hand, MAT, owing to its long-standing dedication to realism, could easily be seen as the vanguard of socialist realism, as it was easier for an existing realist theatre to adapt to new content. On the other hand, Meyerhold was the one fighting through his theatre for the cause of socialism.

Central to the entire theory of socialist realism, therefore, is the very notion of realism. Hence, this chapter commences by examining the origins of the debate on realism and its connection with Russian reality. It then investigates its development through its confrontation with the Avant-Garde and the futurists. Next, it presents the official viewpoint conveyed by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissariat of Enlightenment, and Maxim Gorky, one of the most prominent literary figures of the time and chairman of the Soviet Writer's Congress of 1934. With the purview of these theories, it is aimed to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the relationship between the significant evolution of theatre until 1939 and the (perhaps) disproportionate critical attack on it. By describing the circumstances under which socialist realism was proclaimed and built, it will, perhaps, become easier to understand how and why Meyerhold and Stanislavsky played such a significant role in its formation.

Origins and new challenges

One of the distinguishing features of socialist realism, as it was introduced and developed in Soviet Russia, was the long history of literature under the rubric of realism. From social realism to Revolutionary Romanticism, the Russian intelligentsia had long been engaged in a quest for social utility and verisimilitude. Almost all the aesthetic theories of the late 19th century were issued from the philosophical investigation of these two notions. In *Socialist Realism: An*

Impossible Aesthetic, Regine Robin schematised the differences among the main theorists (Vissarion Belinsky, Nikolay Chernyshevski, Nikolay Dobroliubov, and Dmitry Pisarev), delineating their different perspectives¹⁵¹. For Belinsky, the artistic quality of a work is most important. Truthful depiction and social utility are necessary, but above all, a work of art needs to be beautiful. Chernyshevski, on the other hand, prioritised the concept of the real. He defined ‘real’ as realist in function and social in utility. Thus, it is clear that what is ‘real’ and ‘realist’ is not self-evident. Dobroliubov also prized truthful representation above all, but he asked for balanced attention to artistic quality and social utility. Pisarev was the only one among them that set social utility as the ultimate priority. He declared that literature is important only if it is realistic and based on science.

With the entrance of Marxism as a scientific method at the end of the nineteenth century, several theorists attempted to expand these theories. Among them, probably most prominent was Georgi Plekhanov, who declared ‘a predominance of social interests over literary’¹⁵². In fact, according to Plekhanov, it is exactly this utilitarian aspect of art that raises awareness of what is beautiful and what is not: ‘only that which is useful...can be seen beautiful to social man’¹⁵³. Inevitably, this utilitarian view of art was subject to dispute. Later theorists, from Bogdanov and Lunacharsky to Lelevich, Averbakh, and Chuzhak, disagreed bitterly over what exactly social utility is, and the extent to which that utility should enjoy indisputable primacy over all other aspects of art.

With the socialist revolution and the seizure of power by the working class, another aspect of art came to the fore: mass appeal. Arnold Hauser’s sociological approach to art justifies this. In his *Philosophy of Art History*, he observed that any socially oriented art would have both of these characteristics (social utility and mass appeal). However, he also asserted that, precisely because it does, it will always have limitations. Social utility will always have to dispel arguments over the non-assessment of the quality of art. In other words, it needs to be useful, but not necessarily good. Similarly, mass appeal will always incite a debate between artistic quality and popularity.

¹⁵¹ Robin, pp. 91-101.

¹⁵² Plekhanov 1923-1927, p. 13.

¹⁵³ Plekhanov, Fox, Hartley, and Rothstein, p. 164.

Furthermore, to establish the relationship between the classical theorists of Russian literary past and the Soviet demand for examples from the past, Hauser observed that – between the predecessors and the later artists – there were always interventions of social influences¹⁵⁴. In this case, the social conditions had been changing so drastically that all previous theories of the public's perception of art had to be reformed. The audience itself was completely reinvented as a new audience. Despite the overall industrialization that made mass culture possible, theatre under socialism ceased to belong to the privileged few and became accessible to the masses, which were craving it¹⁵⁵. The people's thirst for theatre revealed that, for the first time in history, mass appeal had to be handled not as a theoretical ideal but as an actual aim to be achieved as soon as possible, if for no other reason than as a weapon in the fight for Lenin's 'cultural revolution'. At the same time, as the public was being re-educated and re-formed, theatre itself had to quickly and continually adapt to meet constantly changing needs. This interdependence between people's needs, preferences, and expectations made the creation of theatre even more complicated.

The artistic field in the 1920s and the role of the party

This interdependence makes Dobrenko's concept of socialist realism – seen in the first chapter – as an invention of both the masses and the authorities as a 'single-creator', more evident¹⁵⁶. However, it seems that if this were the case, there was nothing left to the artist's intuition. In uniting two realms, artists were left more and more helpless amid a radical reverse that had changed (if not cancelled out) all previous knowledge of how art is made. Moreover, they had an additional problem to solve; while the entire society was becoming highly organised, artists were not. A central organ in the quest for 'proletarian art' was sorely needed. Of course, a lot of theorists had recognised this need in the early years after the revolution. However, as it started taking form, it was transformed more and more into a 'front' that would impose its hegemony upon all other artistic groups, rather than a union with a unanimously accepted theoretical foundation.

¹⁵⁴ Hauser, p. 84.

¹⁵⁵ Stites, p. 112.

¹⁵⁶ Dobrenko 1995, p. 135.

The main literary groups that formed the theoretical basis upon which all later assertions regarding the new socialist art were made were Proletkult, Kuznitsa, and October. Proletkult was formed under the leadership of Aleksandr Bogdanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky, a few months before the October Revolution. For its members, art was considered to be the highest and more complex form of labour. According to their leader, Bogdanov, artists should learn all the creative means and methods the proletariat use in their everyday life and apply them to art, with maximum technical and technological efficiency. Proletkult agreed with the official statement that the working class had to find its way towards socialism along three principal paths: the political, the economic, and the cultural. However, although the group recognised that great progress had been made in the first two areas, it claimed that a huge gap remained in the proletariat's cultural advancement. Feeling the responsibility upon their shoulders, Proletkult declared that it was absolutely imperative that they, as the only rightful art representatives of the proletariat, formed its thoughts and emotions based upon the socialist way of life¹⁵⁷.

In February 1920, a part of Proletkult left and formed a new group called 'Kuznitsa'. According to this new group, Proletkult had failed in creating true proletarian art and in organising proletarian writers on a large scale. Kuznitsa's strong attack on Proletkult was quite unexpected, considering that they had more traits in common than opposing ones¹⁵⁸. First of all, they both believed in the very existence of proletarian art and the necessity for developing it. Additionally, in an effort to illuminate the superiority of the working class and the real miracle of creating a communist society by themselves, they both idealised the proletariat. Their solidarity with the international working class was often combined with the Trotskyist ideology regarding a swift universal triumph of the proletariat. Finally, they both accepted that Marxism is the principal theoretical canon, but should not be applied to art. Proletarian art – as imagined by Kuznitsa – was meant to be one of a grand and monumental style, something that remained as a trait in socialist realism. However, perhaps the most significant contribution of Kuznitsa was the organization of the Moscow Union of Proletarian Writers in Moscow in 1920, which soon led to the first All-Russian Congress of Proletarian Writers (in October 1920), where the All-Russian Union of the Proletarian Writer was founded. This union served as the foundation of the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP), which was endorsed by the

¹⁵⁷ Ermolaev, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

Commissariat of Enlightenment¹⁵⁹. It was the first organisation of proletarian writers on a large scale, and it was going to play a significant role in the theoretical and practical debate on proletarian art. After all, their dream to organise writers was close to fruition.

Finally, the OnGuardists or Octobrists (names originating in the journals of the group *NaPostu* and *Oktyabr*, respectively; often referred to as ‘October’) were a group formed in 1922 with the aim ‘to strengthen the Communist line in proletarian literature and organisationally strengthen the All-Russian and Moscow Associations of Proletarian Writers’¹⁶⁰. The majority of the group were young writers, poets, and critics in their 20s – all of them members of the Communist party or Youth wings. October was the first group that tried to back up their ideas on proletarian art through Marxism¹⁶¹. They were also the first to quote from high Communist authorities, although they repeatedly declared that they wanted no party control. They railed against – at any given chance – apoliticalness and formalism as much as the romantic idealization of the metal and the machine, which was very popular at the time. The OnGuardists were clearly militant and confident about their work, although this confidence was based more on their political and ideological background than their actual artistic productions.

In March 1923, the OnGuardists organised a conference in Moscow without actually being the ones in charge for such a call, given that a Writers’ Association had already been founded three years before by Kuznitsa. However, this conference introduced the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers (MAPP), which was a platform under complete October control. This meant a total loss for Kuznitsa and the consequential decay of VAPP, which was now about to get reorganised by MAPP. Thus, the October group gained control of the VAPP as well¹⁶². Two years later, in January 1925, the first All-Union Conference of Proletarian Writers was held. This conference came up with a resolution that included VAPP’s primary theoretical aspects. According to the resolution, art in a class-based society cannot be neutral; it serves a certain class. Moreover, VAPP made it clear that proletarian culture and literature can indeed exist in that stage of socialist development (profoundly attacking Trotsky’s and Voronsky’s opinions). In fact, it was not enough to recognise the ‘existence’ of proletarian culture, but also

¹⁵⁹ Ermolaev, p. 27.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 35.

its ‘hegemony’ over bourgeois and petit-bourgeois literature¹⁶³. Proletarian literature in the Soviet Union had to have but one aim: to serve the cause of world proletarian victory and fight all the enemies of the Revolution ruthlessly.

In 1928, VAPP changed its name to RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), and a new era of persecution of anti- or non-proletarian writers began. For all the causes that they fought for, RAPP claimed that the Communist Party should assist them in establishing the dominance of proletarian literature in the Soviet Union. However, their opposition, the LEF (Left Front of Arts)¹⁶⁴, had always considered itself to be the only representative of revolutionary art. Further, most of its members were former radical futurists, who had always been loyal to the Bolsheviks; and this, for them, was enough to prove their ‘proletarian identity’. Nonetheless, LEF had a rather utilitarian idea of art. With the stated goal of rationalising the production of art forms that would serve the Revolution, and to promote the discovery and utilisation of avant-garde methods, they pronounced literature to be merely a craft and the writer a mere craftsman. In addition, the activity of this writer–craftsman was to be determined by the demands of his client (i.e., the leaders of the proletarian state) and had nothing to do with reflecting the author's psyche. Particular emphasis was placed on ‘literature of fact’ or ‘factography’, rejecting any level of imaginative literature¹⁶⁵:

Since the new society was preoccupied with the building of a new life, it was interested in the precise knowledge of reality, in facts obtained by the intellect, and not in figments of the imagination or intuition¹⁶⁶.

Literature of facts versus imaginative literature -and the very existence of the writer’s psyche in a work of art- were at the core of the debate between LEF and RAPP. Alexander Fadeev, writer and theorist, prominent member of RAPP, and part of the 1934 Congress, asserted that LEF represented the rational trend in literary theory, which, along with the irrational

¹⁶³ Struve, p. 79.

¹⁶⁴ The group of the former Avant-Garde Constructivists and Futurists considered itself as the only representative of revolutionary art. In 1923, they founded the journal *LEF* (Left Front of the Arts), which was published until 1925. In 1927, it was succeeded by *Novyi LEF* (New LEF) and published until 1928. Despite its short run of only 33 issues, *LEF* inspired entire movements and artists not only in Russia, but throughout the world. As a group, they were named after the journal, thus the name without italics.

¹⁶⁵ Ermolaev, p. 74.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

(represented, for instance, by Voronsky and Vsevolod Ivanov), was disrupting the dialectical unity of the conscious and the subconscious, rendering them incapable of creating proletarian art¹⁶⁷. From RAPP's point of view, imaginative literature had roots in Lenin's concept of 'cultural revolution'. According to them:

The Leninist cultural revolution should affect both the social psyche and social ideology. The social psyche belongs to the realm of subconscious reactions, to the realm of immediate perceptions and intuitive reactions to the outside world. Social ideology is the form of the social psyche which is 'assimilated', 'organized' and 'systemized' by conscious effort. Nevertheless, elements of social ideology, when highly developed, can invade the realm of the subconscious and thus become components of the social psyche.¹⁶⁸

However, in essence, RAPP had set its goal to re-educate the entire Soviet society with a culture that would affect both the psyche and ideology, to ultimately create socialist emotions, behaviour, and psychology¹⁶⁹. Writers should focus on the portrayal of the individual as a part of the whole and on the depiction of that individual as a product of their social environment. They supported their arguments by referring to Plekhanov's axiom that 'the psychology of every single literary personage reflects the psychology of his entire class'¹⁷⁰. The form that would best suit this goal was, according to RAPP, psychological realism, which examines all emotions, behaviour, and psychology through an objective, 'scientific' picture of reality.

Realism was set forth as the most suitable literary method for expressing the essence of dialectical materialism, which considers man a part of the objectively existing material world and affirms the primacy of existence over consciousness.¹⁷¹

In addition, this transformation of the human psyche was a goal not only for the reader but also for the writer. RAPP's attitude toward the fellow travellers illuminates this. Despite their troubling relationship – resulting from many internal disputes – RAPP came to believe that

¹⁶⁷ Ermolaev, p. 72.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 64.

fellow travellers must be ‘either with us or against us’. Eventually, they succumbed to the idea that it is indeed possible for an artist of a ‘hostile’ class to take the friendly side, as a result of personal interests and the social environment’s influence upon them. LEF’s standpoint on fellow travellers was indeed friendlier because, in essence, LEF mostly comprised fellow travellers.

The disagreement between LEF and RAPP covered almost all aspects of artistic creation. As a risky generalisation, it could be claimed that LEF represented the ultra-left concept of art and RAPP the ultra-conservative. Evgeny Dobrenko described their differences as follows:

The factographic utopia of LEF (the replacement of literature by the newspaper) was no less radical than RAPP’s aesthetic revanchism: while the LEF members proposed to accomplish the “leap forward” over fiction, the RAPP critics imagined the development of literature as if literature had not passed through the age of modernism, as if there had been neither a Silver Age nor an Avant-Garde.¹⁷²

From MAPP (Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers) to VAPP (All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), and then RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), along with all the organizations of artists that they spawned, there was a profound tendency to create a strong structure that would attract the endorsement of the party, performing – if possible – as its legal artistic advocate¹⁷³. Artists, theorists, and other groups with Marxist backgrounds were constantly appealing to the party in an effort to establish their own theory as the official one and to suppress others¹⁷⁴. For example, in 1923, the 12th Congress of the party demanded dramas on contemporary themes, ‘using the episodes of the heroic struggle led by the working class’¹⁷⁵. Several of the plays in the new Soviet repertory seemed to have responded to this call. For instance, plays by Nikolai Erdman (*Mandate*) or Vsevolod Ivanov (*Armored Train 14–69*), which were staged by Meyerhold and MAT, respectively, followed this new demand¹⁷⁶. VAPP and RAPP, however, continued being provocative by declaring that plays

¹⁷² Dobrenko, and Tihanov, p. 50.

¹⁷³ Ermolaev.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷⁵ Slonim, p. 303.

¹⁷⁶ The following chapters include detailed description on the types of the new plays that got inserted to both theatres’ repertories.

loyal to the regime were outweighed by those hostile to it, or by neutral ones. Therefore, they sustained their fierce charge against the academism of MAT¹⁷⁷ and the formalism of Meyerhold¹⁷⁸.

On the other hand, Prolekult, 'Theatrical October', and LEF, faced great difficulty in forming one cohesive group that could challenge RAPP and also have a major impact. Several factors worked against them and finally caused their collapse, along with that of all other artistic organizations. The random resolutions on art issued by the party until then were rarely helpful. Under these circumstances, the Central Committee of the Communist Party came up with its most efficient resolution (April 23, 1932), which announced the suppression of RAPP and all other proletarian or non-proletarian artistic organizations, and their replacement by a single Union of Soviet Writers. An analogous scheme was established in every other area of the arts, including theatre. After a decade of intense conflict over the purpose of art, a common aim was agreed upon at the First Soviet Writers Congress (1934): to create a central artistic organ that will study realism as a means of portraying contemporary socialist life and its further development. Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), made it clear in his opening speech that 'the key to the success of Soviet literature is to be sought for in the success of socialist construction. Its growth is an expression of the successes and achievements of our social system'¹⁷⁹. However, the need for centralisation, along with a clarification of what 'realism' means, were not simply aesthetic requests. It is a reflection of deeper theoretical issues that the newly born socialist state had to solve.

Further, there were disagreements even within the party, both regarding how one succeeds at socialism, but also regarding socialism itself. On the one hand, there was the need to defend Marxist–Leninist theory and methodology from the effects of the bourgeois political economy and, on the other, the necessity to assimilate Marxist ideology into the new historical conditions that the socialist Revolution had created. However, in reality, the controversy stemmed from the mixed and contradictory internal structure of socialism itself, as a system that simultaneously sows the seeds of the new type of social development and the relations of

¹⁷⁷ See Chapter 5, p. 152.

¹⁷⁸ See Chapter 4, p. 117.

¹⁷⁹ Zhdanov, and Scott, p. 17.

production inherited from the previous stages of development. This mixed character led to distinct ideological controversies within the party, on issues such as the substance of the transitional period (e.g., NEP, ‘state capitalism’, etc.), on who should be the regulator of the popular economy, on what should be the form of socialist property, etc.

On the ideological front, this conflict manifested two main camps that contested the official ideology, one championed by Nikolai Bukharin, and the other by Leon Trotsky. Bukharin supported the position that ‘only with the passing away of the market we can get socialism’ and that ‘the market will be removed by the development itself’¹⁸⁰, an idea that actually weakened the importance of class struggle and essentially encouraged the preservation of NEP. Trotsky forced the Communist Party and the Soviets into a fierce confrontation over the role of the unions in Soviet society, as they sought to transform them into state organizations, questioning, in essence, the leading role of the party in what was supposed to be a dictatorship of the proletariat. To support their ideas, Bukharin and Trotsky formed factional groups, which were separate at the beginning but later combined, causing a major crisis within the Communist Party. At the end of the 1920s, the struggle within the party climaxed. In 1927, in view of the first Five-Year Plan, Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev established the ‘United Opposition’, an open factional movement within the party. A few years later, Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky, reacting strongly to the policy of ‘attack on capitalist elements’ – which was promoted by a majority of the Communist party leadership – and to the collectivisation movement, set up a platform, characterised as ‘right deviation’, in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This intra-party ideological discourse was, of course, reflected in theatre. The passionate conflicts among the different groups constitute a clear manifestation of this. However, the same goes for the intense and deliberate effort by both the artists and the party to resolve these issues. After the 15th Party Congress (December 1927), however, things began to change. The eradication of ideological deviations, with the expulsion of the left opposition at the beginning and the right deviation later, along with rapid industrialisation, accompanied by a general improvement in the socio-economic status of working men¹⁸¹, created a more stable socio-economic environment.

¹⁸⁰ Bukharin, pp. 31-34.

¹⁸¹ Tucker, p. 66, and, DaVanzo, Farnsworth, pp. 115-121.

Socialist realism's introduction coincided with this end of the strong intra-party discourses and the neutralisation of factions. The overall environment became more level, facilitating the development of a more complete aesthetic theory. Hence, the transition from the chaotic artistic field of the 1920s, to artists trying to organise under a central organ on their own, cannot coincide with the formation of RAPP (1928), the liquidation of all artistic groups (1932), and the introduction of socialist realism (1934), each of which – in turn – cannot but be linked to the changes in the economy and their reflection within the party (NEP, 1st Five-Year Plan, and 2nd Five-Year Plan). Furthermore, the fact that LEF, RAPP, and even the Commissariat of Enlightenment had common goals but different strategies might now be seen as a projection of the ideological discourses of the entire society on sectors much more vital to the socialist construct, such as the economy. Their contradictions are more understandable through this prism.

The aesthetic theory of Anatoly Lunacharsky

Standing among all these camps, the Commissariat of Enlightenment, the official arbiter on issues of ideology and aesthetics, had a complex role to play. Serving as its head, Anatoly Lunacharsky had to simultaneously define and implement the government's policies, while taking the controversies between groups into consideration, along with controversies within the party and their consequences within the state organs, and even controversies within his own office. Further, in view of its formation, RAPP was not just another group, it was the result of Kuznitsa's claim that Prolekult had failed to create true proletarian art and organise proletarian writers on a large scale, which had led to the formation of VAPP (endorsed by the Commissariat of Enlightenment). The VAPP came under the control of October, which organised a conference that led to the very formation of RAPP. In essence, RAPP had two precious assets: it had unofficial but strong support from the party and it was an organ as naturally centralised as possible. On the other hand, LEF and the futurists were already ensconced in governmental posts because, after the revolution, they had been considered 'the most appropriate to fill the leading positions'¹⁸², a result of the flight of many intellectuals and of the support the futurists had shown to the Bolsheviks. Throughout the 1920s, though, the

¹⁸² Struve, p. 20.

theatre policies of the Commissariat of Enlightenment had been repeatedly severely degraded by both these groups. Taking advantage of the influence they had among artists, they flagrantly disobeyed the government's resolutions and – from the governmental posts that they had been assigned to – tried to implement policies often contrary to official directions.¹⁸³

However, Lunacharsky, being both reformative and analytical, could not have remained only on the defensive. A Marxist theorist himself, he wrote hundreds of articles on arts, politics, aesthetics, and ideology, establishing the ground upon which Marxist aesthetics of the 1930s were built. Still, the most important reason why his work is significant is the fact that he was a playwright himself and had written a great number of reviews and theoretical analyses of performances.

Lunacharsky argued both with RAPP for repressing any form they did not accept and with LEF for giving workers art that they did not understand (and which probably even the most sophisticated futurist would not¹⁸⁴). 'Do not give us transcripts,' he said, 'but give us an artistic synthesis'¹⁸⁵. It was not the form they chose that he was reacting to; it was their attitude towards art. That attitude was artificial: 'not to draw, but to photograph; not to create, but to transcribe'¹⁸⁶. However, even under these circumstances, he could not reject them all at once. He supported the efforts of fellow travellers, replacing the Manichean 'with us or against us' with 'whoever is against capitalism is with us'¹⁸⁷. His comment on Mayakovsky, for example, is indicative of how he envisioned the 'transformation' of fellow travellers:

Mayakovsky, too, is not taking exactly the right course, although he understands to some extent that the road being taken by futurism may move farther and farther away from 'anti-psychologism'. [Only in that way] is it possible to arrive at comprehensiveness. And it is more than likely, [comrades from LEF], that in the new phase of your concentration you will arrive not at photography, not at the transcript—

¹⁸³ Fitzpatrick 1970, pp. 150-151.

¹⁸⁴ Kuznetsova, p. 70.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁷ Cate, p. 9.

it goes without saying that salvation is not to be found in that direction—but will produce a genuine work of art, [realistically representing] creative existence.¹⁸⁸

He also disagreed with LEF's total disregard of the 'old-bourgeois art'. Instead, Lunacharsky deeply believed in the need for preserving what is good from the old bourgeois culture, precisely because he believed in its evolution:

The proletariat is a class that grew organically from the capitalist epoch, and it cannot be seen as an anarchic rolling stone torn from the soil. Proletarian culture is founded on the achievements of bourgeois, scientific, industrial, and agrarian culture. In the realm of art, we are also unable simply to disregard the enormous experience of humanity.¹⁸⁹

For Lunacharsky, theatre should deal with ideas in a way that will engage common people. In a 1908 essay, *Socialism in Theatre*, he states that bourgeois theatre is 'coarse, base and vulgar' without rejecting its masterpieces outright. Lunacharsky's 1908 essay does not call for the renunciation of the classics. Instead, they must be recaptured from the bourgeoisie 'in order to link great art with the great lords of the future—the people'¹⁹⁰. After the revolution, the emphasis of the Soviet state on the education system and extra-mural education coexisted with the shift of focus on art. 'The socialist revolution', says Lunacharsky in his article 'What is Education?' (1919), wherein he projects the importance of a wide-ranging education system, 'is a revolution in education, both in and out of school'¹⁹¹. He goes on to say that 'extra-mural education is the whole of life'¹⁹², and maintains that, as life is constantly moving forward, people should do the same with their education. More importantly, this is what the socialist state should help them do. Theatre is also expected to meet this goal. This link between education (as cultivation) and theatre is important to establish the difference that Lunacharsky sees (almost as self-evident) between didactic and educative art. He himself would also be opposed to sterile propagandistic theatre, but he could not gainsay the in-depth educational and cultivating influence that theatre has on both its public and the artists themselves.

¹⁸⁸ Kuznetsova, p. 75.

¹⁸⁹ Lunacharsky 1965, p. 22.

¹⁹⁰ Carlson, p. 354.

¹⁹¹ Lunacharsky 1981, p. 50.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 52.

This educative-illuminative aspect of theatre is included among the qualities of a good work of art in his 1928 article, ‘Theses on the Problems of Marxist Criticism’, wherein he describes all the good qualities that a critic should look for in a good work of art (especially in literature). In terms of content, he states that ‘everything that aids the development and the victory of the proletariat is good; everything that harms it is evil’¹⁹³. However, it is not enough to only contain a ‘fundamental social trend’, he goes on to say, but it is also necessary to clearly point out which trend that is and where it is heading. In other words, early Marxist theories should be moved forwards both socially and dynamically. To explain this, he uses an example: artists, he says, might choose to deal with contemporary issues or not; but this by itself does not prove anything:

Without denying the special importance of current problems, it is completely impossible to ignore the tremendous significance of issues, which at first sight appear too general and remote but which, in fact, on closer inspection, do exert an influence on social life.¹⁹⁴

In fact, what Lunacharsky suggests here is that it is not enough to expose a problem (contemporary or not). It is also the responsibility of the insightful artist to identify the general social and/or historical laws that caused the problem by applying scientific methodology. However, unlike science, Lunacharsky is cautious when artists try to also find solutions to the problem they are dealing with. This is because, even if they identify causality, the historical criteria that would verify its applicability might still be missing. Further, it is not primarily the solution that an artist should be concerned with, but rather ‘with posing the problems and analysing them’¹⁹⁵. In fact, all of society might lack these criteria for identifying ‘whether a writer is right, whether he has correctly combined the truth and the basic aspirations of communism’¹⁹⁶. Furthermore, if there is a way out of such a problem, it is by way of a judgement worked out ‘in the clash of the opinions between critics and readers’¹⁹⁷.

Furthermore, what might be even more relevant in examining the critical stance of reviewers and officials towards MAT is Lunacharsky’s next point. Dealing with problems already solved

¹⁹³ Lunacharsky 1965, p. 13.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

in any given historical context is also a weakness, he claims. The artist should choose topics that will facilitate an understanding of an unknown or little-known phenomenon, idea, or concept. From this perspective, elements hostile to the Soviet state are not self-evidently bad qualities (see, for example, in Chapter 4, how the reviewers reacted to Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins* because it showed the victory of the Red Army through the eyes of the defeated). In this case, Lunacharsky suggests that it is important to take the writer's background into consideration and examine whether his way of thinking has evolved or not, and judge based on that. Further, an in-depth examination of how the world is reflected in the consciousness of elements alien to the system might yield useful conclusions on life's phenomena in general. Of course, in theatre, this becomes even more complicated because the writer is not the only one whose background and intentions should be taken into consideration.

Lunacharsky then goes on to identify the good form of a virtuous piece of art. For Marxist criticism, form and content constitute a dialectic pair that work as a whole. However, as it is the content that embodies the social essence, Lunacharsky says, it is the content that will ultimately define the form: 'the content strives of itself towards a definite form'¹⁹⁸.

A writer is able – to a greater or lesser extent – to find for the thoughts, events and feelings of concern to him, those modes of expression which reveal them with the greatest clarity and which make the strongest impression on the readers for whom the work is intended.¹⁹⁹

Thus, the artist first becomes aware of the thoughts, events, and feelings of concern and then tries to create the best form that would most accurately express them. That said, Lunacharsky does not focus only on the importance of good content. He also pays attention to the form. A good work of art should present a clear idea in the most accurate way:

The form must correspond to the content as closely as possible, giving it maximum expressiveness and assuring the strongest possible impact on the readers for whom the work is intended.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

Meyerhold's theatre contributed significantly to this aspect. As we will see, he not only inserted new topics but also exploited futuristic and Avant-Garde forms to help him elaborate on his content. According to Lunacharsky's aesthetics, Meyerhold's works should have been even more appreciated for the originality of their form. In other words, given that a good work of art should always deal with something new (content-wise), and that it is the content that defines the form, the form should be new as well – a form that will support and correspond to the new content. The problem with Meyerhold's work was perhaps what Lunacharsky calls 'too original', meaning originality just for the sake of it. In general, a lack of originality (stereotyped forms and forms that are weak owing to the artist's weaknesses) is as bad as 'over-originality' of form, where the emptiness of content is camouflaged by formal inventions and ornamentation²⁰¹. Interestingly enough, both aspects were commonly found in the reviews that Meyerhold received²⁰². On the other hand, how form was perceived by Stalin is perhaps more indicative of how socialist realism ended up being shaped. His famous statement 'national in form, socialist in content' might not make a lot of sense out of context. However, his original thought that 'the development of cultures national in form and socialist in content is necessary for the purpose of their ultimate fusion into one General Culture, socialist as to form and content, and expressed in one general language'²⁰³ demonstrates the Marxist unity of form and content that Lunacharsky tries to explain and achieve.

Moreover, Lunacharsky's own play, *Vasilissa the Wise*, written in a pseudo-folk style, introduces us to his own meaning of 'folk'. Folk, for Lunacharsky, was a fundamental element of theatre because it strips it of any bizarreness and leads to 'universality'. A good work of art does not appeal only to the few, he observes. It does not tend to reticence and isolation; it concerns the masses. However, it simultaneously avoids the trap of lowering its level in a struggle to address illiterate or sub-literate people. In fact, this was an accusation against both RAPP, which aimed to establish an art form for the proletariat only, and LEF, which, by isolating themselves in the quest for form, were left with no audience. However, it is not that LEF was not concerned about mass appeal. They just assumed that they could train their audience to see reality the way they did. From a different point of view, so did RAPP.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁰² See next chapter.

²⁰³ Quoted in: Frolova-Walker, p. 331.

Nevertheless, in his 1928 writings (but also from his personal experience) Lunacharsky also found it difficult to explain how this balance can be achieved. What he suggested instead was that it is the artist who, by choosing the right topic and expressing it in the right form, has to find this golden ratio. ‘In all’, as John J. Von Szeliski stated, ‘Lunacharsky wrote fourteen plays, praising change and revolution for humanistic rather than narrowly doctrinaire reasons’²⁰⁴.

It could be argued now that the liquidation of all artistic groups in 1928 helped Lunacharsky overcome this dead-end. The supremacy of form over content, the rationalization of art, the priority of facts over imagination and of craft over psyche, the role of the individual, the role of fellow travellers, and the approach to reality are all issues that diverged from all theories produced thus far. However, all theories, along with their differentiations, were formed to fulfil Hauser’s model of artistic creation: social utility and mass appeal. LEF called this pair ‘social necessity of our movement and captivating the workers’ audience’²⁰⁵, while RAPP called it ‘literature written for members of the working class and made accessible to working-class readers’. Further, Lunacharsky called it ‘the building of the new life & new man’²⁰⁶, ‘approached by the whole vast variety of the worker and peasant masses’²⁰⁷. However, in essence, these two elements were present in all three theoretical approaches, constituting the core of all debates. The end of superficial quarrels regarding the establishment of a hegemony among the groups and their replacement by disagreements on the essence of the art of socialism had visible results.

Regarding the essence of realism, Lunacharsky observed that all progressive forces have a propensity towards realism because they are attempting to understand reality in order to reshape it. ‘The task of literature has always been to organize the class for which it speaks’, he declared. The young bourgeoisie supported realism for the same reason: ‘the bourgeois satirists made fun of the upper classes, defended the bourgeois “virtues” and presented the bourgeois ideology in ringing and vivid forms, attempting to make it the ideology of the oppressed mass following in its wake’²⁰⁸. However, as it started losing its dominant power and progressive

²⁰⁴ Szeliski, p. 415.

²⁰⁵ Lawton, and Eagle, p. 193.

²⁰⁶ Ermolaev, p. 75.

²⁰⁷ Lunacharsky 1965, p. 200.

²⁰⁸ Lunacharsky 1981, p. 55.

influence, it fled into pseudo-romanticism and ‘art for art’s sake’. *Mutatis mutandis*, the new proletariat, which tries to establish its own power, is also leaning towards realism for the same reason. The revolution and the building of socialism is an ongoing process that needs a proper understanding of society’s capabilities and the forces inimical to them to establish its power. The former kind of realism, the bourgeois one, says Lunacharsky, involved sketches of reality which embraced the forces that were moving society forwards or backwards without necessarily knowing it: ‘they could not distinguish clearly where their real enemy lay and even were not quite certain in whose name they were in fact writing’²⁰⁹. However, this kind of realism served the proletariat because, technically speaking, it supplied them with their arsenal. Further, naturalism appeared at the time when bourgeois art began loathing reality because reality was not suited to the bourgeois anymore. The ‘photographic writing’ of naturalism was an indignant way of describing a society that had started to rot. For Lunacharsky and Soviet theorists, this is the part of bourgeois realism is reactionary, precisely because it does no more than portray reality as it is, ignoring the forces that are fighting against its decay. Finally, if socialist realism differs from any previous form of realism, Lunacharsky states, this is because it is active: ‘it not only gets to know the world but strives to reshape it’²¹⁰. In contrast, ‘it is for the sake of this reshaping that it gets to know the world’.

Lunacharsky identifies a unique element of socialist realism in its ability to study and describe reality both from the outside and the inside; not only what it looks like but also how it works – its inner logic. This double purposefulness is what he calls dialectical realism. The subjective element that the artist’s viewpoint adds to the portrayal of everyday life not only is not a flaw but, on the contrary, is absolutely necessary. An objective description of reality requires this subjective element, says Lunacharsky; it is part of socialist realism. It is ‘realism plus enthusiasm, realism plus a militant mood,’ and it is what makes revolutionary romanticism different from former bourgeois romanticism, which had arisen from dissatisfaction with life and the total absence of hope. In addition, as socialist realism is a result of observing reality, the playwright does not actually need to verbalise Marxist laws or socialist doctrines for the play to become socialist realist. As Szelinsky observed in his article, ‘The Rescue of the Soviet Theatre’, following Lunacharsky’s thinking:

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

A right socialism was inherent in a right observance of realism [...] because even if one did not have great knowledge of Marxism a good approximation of socialist realism was still possible by writing conscientiously about reality in terms of what the real society was trying to do with its doctrines. Thus, a good play would reflect the source of what goodness was in the society, leading one back to an appreciation of Marxism or, perhaps, only socialism.²¹¹

In the following chapters, how non-Communist artists, such as Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and the ‘fellow-travellers’²¹² responded to their socialist environment is examined. In this way, the reflection of society in the artists’ consciousness can be verified, and with it the ability to follow Lunacharsky’s model of good socialist art, independent of their own political leanings.

The aesthetic theory of Maxim Gorky

Ultimately, Maxim Gorky’s thinking did not differ significantly from that of Lunacharsky. It could be said that Gorky was bringing a more practical perspective to his aesthetics than Lunacharsky’s academic observations. Further, Gorky must be included in this chapter because all the theories mentioned above fail to highlight the contradiction between the need for socialist realism to move forward and its actual postponement by those who use methods of the past. Ultimately, Gorky influenced, more than any of his peers, both the official Soviet guidelines on theatre and the later discussion on realism (in particular, that of Lukasz)²¹³. By examining the traits in Gorky’s aesthetics that impressed the Soviet officials, it will become easier to understand what the actual characteristics that the officials were looking for in the new socialist era.

Gorky’s theory of what is virtuous art and how it can be achieved manifests a clear linear causality in his way of thinking. Like Lunacharsky, Gorky believed that good art is art that identifies and illuminates notions of universal significance. There are feelings, ideas, and situations that – although they might be expressed differently in different parts of the world

²¹¹ Szeliski, p. 419.

²¹² The plays of whom they were staging.

²¹³ Gorchakov, and Lehrman, p. 326.

owing to national, racial, religious, and state differentiation – refer to ideals common to all people: ‘all literary creation, in prose and poetry, is saturated with a unity of feelings, thoughts, and ideals shared by all men’²¹⁴. This universal unification of feelings and ideas constitutes a virtue to be accomplished and is not any literature’s inherent trait. It is the artist’s responsibility to choose those ‘impressions picked out of the chaos with universal significance’²¹⁵. Expressing the universal becomes possible with the creation of types. Types are built characters and/or themes that incarnate all the characteristics of their particular group:

If a writer is able to extract from twenty or fifty or a hundred shopkeepers, officials or workmen the characteristic traits, habits, tastes, gestures, beliefs, mannerisms typical of them as a class and if he can bring these traits to life in a single shopkeeper, official or workman, he will have created a type and his work will be a work of art.²¹⁶

Distinctive examples of this are the adaptations of *Among People* and *Egor Bulychov and the Others*, staged at MAT in 1933 and 1934, respectively. These plays, the first two of Gorky’s plays at MAT since 1905, included typical characters of everyday craftsmanship. His language, full of provincial idioms, attracted the attention of critics. Gorky claimed that only folklore art has this element of universal significance. In one of his key pre-revolution articles, ‘The Destruction of Personality’ (1909), he proved that folklore art lost its generic meaning at the time when specific economic laws replaced the collective spirit of growth and evolution with individualism²¹⁷. For Gorky, restoring folklore art is of pivotal importance as it equates to the struggle between the old and new social values that socialism tries to establish. The value of folklore is also unnegotiable for Gorky owing to its socially educative significance, given that ‘it contributes [...] to our knowledge of life and of our fellow men’²¹⁸. Firstly, it helps people realise that the struggle is common to all people. The ‘tragedy of life,’ as Gorky calls it, is created by the same natural or social forces that surround us all. Folklore in art can assist people in understanding that they are not alone. People everywhere face the same problems; therefore, they should fight together:

²¹⁴ Gorky 1920, p. 748.

²¹⁵ Gorky 1946, p. 132.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-116.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

This anguish that arises from the dim sense of the precariousness and tragedy of life is common to great and small, to everyone who has the courage to look at life with open eyes. And if the time is to come when men will have overcome this anguish and stifled in themselves the consciousness of tragedy and loneliness, they will achieve that victory only by the way of spiritual creation, only by the combined efforts of literature and science.²¹⁹

Secondly, by illustrating the objective laws of cause and effect that lead to all social and personal problems, it educates men to adopt a scientific approach, by demonstrating and proving the causes of and the solutions to these problems:

The artist, like the scientist, needs both imagination and intuition. Imagination and intuition bridge the gaps left in the chain of facts by its – as yet – undiscovered links and permit scientist to create hypotheses [that direct the mind in the] study of the forces and phenomena of nature, gradually subjecting them to human will [...].²²⁰

For Gorky, as it was for Lunacharsky, art must be as precise as science. Nothing should be left to chance. Thus, the artist should develop a scientific methodology in his approach to the phenomena he chooses to talk about and to his art itself. This methodology can be developed by studying, observing, and cultivating the ability to distinguish similarities and differences. Good art is made by developing all these facets:

The fabulous achievements and rapid growth of science are due precisely to the fact that scientists know the history of their own speciality. Science and literature have much in common; in both, observation, comparison and study are of fundamental importance.²²¹

In addition to universality, Gorky tirelessly insisted on the importance of knowledge. He continually advised artists to learn as much as possible, especially about people, their history, and their thoughts. If possible, Gorky suggested that they should learn everything about their society. He advised them to study proverbs, as they constitute good examples of concentrated

²¹⁹ Gorky 1920, p. 748.

²²⁰ Gorky 1946, p. 43.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 43.

collective knowledge, and to learn to think in aphorisms, as this will help them identify the core of the collective knowledge or experience²²². Moreover, he suggested that they should improve their powers of observation, in order to distinguish similarities and differences, and even to be able to choose what is typical about them and what is not. Finally, studying and appreciating the habitual is also important, as – according to Gorky – the habitual is what survives as vital and necessary in each community²²³. In contrast, focusing on human errors is of less importance, as the goal is to eventually destroy them; much more useful would be to expose the ‘cruel contradictions of life that arouse the enmity and hatred of nations, classes, individuals and lead to these errors’²²⁴. By developing a scientific methodology, artists gain additional skills, such as learning to foresee and, along with this, the realization that things can change. Good art should transmit this realization of the possibility of changing the world by not only showing how things *are*, but also that they can change, and how to accomplish this²²⁵.

However, he did not claim knowledge just for the sake of knowledge. Artists should be both objective and subjective. For Gorky, there is an unambiguous relationship between being objective and being subjective. To show how the artist can accomplish this seemingly contradictory goal, Gorky goes back to describing the importance of knowledge.

The work of a writer is determined not merely by the impact of immediate observation and experience, but also by the fact that the living material on which he works possesses the faculty of resisting the writer’s own arbitrary class sympathies and class antipathies. It is precisely this power of resistance, inherent in living material, against the personal approach of the author that can explain why it is that writer living in the conditions of bourgeois society appear, with ever- greater frequency, as impartial historians of their own class, relentlessly describing its vices, its baseness, its greed and cruelty, the whole process of its decline and fall.²²⁶

An objective description is not enough, though. Gorky wants artists to be both objective and subjective. They must bring to light the laws that govern the world:

²²² Ibid., p. 53.

²²³ Gorky 1920, p. 781.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Gorky 1946, p. 98.

²²⁶ Ibid, p. 99.

Reality demands and merits colouring when it is an unswerving continuation of the struggle carried on by its main hero, the common man, for freedom from physical and moral enslavement—never when it is directly or indirectly a justification of the enslavement of man²²⁷.

Thus, art is not only about identifying and portraying the typical, Gorky avers but effectively presenting how and why this might change. If an artist colours reality successfully, he says, this is not suppression, rather the potentiality of terminating it. To this argument of Gorky, illuminating is also a letter that he sent to Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1914, when MAT decided to stage Dostoyevsky's *Devils*. Dostoyevsky's satirical tome against the revolutionary forces forced Gorky to protest against the production of the play. Nemirovich-Danchenko replied by saying that art is non-political and therefore this argument was not enough; however, Gorky explained that the play already had a clear political tone²²⁸. After the Revolution, Gorky's plays constituted a great part of MAT's repertory, which abandoned its 'non-political ways'²²⁹.

All of the above justify Gorky's opinion on realism and romanticism. He rejected both the empiricism of naturalism and the decadence of passive romanticism. He identified in romanticism an active current, that 'attempts to strengthen man's will to live, to rouse him to rebellion against reality with all its tyranny'²³⁰, in contrast to passive romanticism, which 'attempts to reconcile people with reality by colouring it' or even 'divert people from reality'²³¹. What he essentially wanted instead, from literature and theatre, is a revolutionary romanticism:

[...] which advocates a creative attitude to reality, which glorifies labour and the will-to-live and advocates the building-up of new forms of life and which also preaches hatred of the old world, the evil heritage of which we are now overcoming with such difficulty at the cost of so much suffering.²³²

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

²²⁸ Gyseghem, p. 53.

²²⁹ Gorchakov, p. 326.

²³⁰ Gorky 1946, p. 44.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 44.

²³² Ibid., p. 46.

In his later works, he emphasized the importance of the good use of language, along with the necessity of knowing the past (history) and social phenomena to portray that society before socialism has been very cruel to humankind. He stated that the young authors of the Soviet Union must counteract the poisonous effect of capitalism upon the working class with strong animosity. He also stated that they should ‘evoke a proud and happy enthusiasm [...] based only on socialist experience’²³³. The former form of realism is useful only to shed light upon the past. The newer times called for a new kind realism – a realism ‘of the facts of socialist creativity provided by practical experience’²³⁴ .

In fact, this ‘new kind of realism’ is a pivotal notion in understanding the evolution of Gorky’s theory. The overall aesthetics that Gorky was trying to establish during the first years of the Revolution are those of the melodrama. Gerould’s article on Gorky’s early Soviet theories on melodrama astonishingly portrays that, in fact, melodrama was very progressive for its time. Living under tremendously difficult conditions, facing famine, freezing-cold temperatures, typhus, and an extremely difficult civil war, Gorky ‘argued for the heroic art of romantic melodrama as befitting the new revolutionary ethos’. ²³⁵ Psychological primitivism and the simplification of feelings would enable drama to inculcate an audience – living under extremely difficult and often inhumane conditions – with a sense of moral responsibility. Gorky believed that melodrama, which was monumental and popular in style, was also the only genre capable of criticizing the old psychological realism. However, to return to this ‘new kind of realism’ (stated above), Gerould is being unfair when stating that Gorky, with the introduction of socialist realism, ended up defending what he had been rejecting:

Concerned with presenting Gorky as the founder of socialist realism, the critics overlooked his earlier advocacy of melodrama and stressed Gorky’s opposition to Avant-Garde experimentation rather than his criticism of psychological realism. Gorky himself had apparently forgotten the melodrama episode.²³⁶

²³³ Ibid., p. 39.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

²³⁵ Gerould, p. 35.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

Gorky may have neglected the importance he had attributed to melodrama. However, he did not return to the old forms of realism, but moved forward, merging his vision of a dramatic genre bright and colourful, that ‘idealises the individual’ and ‘shows man as a hero, chivalrously selfless and passionate in his devotion to the cause in which he believes’²³⁷, with socialist realism. Plays such as *Yegor Bulychov and Others* (1932) or *Dostigayev and Others* (1933), staged multiple times by MAT, are a good example of this transformation. Gorky was a key figure in formulating socialist realism, precisely on account of his early Soviet writings on melodrama. Gorky’s statement that ‘we supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way’²³⁸ goes back to his speech at the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, and not to 1918. Ultimately, as Cynthia Marsh points out, ‘in many ways, this notion had always underlain Gorky’s aesthetic. Many of the plays exhibit a streak of this romanticism designed to bring about practical change’.²³⁹

Conclusion

Although this chapter did not focus on theatre per se, an examination of the difficult circumstances upon which theatre was based can be of significance. The differences and the arguments within the party and other artistic groups that will be seen in the next chapter – being reflected in theatrical criticism, stemming from the need for identification of what the art of the new socialist era should be – are the same as those identified in the current chapter. This is linked to the various economic developments of the period and the ideological differences that they caused. It was manifested in this chapter that this ideological contradiction existed both in the artistic and the political field, meaning that socialist realism was not forced, as some contemporary scholars portray it, but rather an ongoing development. The principal finding of this chapter, however, stems from the intensity with which Lunacharsky and Gorky composed

²³⁷ Ibid., p.38.

²³⁸ Scott, and Gorky, p. 44.

²³⁹ Marsh, p. 293.

their theories. This is further proof of the substantial importance that the Soviets attributed to the role of art in shaping the characteristics of the new proletariat, which is now in power and needs to act accordingly. For reasons that we will see in the following chapters, the role of theatre in this process of shaping the new socialist consciousness was of paramount importance.

CHAPTER 3

The Meyerhold Theatre and the formation of socialist realism

Introduction

By the spring of 1925, the New Economic Policy (NEP) had restored the Soviet economy and the time had come to abandon any alliance with the private sector. NEP came to an end by 1928, marking the beginning of a five-year plan for the industrialisation of the country. Given all these changes in society, it was under very harsh circumstances that the Meyerhold Theatre attempted to forge its new socialist identity, nearly ten years after the Revolution. During these years, the theatre of Meyerhold received several indignant reviews. Unlike the way in which this attack has been described by several scholars, this kind of criticism very rarely took the form of personal attacks. The focus was on what Meyerhold's Theatre should aim for and how to achieve it, turning this new theatre into an excuse for a broader aesthetical debate.

As Bennett explains, it is true that reviews – although an important source of evidence – are often over-estimated and overly relied upon. Reviews not only constitute just a small part of the theatrical experience but, most importantly, they usually come from experts, adding information about the performance that might have never actually been noticed by the audience

in the first place²⁴⁰. Still, as we saw in Chapter 2, a detailed unfolding of the events that accompany a review is undoubtedly proof of the emotional and cognitive impact that the theatre had on any given audience. ‘The social frames we call performances are the fictional ways in which society is represented by means of writing and the stage’ ²⁴¹, says Patrice Pavis, recommending that any analysis of theatre needs to understand a performance according to what its social function was prescribed to be by society²⁴².

In the case of the first few decades of Soviet theatrical criticism, though, the lack of any consistent or widely accepted method of approaching it often led to unsubstantiated general conclusions based – from time-to-time on mere details of a particular production. This biased and often incoherent evaluation, that did not take the entire range of the artistic and political factors of any given performance into consideration, often resorted to extremes that could hardly help the artist understand what he was asked to do. Nevertheless, this excessive over-generalization or focus on the political function of a project, which often disregarded the artistic process, had an unexpected benefit as the by-product. It led to a significant shift from the obsessive search for good forms, which typified the previous period, to the gradual need for identification of the so-called ‘right topics’. Both artistically and politically, these reviews triggered debates that manifested a unanimous effort to identify the ‘socialist theatre’. In other words, as it was not enough to claim whether a performance was good or not anymore (as there was no commonly accepted model), it gradually changed the focus of the discussion from ‘good or not’ to a more substantial debate on ‘what it actually is’. In this context, it is of additional interest to identify any shift in critical writing itself after 1934, i.e., after the official definition of socialist realism.

Of course, beyond criticism, the most important contribution to forming Soviet Theatre and its aesthetics was that of the artists and their work. In the case of Meyerhold’s Theatre, it may even be argued that it was the hostile reviews that more profoundly unravelled the theoretical landscape upon which the aesthetical debate was taking place, regardless of whether they were fair. To prove this, it suffices to compare the priorities set by the 1934 Congress for the

²⁴⁰ Bennett 2012, p. 8.

²⁴¹ Pavis, p. 261.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 263.

formation of socialist realism with the content of the harshest critics of Meyerhold's productions, which are examined later in this chapter.

The Congress insisted on the right choice of repertoire²⁴³. According to its resolutions, theatres should look for the right choice of plays; that is, those that would help the rising working class to understand the laws of socialism by popularizing Marxist ideas. Addressing Soviet writers, Gorky explained that:

We [the writers] must grasp the fact that it is the toil of the masses which forms the fundamental organiser of culture and the creator of all ideas, both those which in the course of centuries have minimized the decisive significance of labour—the source of our knowledge—and those ideas of Marx, Lenin and Stalin which in our time are fostering a revolutionary sense of justice among the proletarians of all countries, and in our country are lifting labour to the level of a power which serves as the foundation for the creative activity of science and art.²⁴⁴

The Congress also focused on the importance of the struggle against individualism²⁴⁵. As an alternative, it proposed a new social and team model of artistic production. It also insisted on the fight against 'estrangement', as a reactionary element of formalism²⁴⁶; on the focus on social issues; and on the creative approach to classical works in such a manner as to render them up-to-date. These issues were formalised in 1934 but had existed long before in both the aesthetic preoccupations of the theatre of Meyerhold and in the critical analyses of its productions. Further, in 1928, Lunacharsky was already claiming – vis-a-vis the content of the new form of art – that 'everything that aids the development and the victory of the proletariat is good; everything that harms it is evil'²⁴⁷.

This chapter investigates and describes the correlation between the theoretical work – as expressed by the critics before and after the Congress – and the artistic choices of the Meyerhold Theatre. In light of this discussion, it focuses on the repertoire, the discussion of

²⁴³ Scott, and Gorky, p. 21.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 55-63.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

²⁴⁷ Lunacharsky 1965, p. 13.

‘individualism’, and the misconceptions about formalism that survive to this day, primarily because these issues attracted far more interest, as can be seen through my research, than the rest of the arguments. Collectively, both as topics and as argumentation, these three themes outline the acknowledgement of theatre as a significant force in the formation of the new socialist identity.

On repertoire

In general, the choice of plays in Meyerhold’s Theatre did not differ significantly from what was expected of an academic theatre such as his. Between 1925 and 1939, he staged 15 productions (excluding repetitions), whose themes followed the general tendency of the time. According to Harold B. Segel, the themes raised in the new Soviet drama during this period can be divided into three categories. From 1925 to 1928, artists continued to draw inspiration primarily from the Revolution and the Civil War, the NEP, and the drastic changes in daily life brought about by the transformation to socialism. The years between 1928 and 1932 were characterised by individual efforts towards adjustment, the implementation of industrialism, and the new Soviet political mythology. Finally, during the 1930s, theatre additionally focused on the preparedness for war.

Although the repertoire of Meyerhold’s Theatre fell into all three of these categories, it over-emphasized the ‘NEP era’. In fact, Segel notes the following about the preservation of NEP’s thematic after its abolishment, ‘later, however, with the end of NEP, it was used as a means of exposing what was regarded as still “unassimilated” elements in the Soviet society’²⁴⁸, and Meyerhold continued this convention. A series of productions from 1925 to 1939 dealt with this topic. Along with Erdman’s *Mandate* (1925), Meyerhold’s adaptations of Gogol’s *The General Inspector* (1926), Chekhov’s *33 Fainting Fits* (1935), Griboedov’s *Woe to Wit* (1928), Mayakovsky’s *Bedbug* (1929) and *Bathhouse* (1930), and Sukhovo-Kobylin’s *Marriage of Krechinsky* (1933), Meyerhold presented both the personal and social deficiencies of the heroes.

²⁴⁸ Segel, p.148.

Faiko's *Bubus the Teacher* (1925) was a performance about the German Revolutions, Ehrenburg's *D.S.E.* (1930) about the Russian Revolution, and Selvinsky's *Commander of the Second Army* (1929) about the Russian Civil War. These three performances belonged to the very first category. Three more can be claimed to deal with the effort of individual adjustment that preoccupied the art of the late 1920s: Olesha's *List of Assets* (1931), German's *Introduction* (1933) (a play about 'spetsy', German specialists engineers who came to the USSR to give their expertise), and the adaptation of Dumas Fils's *Lady with the Camellias* (1934). In contrast, the 1931 production of Vishnevskiy's *Last Decisive Battle* is perhaps the Meyerhold Theatre's only war-related performance. None of the productions, however, dealt with the advent of industrialisation or the new approach to Soviet politics (either positively or negatively).

Nevertheless, whether this repertoire was 'aiding the development and the victory of the proletariat', as Lunacharsky had asked for²⁴⁹, was still under question. Furthermore, it did not even seem enough for a performance to merely not be harmful, and questions such as how a play, a performance, and consequently a whole repertoire could help the proletariat, remained unanswered. It is obvious that one should first be able to answer these questions before being in a position to evaluate Meyerhold's Theatre. Unfortunately, before 1934, there was no general theoretical direction that could help critics answer those questions, irrespective of whether they had found a specific performance to be 'good'. In other words, in a lot of cases, critics and theorists were trying to find the correct arguments to convince their readers whether a particular performance was 'good for the proletariat' or not, without having agreed on what it is that 'good for the proletariat' means – echoing, in a way, the larger ideological issues of the time.

Meyerhold himself had boldly proclaimed his support for the Revolution, openly choosing sides. Regarding the stance of artists when the Revolution occurred, he stated:

If you like, I'll tell you what sharply divided artists when the Revolution arrived. It's naïve and superficial to think that all writers, musicians, and artists who emigrated were thinking only for their lost bank accounts or their confiscated dachas. In fact, the majority of them didn't have these things. Chaliapin loved money. Everyone knows

²⁴⁹ This concept is thoroughly explained in the previous chapter.

this, but even for him, it wasn't the main thing. The main thing was what Gorky, Mayakovsky, Bryusov, and many others including myself understood at once: that the Revolution was not only destruction, but creation as well. Those who thought the Revolution was only destruction absolutely rejected it. Mayakovsky and I belong to different generations, but for both of us the Revolution was a second birth.²⁵⁰

Furthermore, in a letter to Ilya Ehrenburg in 1924, he accused the writer of not writing plays useful to the Revolution, stating that his plays were suitable to be staged only in a city of the Entente. On the other hand, regarding Meyerhold's theatre, which is and will remain at the service of the Revolution, he stated 'we need tendentious plays, plays that have only one purpose: to serve the needs of the Revolution'²⁵¹. However, although he had obviously chosen sides in favour of the Revolution, his productions, according to the critics, did not always 'serve its needs'. One of the reasons for this was that, despite his intentions, his choice of plays did not always help him. A number of reviews reveal that selecting plays with a rather ambiguous end (e.g., Mayakovsky's *Bedbug* or Olesha's *List of Assets*) or with seemingly irrelevant themes (e.g., Dumas Fils's *The Lady with the Camellias*) raised a lot of issues regarding their appropriateness for the Soviet audience²⁵². Concurrently, they also revealed a huge ideological gap between the supporters and the rivals of Meyerhold's productions. From 1925 to 1939, there were several performances that functioned as a *casus belli* for the critics. A very telling example of this is the case of Gogol's *The General Inspector*.

It is beyond doubt that *The General Inspector* initiated a long debate that led to several articles being printed in magazines and newspapers dedicated to its aesthetics. It also revealed, in a rather bold way, the main ideological issues upon which almost all critical discussions were based until then, such as the fight against apoliticalness and mysticism. Perhaps, Meyerhold's alterations to *The General Inspector*, despite creating one of his masterpieces, were provocative on many different levels. First, he took the setting of the play out of its initial provincial surroundings and based it on Petersburg-like nobility, advancing minor government workers to high-positioned authorities of Tsarist officialdom. While placing the genre closer to tragedy, Meyerhold also massively limited stage space. Wishing – as he clarified it – 'to show

²⁵⁰ Gladkov, and Law, p. 93.

²⁵¹ Meyerhold, and Schmidt, p. 68.

²⁵² All these reviews are thoroughly examined later in this chapter.

“swinishness” in the effective and beautiful, to find “brutishness” in the elegant form of a Briullov model²⁵³, the director conducted almost all of his grandiose production on small sliding platforms. Inside these impediments, in an intentionally disturbing closeness, Meyerhold created an intricate, beautiful arrangement, imitating the impressive characteristics of the Russian Empire. Meyerhold also divided the play into a sequence of fifteen titled episodes that primarily followed the chronological sequence of Gogol’s plot. He inserted pantomime and visual tricks, often with props, to bring out both the true quality of the action and the actor’s understanding of it. Experimenting with different types of montages, he used lines from *The Gamblers*, *Marriage*, *Vladimir of the Third Degree*, and *St. Petersburg Stories*. Regarding the most ‘mystical’ character, Khlestakov, Leonid Grossman describes his first entrance:

He appears on stage, a character from some tale by Hoffmann: slender, clad in black. With a stiff, mannered gait, strange spectacles, a sinister old-fashioned tall hat, a rug and a cane, apparently tormented by some private vision. He is a flaneur from the Nevsky Project, a native of Gogol’s own Petersburg.²⁵⁴

Considered no less ‘mystical’, though, was his double, the ‘Officer in Transit’, who was seen – on the one hand – as ‘a mystical representation of everything which took place behind the scenes of Khlestakov’s soul’²⁵⁵ and – on the other – as ‘an animated piece of furniture’²⁵⁶. Although he was criticised for almost all the changes he made, these experimentations with the classical text helped him further determine his style. According to Nikolai Gorchakov, ‘this production was his “Song of Songs” as a director. If a description of this masterpiece alone of all his presentations were preserved, it would be quite enough to permit one to understand his creative personality’²⁵⁷.

²⁵³ Korenev, p. 79.

²⁵⁴ Leonid Grossman, “Tragedia-buff” in Gogol i Meyerhold, quoted in Braun, 2016, p. 213.

²⁵⁵ Talnikov, p. 52.

²⁵⁶ Lunacharsky 1958, p. 402.

²⁵⁷ Gorchakov, and H. Lehrman, p. 212.



Figure 3.1. *The General Inspector*, Final Scene. Source: A. V. Lunacharsky, Alexander Sumerkin, ‘Gogol-Meyerhold’s “The General Inspector”’, p. 69.

The way Bennett draws our attention in this ‘change of style’ is indicative of how change-sensitive the critics had become. Bennett mentions that ‘as the artist works within the technical means available and within the scope of aesthetic convention, audiences read according to the scope and means culturally and aesthetically constituted interpretive processes.’²⁵⁸ The way Meyerhold had evolved, and along with him his audience, piqued critics’ curiosity in establishing the ground for further discussion on ‘appropriate’ Soviet aesthetics. Meyerhold’s decision to highlight the comicality of the play by eliminating the superficial element of farce concerned numerous critics, as it was linked with the discussion of whether *The General Inspector* is a comedy or not and, ultimately, with redefining all notions.

The remarks regarding the comic genre of the play were once again controversial. For one thing, Meyerhold was interested in illuminating the tragic character of the play and comedy was used to further illuminate this aspect. The theatre critic Alexander R. Kugel supported the director’s decision, claiming that it revealed the tragic element that already existed in Gogol’s

²⁵⁸ Bennett 1997, p. 156.

writings²⁵⁹. At the same time, the American art historian Jere Abbott, who attended one of *The General Inspector*'s performances, mentioned 'the extraordinarily humorous effect' in his diary²⁶⁰. However, other critics – including Mikhail Zagorskiy, Soviet playwright, theatre historian, and critic – considered the fact that not a single person laughed 'at the world's funniest comedy' outrageous and sad²⁶¹. Demyan Bedny, Soviet poet and satirist, who was also among the speakers of the First Soviet Writers' Congress and the author of *Pravda*, *Izvestiya*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, indignantly addressing Meyerhold, told him that he had murdered Gogol's laughter²⁶². This deviation would not seem so unreasonable if one took into account the fact that there was already a debate taking place regarding Gogol's dramatic style. Meyerhold himself claimed that 'Gogol was fond of saying that funny things often become sad if you look long enough at them. This transformation of mirth into sadness is the conjuring trick of Gogol's dramatic style'²⁶³. However, once again, Meyerhold stood between two opposing camps. Gogol was claimed by both the realists (who saw him as a clear example of traditional comedy and linked him with Ostrovsky and Chekhov) and the Symbolists (who pointed to and emphasized the mystical element of Gogol's last period)²⁶⁴. Thus, the question of whether the play is a comedy goes deeper into the idea of defining genres. In any case, Meyerhold's decision to turn it into a farcical tragedy, or rather a tragic farce, was definitely not an easy one. His struggle is evident in a speech he gave to his actors in March of 1926:

The question of the nature of Gogol's comedy, which I would venture to describe as not so much 'comedy of the absurd', but rather 'comedy of the absurd situation'. One needs to be as tentative as this because of the further question: *Is it comic at all?* I suspect that it is not. When Gogol read the first chapters of *Dead Souls* to Pushkin – Pushkin, who, after all, loved a good laugh, 'gradually became more and more gloomy, and finally was absolutely miserable'. When Gogol finished reading, Pushkin said in a grief-stricken voice: 'My God, how sad our Russia is!' Gogol had achieved the desired effect: although the treatment was comic, Pushkin understood at once that the intention was something more than comic.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Kugel', p. 4.

²⁶⁰ Abbott, p. 148.

²⁶¹ Zagorskiy 1926, p. 8.

²⁶² Rudnitsky, and Milne, p. 192.

²⁶³ Braun 2016, p. 263.

²⁶⁴ Symons, p. 153.

²⁶⁵ Braun 2016, p. 220.

However, philological support of such a choice could not have been enough to convince critics regarding his personal struggle. Further, their judgements stemmed from what they had seen and not from the director's intentions. Undoubtedly, the production had generated a torrent of reactions, with the opponents being visibly more aggressive. A swarm of indignant reviews charged Meyerhold with greedily changing the Gogolian character of the play and promoting apoliticalness, mysticism, and formalism on the Soviet stage. M. Zagorskiy's review viciously attacked the director for his alterations, which the critic found 'unreasonable, unnecessary and terribly tasteless' (Zagorskiy 1926). No different were the comments from the literary theorist of formalism, Viktor Shklovskiy, who condemned the performance, arguing that 'the play was just an excuse [for Meyerhold] to make his own associations' and severely criticised the 'bad text'. Particularly caustic was a review by drama and music critic V. Blyum, who called Meyerhold a 'bad captain' because the show had 'no logic or system'; he 'cursed' the performance as being 'leftist sauce with eccentric acrobatics'²⁶⁶, and he entitled it 'decadent bourgeois West theatre [...] such as the 2nd MAT Studio'²⁶⁷.

The final blow, though, was yet to come. The two most serious accusations were that it was apolitical and mystical ('political indifference, mysticism, and formalism merged in Meyerhold's *The General Inspector* in this dissonant, confused and disorganised rumble'²⁶⁸). It is no coincidence that 'mysticism' was mentioned in almost every critical survey of *The General Inspector*. In order to decry it, though, they first had to agree on whether it existed or not. Strangely enough, this was not always easy, especially because mysticism itself was not easy to define. For Erast Garin, the actor who played Khlestakov, the accusation of mysticism was outrageous:

In the interpretation of the director there was hyperbole but no mysticism... the mystical interpretation of Meyerhold's Khlestakov by a section of the critics was a product of their own biographies; they were over-conscientious in the application of their literary education.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Blyum, p. 4.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Garin, p. 28.

However, perhaps even more indicative of this was a comment by Lunacharsky, one of Meyerhold's unexpected supporters:

Some people found mysticism in the production. [...] How could Meyerhold, an inveterate enemy of mysticism of any kind (not long ago he rejected even psychology!) make a Hoffmannian-Dostoevskyan-*St.-Petersburg-White-Nights* show with doubles? Of course, there was nothing of the kind in the production.²⁷⁰

Further, he goes on to analyse the seventh scene according to Meyerhold's division, the 'With a Plump Bottle', to examine what it is that causes this scene to be accused of mysticism:

Khlestakov is drunk, so drunk that reality looks fabulous to him. Not only does he keep telling lies, but he enjoys his lies to the full, and even his smallest wishes seem to come true in no time. When he wants to, he hears magic music play, he sees the delicacies he has dreamt about appear in front of him, etc. So, this scene is not to be understood as true reality but as reality filtered through the haze of a half-drunken mind.

Is it mysticism? But how could it suddenly turn into mysticism? If a novelist has the right to tell us how a drunken man sees the world, why indeed can the theatre not show it? [...] Meyerhold has gone much farther: not scientific hallucinations, but reality distorted by alcoholic excitement.²⁷¹

Those who claimed that there was a 'mystical' element to this performance were, however, not convinced by Lunacharsky's analysis, and they were also furious regarding his unexpected support of Meyerhold. Blyum argued that Lunacharsky's analysis could have affected all arts and turned this into a norm because the outrageous performance now had the support of high officials. For Blyum, 'the problem is not the meaning that Meyerhold chooses to see from Gogol but that looking back he only sees the 'thinker' of the last years, [whose thought was based on ideas] mystical, feudal and reactionary'. The result of such an approach to Gogol was then 'a poor mystical staging of his General Inspector'.

²⁷⁰ Lunacharsky, and Sumerkin, p. 64.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 66.

Regarding the apoliticalness of the performance, a clear answer was once again difficult to come by, given that the two different camps seemed to define ‘political’ differently. The adversaries disagreed on whether interpreting reality from a social point of view is already political or, in order to be political, it has to have straightforward messages. On the one hand, Pavel Markov, theatre critic and head of the Literary Section of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), claimed that criticising the distorted image of love, the intellectual dead ends, and the internal destruction, which were themes proposed by Gogol himself, is already political (Markov 1927). Lunacharsky’s opinion was also similar, for whom ‘the bourgeois love is subjected to ruthless criticism’²⁷², something that disturbs the attentive spectator. However, for Blyum, these arguments were not enough. He wrote that Meyerhold’s production ‘neutralizes your socio-political enthusiasm and switches your emotional “readiness” through theatrical trick while it consists [of] the most apolitical performance of the nine years of the revolution’²⁷³. Another interesting comment was made by Zagorskiy, who found that the problem with the performance was not only that Meyerhold radically changed the play, but also that he did so with no intention of ‘sovietisation’ (without, however, giving any more details on what that entails), a practice that could have shed light on the director’s political construction on the themes that he dealt with. Among these vague and equivocal accusations of *The General Inspector’s* apoliticalness, though, perhaps the most accurate explanation was that of the critic Boris Alpers, who established apoliticalness as the main weakness of the production and defined it as disengagement from the historical process:

The conflict disappears from the stage of the Meyerhold theatre. Scenic action is circumscribed by the boundaries of decaying social milieu... in *The General Inspector* and the *Trouble from Reason* [premiere, March 1928] the director’s field of vision embraces only the dark and hopeless aspects of the historical epoch which is taken up by these works.²⁷⁴

It is important to understand that the reactions to Meyerhold’s production assisted in the quest of defining what makes a performance adequate to serve the needs of the Revolution. Following Gorky’s statement, writers should grasp the fact that it is the toiling masses who

²⁷² Lunacharsky, and Sumerkin, p. 68.

²⁷³ Blyum, p. 4.

²⁷⁴ Alpers, pp. 56-57.

create culture. Thus, if they learn to become good observers, they will be able to depict the new reality that these toiling masses have created under socialism. Was Meyerhold then concerned with the everyday reality of the working people? Again, according to the critics, in most cases not. Still, it is questionable whether this was enough to claim that his productions were irrelevant to the needs of the Revolution. Indisputably, his theatre was an opponent of both capitalism (e.g., German's *Introduction*) and its remnants in socialism (e.g., Mayakovsky's *Bathhouse*), which, as seen in Chapter 2, was common ground among all theoretical factions, Lunacharsky and Gorky included. However, rejecting capitalism is only one aspect of what was expected. His theatre was accused of never having fully succeeded in illuminating any alternative. As several critics had suggested, to merely criticise a bad phenomenon, no matter how severely, was not enough. His repertoire should have been chosen in such a way as to not only condemn capitalism as an exploitative system but to also analyse the themes that could inspire the working class to find solutions and overcome the weaknesses and difficulties of building a socialist system. In other words, his repertoire should not only have condemned capitalism and the surviving petite bourgeoisie – something that might have been of great importance during the first years of the Revolution or the NEP – but also to portray socialism, along with both its resolved and unresolved issues.

Once again, following Meyerhold's productions and the reactions to them can illustrate the essence of the above argument very well. In Olesha's *List of Assets* (1931), a famous Soviet actress – Yelena Goncharova, who was born and raised in Imperial Russia – found it difficult to adapt to the new post-Revolution conditions. Therefore, she migrates to Paris, only to realise the decay of the artistic movement there. Before leaving Russia, though, disappointed by the new conditions that do not offer artistic freedom and personal fulfilment, Goncharova wrote a list in her diary of all the disadvantages of being an actress in the Soviet Union. After going to Paris, where, through a series of events, she grasps the disintegration of bourgeois art, she is ready to return to the Soviet Union. However, having lost her list – which she wanted to correct – she decides to write a new one, this time about the benefits of living in a socialist system. Unfortunately, before she manages to find her way home, she dies. Finding herself in the middle of a strike, she gets shot attempting to protect a French communist with her body, who would have been killed by an undercover policeman. Although fulfilling her duty to the communist cause, Olesha's final stage direction makes things more complicated: 'the unemployed march. Yelena's body remains lying in the street uncovered. There are heard

strains of a march'²⁷⁵. Although this profound polarisation was well-received by critics, the ambivalent ending raised a lot of discussion concerning the obligation of art to not only show 'bad deeds', but also what can reverse them. As Professor Edward Braun notices, 'it would have been simple enough for Meyerhold to cover her and to play "The Internationale", but in this occasion, there was to be no optimistic tragedy, no stirring call to arms, no affirmation of solidarity. This time the audience was allowed to remain seated, alone with their contradictory thoughts'²⁷⁶. But were they? Kruti, in his review, wrote: 'We got the play, carrying a lot of fundamentally new skills for Meyerhold, but it still does not meet the social and political demands, which we have the right today to bring his revolutionary theatre'²⁷⁷. According to Kruti, positive features of the productions, such as the lack of extreme experimentation and clear, linear progress, made it easy to recognise Goncharova as the symbol of the crisis of consciousness that part of the Soviet intelligentsia was facing. Meyerhold's production emphasized Goncharova's uncertainty and indecisiveness, arguing that this kind of instability can be very harmful to the revolution. Interestingly enough, however, the performance showed the same indecisiveness. To merely deny the West is not enough, as the playwright Aleksandr Shteyn commented: 'Olesha, in the scene with Ulyalyum, protests against the profanation of art in the West, but he cannot reveal the true roots of Western culture's marasmus'²⁷⁸. Similarly, Uriel' claimed that Olesha described Western European art through impressive and vivid images, and if he had done the same with Soviet art, it would have been clear why the intelligentsia should choose to support it²⁷⁹; however, he did not. Olesha admitted the reasons why he found it difficult to give his play a happy ending:

She is ready to commit treason. But, well on the road to treachery, she begins to understand that outside those conditions that yesterday seemed unnatural and unbearable, she cannot exist. Here, as it were, the other half—the mind—becomes important, here the heroine steps outside for the second time and dreams, panic-stricken: to return! return! But there is no way to return, because the shadow of treason already lies on her. And the heroine seeks a means of rehabilitation and finds it.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ Sited in: Braun 1979, p. 247.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 265-266.

²⁷⁷ Kruti, p. 3.

²⁷⁸ Shteyn, p. 3.

²⁷⁹ Uriel', p. 4.

²⁸⁰ Olesha, p. 6.

In an altruistic gesture, Olesha, not being able to excuse his heroine, decides to kill her. However, as critics noted, the contradictions of the play were so acute, that killing Goncharova did not make it any easier for the audience to draw conclusions regarding the superiority or inferiority of the socialist system. Kruti, Uriel', and Shteyn all agreed that this play was a step forward for Meyerhold in overcoming his mechanistic treatment of the human condition on stage. However, they also agreed that it was also a step backwards for both Meyerhold and Olesha, as they failed in revealing the reasons why the socialist environment is any better for the intelligentsia than capitalism was. This is the way they defended their affirmation that the performance did not 'meet the social and political demands', something that is ultimately so important for a performance to accomplish because of its power to 'implant' these notions into its audience's minds.



Figure 3.2. Meyerhold rehearsing with Raikh in *List of Assets*. Source: Marjorie L. Hoover, *Meyerhold: The Art of Conscious Theatre*, p. 209.

Portraying the socialist environment and the productive role of the working class in building it was not only a way of approaching the socialist reality but also of depicting its evolution. Furthermore, for Lunacharsky, it was not enough for art to merely establish the 'fundamental social trend', it was far more important to clearly indicate what that was and where it was

heading. In other words, art should be not only social but also dynamic²⁸¹. This discussion of socialist art portraying not only today's reality but also its route towards the future was further grasped during the congress. As expressed by Zhdanov: 'In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as "objective reality", but to depict reality in its revolutionary development'²⁸².

Retrospectively, during the 1920s, to criticise the petite bourgeoisie was not only a common theme, but was also very useful. For as long as the NEP was implemented, plays dealing with the machinations of swindlers and speculators associated with the NEP were very popular. In fact, they were also officially supported, primarily because they raised concern against this new form of petite bourgeoisie that stemmed from NEP.

The concept of NEP allowed the writers and directors of the Revolution to express all their animosity against the old and new bourgeoisie. Under the influence of the New Economic Policy, Moscow life had changed radically. In the evenings, people danced the Charleston, the foxtrot and tango in restaurants. Moscow women, imitating the Western fashion, cut their hair in short bobs, wore little round hats pulled down low to their eyebrows and skirts with hemlines above the knee. Cinema posters displayed the names of Conrad Veidt, Harry Piel and Lya de Putti. A kind of front line emerged in the sphere of everyday life. On one side were lads in Russian blouses and shirts with turn-down collars and girls in red kerchiefs, and on the other, young men wearing ties and girls wearing hats.²⁸³

This description by Rudnitsky portrays the impossible link between capitalism and socialism, and the huge contradictions that it raised among the working class and the few defenders (even among the working class) of the old bourgeoisie. The inevitable step of introducing laws related to capitalism in a socialist economy had its effects on culture, too (but somehow not on writers, according to Rudnitsky). Yet, once NEP was abolished in 1928, attacking the bourgeoisie gradually fell out of favour or, at least, became the least of the problems. The theorists, almost unanimously, were asking now for themes influenced by the working class's everyday life.

²⁸¹ Lunacharsky 1946, p. 13.

²⁸² Scott, and Gorky, p. 21.

²⁸³ Rudnitsky, p. 103.

Lunacharsky defined the new themes as those that would revise all relationships through the new prism of socialism; revise the understanding of the human condition; the notion of cooperation; the notion of universal and eternal situations, such as love and death; and illuminate the tendency to bring harmony to conflicting forces²⁸⁴.



Figure 3.3 Prisyarkin being unfrozen in the second part of *Bedbug*. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, p. 258.

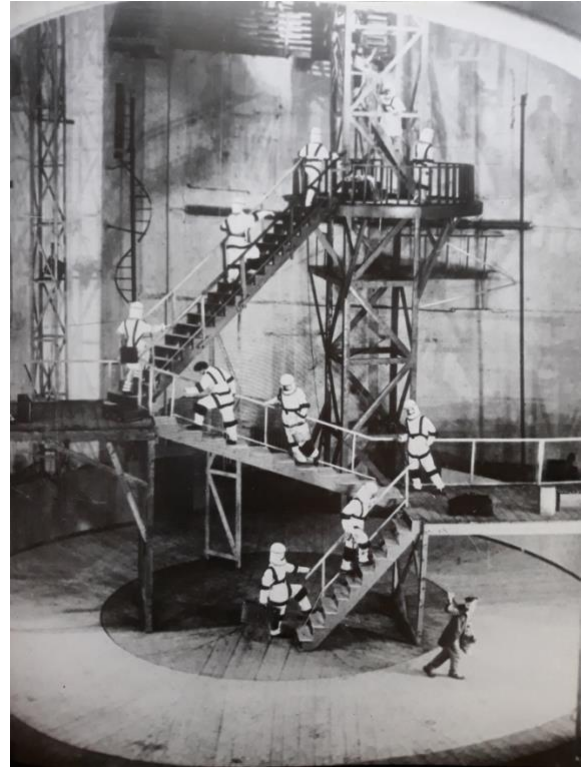


Figure 3.4. The final scene of *Bathhouse*. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, p. 260.

However, in contrast, almost all of the productions of Meyerhold's Theatre during this period did not even include the working class as a theme. Instead, they aimed at confronting bureaucracy or at the critical evaluation of the actions of the intelligentsia or the former petite bourgeoisie, in a way that could potentially help them choose sides (with perhaps one exception, that of Selvinsky's *Commander of the Second Army* in 1929, Meyerhold's only civil war-related production). Not all critics were content with this strategy. While some of them praised Meyerhold's courage and innovative proposals, a great number of others accused him

²⁸⁴ Lunacharsky 1946, pp. 11-28.

of hiding himself behind condemning the petite bourgeoisie without trying to help the working class approach its new reality. ‘The working class’, argued Gorky, ‘do not yet grasp the fact that they are working only for themselves’²⁸⁵, and it is theatre’s responsibility to help them do so, echoing once again its power of shaping social identities.

In fact, one year after Lunacharsky’s call for ‘revised relationships under the prism of socialism’, Meyerhold staged Mayakovsky’s *Bedbug*, and in 1930, *Bathhouse*. In *Bedbug*, Mayakovsky satirised the type of philistine that emerged from NEP in the Soviet Union and, in *Bathhouse*, the absurdity of bureaucracy. For these two productions, ‘Mayakovsky and Meyerhold were accused of the “artificial magnification” of the phenomena they portrayed and of unjustified intent to portray the individual case as something typical’, as Rudnitsky explained, after having mentioned that ‘many critics thought that in *The Bedbug* Mayakovsky and Meyerhold were mistakenly “inflating” the danger of the petit-bourgeoisie.’²⁸⁶ Furthermore, Meyerhold himself had claimed that:

The main purpose is to castigate the vices of the present day. In projecting us forward to 1979, Mayakovsky is forcing us to examine not a world transformed, but the very same sickness that is afflicting society today... Mayakovsky’s aim is to show us that illness[es] have deeply rooted causes, and take [a] great deal of time and a vast amount of energy to overcome.²⁸⁷

However, focusing on the negatives did not seem to agree with the critics’ point of view. Theorists and officials wanted theatre to help the working class ‘develop [its] revolutionary self-consciousness’, as Gorky would express it four years later at the Congress²⁸⁸. However according to the critic Stefan Mokul’skiy, with *Bedbug*, Meyerhold emphasized an already weak political comment of Mayakovsky. In addition, he claimed that the writer chose ‘the path of least resistance’²⁸⁹. The performance not only deviated far from workers’ everyday lives but also portrayed the Soviet citizen of the future as completely unstable, in danger of becoming infected with philistinism through even minimal contact with it. Ultimately, it was accused of

²⁸⁵ Scott, and Gorky, p. 23.

²⁸⁶ Rudnitsky, p. 207.

²⁸⁷ Meyerhold 1969, p. 88.

²⁸⁸ Scott, and Gorky, p. 52.

²⁸⁹ Mokul’skiy, p. 4.

anti-Sovietism²⁹⁰. As Edward Braun observes, ‘the critics were confused: some saw it as an inspired vision of advanced technology, some found it a lifeless abstraction, whilst some even reached the dangerous conclusion that it was a parody of the achievements of socialism’.²⁹¹

The reviews were certainly harsh, especially given that they criticised Meyerhold for something that he did not even intend to do. The stance of these critics can be linked to the Association of the Proletarian Writers (RAPP)’s recent stance against satire as inappropriate for helping the proletariat. Thus, it was once again more of an ideological debate on whether the new socialist theatre should depict the worker’s everyday life or satirise their enemies’ flaws. It took many years for this question to be answered and, in doing so, it presupposed a lot of political changes that took place in the meanwhile. However, by 1934, Zhdanov was in a position to declare that ‘in addition to this, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism’²⁹². This need to focus on the working class became much more obvious at the Congress.

The importance of theatre in this ‘ideological’ remoulding is even more evident in the fact that, beyond the criticism of the plays themselves, even staging plays of crucial social and contemporary themes was not enough per se. The critics wanted the performances to analyse the topics dealt with to such an extent that the causes of the themes could become visible and therefore accessible for deeper investigation. Unfortunately, according to Alpers, Meyerhold’s productions were political only in the broad sense of the term²⁹³. Further, despite being a member of the Communist Party, Meyerhold’s interests were more existential than Marxist. This can be proved by his statement made in 1927 (and, interestingly enough, not during his pre-revolution symbolist experimentation) that ‘if I were asked, what is the artistic challenge of the regisseur, I would say, “He has to comprehend the uncomprehended”’ [sic] ²⁹⁴. Thus, the question is not whether his productions presented the social causes behind the problem or not, but whether he was in a position (or willing) to do it. In the case of *The Lady with the Camellias*, staged in 1934 – a few months before the Congress – the debate on the necessity of

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Braun 1998, p. 251.

²⁹² Scott, and Gorky, p. 21.

²⁹³ Sited in: Symons, p. 161.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 160.

examining social causes reached its peak. One significant wing of critics agreed that the production overturned all expectations for a boldly social and artistic alteration of *The Lady with the Camellias* ²⁹⁵; all bourgeois moralism had remained. The few ‘social phrases’ and the disappearance of several religious comments could not have provided a scientific analysis of the social causes of Marguerite’s world. For example, it portrayed Marguerite’s tender love story, ignoring ‘the actual historical reality of the evil of prostitution, the post-war frenzy, the fight against female slavery, etc.’²⁹⁶. The supporters of *The Lady with the Camellias*, on the other hand, claimed that the performance revealed the real status of women in bourgeois society. Gvozdev mentioned that the text was already progressive when it was first published because it dealt with the theme of love seen through the pessimistic perspective of the literature of the eighteenth century, which functions as proof of the bourgeoisie’s decadence. In addition, according to Gvozdev, this kind of depiction of love forces the audience to think deeply. Undoubtedly, there was fierce debate regarding this; however, on the positive side, it revealed that – independently of whether Meyerhold’s production depicted the social causes or not – it constituted from all sides a sine qua non for the new Soviet theatre, something that would become more evident a few months later, during the Congress.

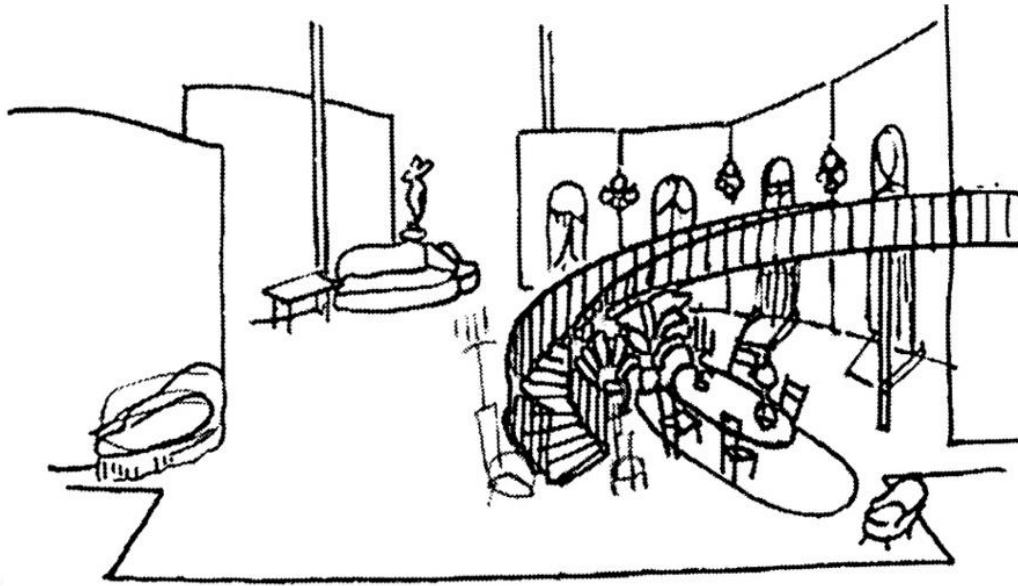


Figure 3.5. *The Lady with the Camellias*, set sketch by I. Leistikov. Source: Beatrice Picon-Vallin, *Meyerhold*, p. 376.

²⁹⁵ See for example, Vishnevskiy, p. 3.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

In contrast, this was not the case with the debate on whether to give priority to the classics or to modern drama in educating the proletariat. This is perhaps what justifies the contradictory reviews in the case of Erdman's *Mandate*. Although Meyerhold is praised for his effort in injecting new Soviet drama into his theatre, he is simultaneously accused of various other issues, such as the fact that supporting a new drama is necessary but not enough. Further, he was lauded by a different wing of critics for his continuously innovative approach to the classics despite ideological insufficiencies. This, of course, in itself constitutes indisputable evidence of the ideological struggle that was taking place in the artistic field. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that Meyerhold came from the left of Proletkult, which was a group that rejected any old bourgeois art. Ilya Ehrenburg, for example, had asserted that 'the classics depict firmly settled forms of life and heroes, while we portray life in its motion'²⁹⁷. Thus, it was a small victory for the supporters of the critical approach to the classics to watch classic Russian or European dramas on Meyerhold's theatre stage. Yet, it was clear that neither classics nor modern theatre was enough. Meyerhold's radical proposal baffled the critics, who did not always know how to respond. As seen previously, the debates on both *The General Inspector* and *Bathhouse* were indicative of this.

This is why, regardless of what he was staging, there was always room for dispute. When, in 1925, he staged Erdman's *Mandate*, one wing of critics applauded him for his choice of supporting newer dramas and merging this new content with his advanced techniques²⁹⁸. However, at the same time, other critics accused him of focusing on the pseudo-scientific while losing the artistic aspect of the production. The reactions were similar to plays such as the *Bedbug*, *Commander of the Second Army*, *Bathhouse*, and Visnievsky's *Last Decisive Battle*. In addition, Meyerhold's choice of repertoire could have satisfied those supporting the classics as well. Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Marriage of Krechinsky* (1933) was hailed as proof that a 'classic can be lively and modern'; *The Lady with the Camellias* was seen as a much needed 'expansion of classical repertoire'; and even *The General Inspector*, despite the huge reaction against it, drew positive reviews, implying that it was a much-needed new approach to the classics.

²⁹⁷ Robin 1992, p. 17.

²⁹⁸ See for example, Gvozdev, and Markov 1925.

The critics could not reach a consensus on whether staging modern or classic pieces was the most efficient way of enlightening the proletariat. However, they once again agreed on the fact that this was the aim. For Griboyedov's 1823 classic *Woe to Wit*, staged in 1928, critics praised the fact that, while it was an old play, it was profoundly linked to its own social movement. To keep this revolutionary enthusiasm alive, Meyerhold had to change it and readjust it, which he did; to some critics successfully, to others not. He finally focused on the love story to portray the social element of the play. Of 1929's *Commander of the Second Army*, they claimed that it enriched theatre with new themes, such as the role of the masses and the fight against extreme individualism.

In 1934, Gorky would sum up the discussion on the classics by asserting that the goal is not to merely reproach the past, as 'there is no sense in reproaching it; it should be studied'²⁹⁹. This is also what he suggested artists should do with new art. They should study reality and become good observers of it so that they do not simply portray it but also analyse the social politics behind it, something that bourgeois art sorely lacked³⁰⁰. Ultimately, with both the classics or with contemporary playwrights, art's object should be the 'cultural education of the masses' and 'the development of the revolutionary self-consciousness of the proletariat, to foster its love for the home it has created'³⁰¹. Of course, this terminology has always been slightly ambiguous, especially in identifying what the 'revolutionary self-consciousness' is and how artists can aid and abet its development. Again, if one follows the themes repeatedly found in the reviews of Meyerhold's productions and then compares them with how they were approached at the Congress and afterwards, several important things can be understood. After examining the literature of the time, the current researcher identified two very common topics of discussion, frequently repeated based on and triggered by Meyerhold's performances. 'Revolutionary self-consciousness' has been linked with the fight against individualism and formalism.

²⁹⁹ Scott, and Gorky, p. 40.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 52.

On individualism

A considerable number of reviews criticised the notion of ‘individualism’ in Meyerhold’s theatre. The discussion on ‘individualism’ (as with that on ‘formalism’, which we will see in the next section) was very important, precisely because theatre could trigger discussions and provide new insights on these complicated philosophical issues in a way that is approachable to a wide audience. Initially, this notion meant two things. It was related to individualistic creation, on the one hand, and to the promotion of individualism through artistic work, on the other. In the beginning, individualism and individuality were both used as opposites to the collective, which was, in turn, a notion primarily linked with Marxist ideology. Following the discussion on Meyerhold’s productions, this part of the thesis portrays that it was only during the late 1920s that the individual as part of the collective gained prominent attention.

For Soviet officials, the social essence and the distinction between ‘individualism’ and ‘individuality’ concerned their aesthetics from the very beginning. The reviews of Meyerhold’s performances not only evidence that, but they also manifest that – throughout the years – the arguments against the former became more intense. The general sense was that Meyerhold’s productions, despite proclamations, were not trying to fight individualism. For the 1930’s production of *Bathhouse*, V. M. Blyumenfel’d claimed that ‘especially today, [theatre] has to stubbornly struggle against the individualistic foundations of traditional psychological drama [under the new] pace of socialist propaganda and construction tasks’³⁰². One year later, Olesha’s *List of Assets* was found to have many ideological contradictions. Therein, the individual, struggling to support one system or the other, found herself in the middle of a personal crisis, unable to see why the socialist system was any better. However, if the play was unable to find the key to the problem of the intelligentsia, it was because the question was not put forward in the right way. In other words, it isolated the protagonist from her social surroundings. Individualism was seen as the separation of the person from society and the isolated examination of any exceptional case. The critical approaches, however, were not always focused on the actual individual and were not always that explicit. An additional reason why Meyerhold was accused of individualism in his productions was that he did not portray how society influences the lifestyle and, consequently, the choices of certain theatre heroes. For example, the idea that a performance (if not the play in the first place) should focus on the

³⁰² Blyumenfel’d, p. 3.

social background of the heroes and not only on their actions, was profound in 1925's Erdman's *Mandate*, where the individualistic elements of the heroes were not seen as the result of the old bourgeois (or NEP) society of consumerism, but as inherent traits of certain people. Lunacharsky's doubts regarding this particular performance are related to this, and had to do with the 'missing of a positive hero and a truthful reflection of the Soviet life'³⁰³. Erdman's *Mandate*, being an overall critique of all kinds of opportunists, did not leave any space for any positive aspect of this society, making it not only un-truthful but also overly focused on exceptions. The same aspect was criticised by P. Markov, whose response was that the importance of fighting on the third front³⁰⁴ needs a more well-rounded and critical approach, rather than the uncritical presentation of 'bad examples':

At one time, we were talking about the approval of the new theatre 'generalities', in both ideological and aesthetic terms, which were easy and convenient to combine with the image of modernity. [But] they coincide with opportunism, if they are not linked to an attitude of investigation. The idea is to shut out not only the aesthetic formalism of the deceased [system], but also the ideological formalism; the dead slogans. We are talking about the revelation of their validity, rather than an irresponsible recitation. It is a gathering of what has already been awakened in the theatre that lives like the undercurrent of our theatre and that erupts in some productions.³⁰⁵

The only time the fight against individualism was present in Meyerhold Theatre's productions was in 1935's *33 Fainting Fits*, an adaptation by Meyerhold of three short stories by Anton Chekhov. There, the 'evil of individualism' was linked with the idleness, laziness and irresponsibility of Chekhov's contemporary intelligentsia, who did nothing more than philosophise. In this case, Meyerhold was praised for highlighting this aspect (Yuzovskiy).

Thus, it seems that Meyerhold did not share the passion that the Soviet theorists had for eliminating individualism; at least not to the same extent. In *Meyerhold at Work*, Paul Schmidt asserted that 'Meyerhold's conception of acting totally denies the idea of "character", with its nineteenth-century overtones of bourgeois individualism – of private morality and personal

³⁰³ Erdman, Hoover, Genereux, and Valkor, p. 8.

³⁰⁴ Referring to Lenin's reformation of the Soviet education and culture, known as the 'third front' of revolutionary activity.

³⁰⁵ Markov 1925, 291.

motivation'³⁰⁶. However, Meyerhold had never actually expressed his struggle against individualism in the same terms. Initially, what Meyerhold did was intensely attack the notion of 'psychologism' that was widely used in Russian theatre, inherited from its symbolist and realist past. Back in 1913, Meyerhold was already stating that:

A theatre which presents plays saturated in 'psychologism', with the motivation of every single event underlined, or which forces the spectator to rack his brains over the solution of all manner of social and philosophical problems – such a theatre destroys its own theatricality.³⁰⁷

Almost ten years later, he would still be fighting against psychologism – the insistence on understanding and explaining all on-stage actions based on motives stemming from inner psychological issues. In addition, he would form an entire method based on scientific reasoning to fight exactly that. In his lecture on Biomechanics, titled 'The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics', delivered on 12 June 1922 in the Conservatoire of Moscow, he claimed that:

There is a whole range of questions to which psychology is incapable of supplying the answers. A theatre built on psychological foundations is as certain to collapse as a house built on sand. On the other hand, a theatre which relies on physical elements is, at the very least, assured of clarity.³⁰⁸

Meyerhold was fighting against psychologism because he wanted clarity in the transmission of his message to the audience. Although clarity for what or of what might not be all that clear, and he later stated that:

All psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes. By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences the excitation which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor's performance: what we used to call 'gripping' the spectator.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Meyerhold, and Schmidt, p. x.

³⁰⁷ Braun 1998, p. 158.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 199.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

If Meyerhold wanted to ‘grip’ the spectator, the actor must have created those perfect physical actions that would enable him to communicate with the audience. Therefore, the individualistic psychologism that explains why a character does what he does is no longer required. Instead, it is replaced by the manifestation of the very action in its flawless execution. ‘Why’ is replaced by ‘how’. The idea goes beyond the acting to the whole production, which works like a perfectly synchronised orchestra. Further, it was not only the human factor that was added to the total; it was the set as well. The constructivist sets of the first post-revolution production were as much a part of the entirety as the actors themselves. In fact, actors were mechanised to such an extent that they constituted nothing more than cogs in a well-oiled machine. In other words, in this dynamic and scientifically organised construction that Meyerhold proposed against psychologism, individuality had no place – let alone individualism. Consequently, they both tended toward extinction.

This was a very common view of the Soviet perception of Meyerhold’s theatre. If everything was made by Meyerhold so as to portray the efficiency of the collective work and the creation in it of the ‘new man who is capable of any form of labour’³¹⁰, how did he get to the point of *Pravda* accusing him of ‘an anti-social atmosphere, subservience, restricted self-criticism, narcissism’³¹¹? In other words, how did he reach the opposite end of what he was aiming for? Platon Kerzhentsev explained this paradox by claiming that:

Generally speaking, [the] rebellious personality, in criticizing the life of its society, seldom and barely realized its own responsibility for society’s odious practices. And still more seldom was the prime motive for its criticism of the existing order a deep and correct understanding of the significance of social and economic causes; more often, criticism was provoked either by a sense of the hopelessness of one’s life in the narrow iron cage of capitalism, or by a desire to avenge the failure of one’s life and its humiliations. And it can be said that when personality turned to the working mass, it did not do so in the interests of the mass, but in the hope that the working class, by destroying bourgeois society, would ensure freedom of thought and liberty of action.³¹²

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 200.

³¹¹ Kerzhentsev, p. 4.

³¹² Scott, and Gorky, p. 55.

This is also one of Gorky's assertions about how personality can work against the collective whole, if not seen as a projection of this very same society. He declared this during the Congress of 1934 and, although he was referring not to Meyerhold but to the European and Russian literature of the nineteenth century, his words somehow referred to him; it is fruitless to criticise a society and its bad deeds, he affirmed, if one does not realise his 'own responsibility for society's odious practices'.

At the same time, Gorky argued that the fundamental theme of pre-revolutionary literature was the individualistic 'tragedy of a person'. A person who, although he perceives the bad deeds of the ruling class of his time and the misery and despair under which he lives, if he rebels, it is only to establish a better position and way of life for himself. By doing so, he commits two crimes against society: firstly, he tries to save himself individualistically, independently from the rest of the society; and secondly, he does so without even trying to identify that the root cause of his misery and despair lie in the way society and its economy work, which therefore should be changed. Indeed, Meyerhold tried to replace this 'tragedy of the person' by creating types of people and behaviours that would criticise the negative aspects of society better than the psychological justification of any given character could. Nevertheless, to criticise without honest self-criticism was merely another kind of individualism, Soviet critics went on to argue. On 17 December 1937, *Pravda* published Platon Kerzhentsev's famous attack on Meyerhold and his theatre, under the title 'An Alien Theatre'. The article, which claimed that Meyerhold's Theatre had been turned into a complete political failure, closed by accusing it of 'an anti-social atmosphere, subservience, restricted self-criticism, narcissism'.

Several contemporary scholars seem to agree with this view. This over-arching role of the director in Meyerhold's Theatre led to an authoritative approach to theatrical creation that left almost no space for an actor's initiative. Jacqueline Robin Ladouceur, in her dissertation on Meyerhold's training methodology, observes that:

Authoritarian tendencies in his directing, tendencies evolved simultaneously with his theories of the *mise en scene* and his later development of Biomechanics. Starting in the period of WWI when he ran a studio on Borodinskaia street, his method of training and working with performers became less democratic. Ultimately, the very structure of the biomechanical exercises, used to train Meyerhold's actors from 1922 onward,

facilitated Meyerhold's control of the *mise en scene* and thus, the development of authoritarian tendencies.³¹³

Ladouceur claims that Meyerhold's technique of training actors was, in fact, a collection of pre-defined movements that the actor had to learn to execute in maximum precision. The actor was at no point responsible for the final result, as even the sequence of these movements was pre-defined by someone else: the director. Therefore, the biomechanical actors were left with no creative initiative³¹⁴. In addition, the fact that the entire method was supposed to be based on a scientific approach to acting left no space for controversy. Its influences from Taylorism and the idea of standardisation and the economy of labour had turned the method into an inviolable directive³¹⁵. Furthermore, its reliance on pseudo-science was criticised from the beginning. However, it was not only this that worried the critics. It was the over-centralisation of power to one person. 'Leaderism' over 'leadership', as Gorky would have said. Schmidt describes this turn in Meyerhold's approach to directing as follows:

Meyerhold was the first director to insist on the primacy of the director's role, indeed the first to conceive it as a role, something to be played out, performed—but a creative force as well, equal to the role of the playwright in shaping the theatrical experience, an experience considered different from the playtext, and not achieved merely by actors. Without the director as demiurge, henceforth, nothing theatrical would obtain. The role of the director is here perceived as an extension of the Romantic notion of the Interpreter, shifted away from the actor and the idea character, from the mimetic impulse merely, to more complicated impulses.³¹⁶

Going back to Ladouceur, with Biomechanics, the theatrical production was achieved 'not merely by actors'; there was almost no influence of actors on the final product. Actors became similar to musical symbols in Meyerhold's score, along with the set, the music, and the space.

This is further testified to by Gromov. Viktor Gromov, the actor who played the father in *The Proposal*, described Meyerhold's 'creative force' slightly differently:

³¹³ Ladouceur, p. 1.

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 194.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

³¹⁶ Meyerhold, and Schmidt, p. xiv.

The director stopped the actor literally at every word and gesture, even when the acting was good, to add suggestions which the actor was to synthesize with his own interpretation of the part. If Meyerhold approved the synthesis, as subsequently verified in a run-through, the painstaking analysis was not repeated.³¹⁷

It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that one of the major disagreements between Meyerhold and Kerzhentsev, during their early theoretical writings, was on collective creation³¹⁸. It had become clear that, although Meyerhold might be truly fighting against individualism, he suppressed collectivism too. For it is impossible, according to Kerzhentsev, to combine collective creativity with directorial authority³¹⁹. The issues that this approach could create in forming the new social identity of the masses explains, perhaps, the intensity of the debate over his performances.

Nevertheless, it was Biomechanics that trained actors in self-control, governability, responsiveness, and obedience³²⁰ – traits that, as Ladouceur observes, were invaluable for the collective work. Further, in accordance with the demands of the new age of the machine, which began with industrialisation made by the socialist system, the actor was additionally trained in economy, efficiency, and efficacy. The machine and the speed of production had raised expectations enormously, and the deification of the future and the machine were connected to the liberation of man from any kind of physical coercion, giving him the strength to dominate not only the terrestrial sphere but also in the entire universe. This affected a lot of aspects of society, including art. Accordingly, Meyerhold, by developing his technique of Biomechanics, was creating the different moving parts of the single machine that altogether comprised the Meyerhold Theatre. Creating individualistically was one way of upholding individualism. The other way was producing art that did not promote the collective spirit, while simultaneously endorsing an individualistic approach to life.

All of the above generated concerns regarding Meyerhold's Theatre. As seen in Chapter 2, Maxim Gorky, in *Destruction of Personality* (1909), studied the function of folklore art and

³¹⁷ Hoover, p. 228.

³¹⁸ Aquilina, pp. 29-48.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

³²⁰ Ladouceur, p. 204.

identified – as a problem – the fact that art lost its generic meaning at the historical moment when specific economic laws replaced the collective spirit with individualism as means of growth and evolution³²¹. All things considered, Gorky proposed that re-establishing folklore in art was of crucial importance in the struggle between the old and new societal values that socialism attempted to establish. According to him, this restoration of the collective spirit and the fight against individualism (the destruction of personality) are synonymous with socialism.

Through this, he established some characteristics that the artist should have to excel in his work under the aegis of socialism. The sequence of duties that the good artist should fulfil and the very discussion of subjectivism are significant because they prove an ideological difference between Gorky and Meyerhold. However, this difference in method did not make Meyerhold any less sensitive to socialist needs. Meyerhold, knowing – or at least understanding – the impact that his work would have on its audience, would not leave this fight on a theoretical level. Not only did he not support subjectivism, but he also tried to extinguish it because he linked it to individualism:

You need not think that my thesis about ‘associations’ leads to some kind of subjectivism in the perception of art. Someday, physiologists, psychologists, and philosophers will show that the realm of associations is connected with certain general (and even social—after all, in the final analysis, everything is social) phenomena for the majority of people. The sound of a factory whistle means one thing to me and something else for those who, their entire life, have gotten out of bed at the sound of that whistle. Sounding in the background of a scene, it will say one thing to one person, and something else to another. That isn’t subjectivism, but is in the realm of social associations.³²²

The concept of associations does indeed win over psychologism and the inner development of the character, as it considers both the actors and the audience as a collective whole, who are of different backgrounds are independently extract meanings from given associations. In fact, for Meyerhold, this procedure is part of the collective creativity. As Schmidt says:

³²¹ Gorky 1946, pp. 113-116.

³²² Law, and Gordon, pp. 164-65.

Meyerhold structured gesture to present a possibility, a virtuality, an idea. This is a social act. It involves two gestures – the primary one is the gesture of presentation: the act which indicates and defines the gesture as gesture, and which demands from the spectator the gesture of response.³²³

In that sense, Meyerhold thought he was fighting against subjectivism. Yet, not only was he not doing so, but ultimately subjectivism was not even the problem. Meyerhold might have linked objectivism with the collective spirit and experience, but he missed the point that subjectivism exists irrespective of this. Thus, the aim should not be to suppress it or ignore it but to identify its function.

In 1934, under the influence of socialism and Marxist philosophy, in addition to the major economic changes in society (further industrialisation and collectivisation), Gorky advanced his theory on ‘individualism’. Individualism must be purged, he said; collective spirit must be supported; but now, by doing so, artists should develop, first in themselves and then in their audience, the spirit of what Gorky calls ‘socialist individuality’. To do this, they ought to change the way they work. Artists should work collectively, and this is the main reason why unions must be created and organised. In other words, not only to unite workers in a single body for practical purposes but mainly to help them understand their corporate power. ‘The idea, of course, is not to restrict individual creation but to furnish it with the widest means of continued powerful development’, he stated³²⁴. One might think that this kind of assertion applies only to individual arts, like literature or painting, but the case of Meyerhold proves that working together did not always mean working collectively. Meyerhold was the absolute creator of his productions, responsible for every single detail. This led to him being considered as working against the cultivation of his own ‘socialist individuality’, while simultaneously leaving minimal space for the actors to develop theirs.

To explain the concept of ‘socialist individuality’, Gorky went back to assessing the critical realism of the nineteenth century to illustrate that even the best and most revolutionary voices among them would only criticise everything without suggesting alternatives or improvements, reverting often to what it had itself repudiated. In contrast, a sequence of events needs to occur

³²³ Meyerhold, and Schmidt, p. xv.

³²⁴ Scott, and Gorky, p. 65.

simultaneously for the new socialist art to arise. As seen previously, art needs to be both objective and subjective. In order for the former to be possible, artists must develop their observation skills and be educated to the highest level. To achieve the latter, they need to be active members of the collective body. Being an active member of the collective body in the socialist society with its new advanced needs and expectations meant to exist in ‘socialist individuality’, which is, in turn, impossible if it occurs outside the collective body. This is the frame within which Meyerhold was being accused of individualism and philistinism.

Ultimately, Meyerhold’s biomechanical obedience and lack of creativity were turned against not only individualism but the individual itself. Indeed, ‘the concept of individuality was abandoned in favour of the dynamic, mechanized, and collective entity’, explains Ladouceur³²⁵. Yet, this was exactly what Meyerhold was accused of. By focusing on exceptions, he lost sight of the big (social) picture. By focusing on the biological elements of the formation of an actor, he lost the social ones. Both of those elements were beginning to gain pivotal roles in Marxist society, which, according to Engels, was that ‘the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations’.³²⁶ Meyerhold, in an effort to denounce individualism, removed the individual as well. He did so at a time when it was being made clear that individualism should come under double attack. It had to be distinguished not only from its previous form but also from the positive notion of individuality, which was now connected with personal initiative and responsibility. The extent of the attack on Meyerhold is indicative of theatre’s influence on the masses.

On estrangement and formalism

The struggle against individualism is not very different from the struggle against formalism. What might be different is the effect that they have on the audience because they are not perceived equally. The discussion of formalism and its effect on people is, perhaps, more ideological and philosophical. It is a debate where Meyerhold’s Theatre is considered among the most influential, because, even if it was MAT that had full houses, it was Meyerhold that was raising the difficult questions. As we have seen in the first chapter, Mally noticed that

³²⁵ Ladouceur, p. 8.

³²⁶ Marx, and Engels 1969, p. 14.

much more attention was paid to classical performances than experimental ones (Mally 1996). Although this is true, it is not accurate regarding the theoretical discussions that experimental performances were raising. Nicolas Rzhevsky, author of one of the histories of the Russian theatre (Rzhevsky 2009), asserts that:

In speaking of Soviet cultural history, Western critics have usually placed heavy emphasis on the political attacks directed at ‘formalism’. But the exaltation of form, of technique and literary device, carries in itself a type of ideological commitment, or in any case, this is how the Kremlin views the matter. Therefore, the denial of formalism by the Soviet leadership was not simply a denial of stylistic innovations in art, but a denial of those artists who held that an intellectual commitment to art was possible outside of the party line.³²⁷

If the Kremlin, as Rzhevsky claims, identified formalism as ‘a type of ideological commitment’, then – independently of which the other ideology was – it was already proven that the fight against formalism was an ideological one. Further, as has already been said, the fight for socialist realism was – above all – an ideological fight regarding what the aesthetics of the new socialist theatre should be. Given the fact that Meyerhold was continuously accused of formalism, it worth investigating his work to identify why formalism was so evil and unacceptable for the Soviets. If formalism is linked with ideologies alien to socialist realism, then establishing it in Meyerhold’s Theatre could further the identification of socialist realism’s ideological background.

When Meyerhold’s Theatre was closed down in 1938, the *Teatr* and *Pravda* newspapers published the ‘Resolution on the Liquidation of the Vsevolod Meyerhold Theatre’. Among the reasons for this decision, it was asserted that:

The Meyerhold Theater, over the course of its entire existence, could not free itself from positions alien to Soviet art, thoroughly bourgeois and formalistic. As a result, to suit ultraleft craftiness and formalistic mannerisms, even classical works of Russian drama were presented by the theatre in distorted, anti-artistic guise, with a

³²⁷ Rzhevsky 1969, p. 420.

misinterpretation of their ideological substance (*The General Inspector*, *Woe to Wit*, *Tarelkin's Death*, etc.).³²⁸

This was not so unexpected after Kerzhentsev's article on Meyerhold's 'alien theatre', and the long string of negative reviews beginning in the 1920s, which only reached their peak during the 1930s, most of which have been included in this part of the thesis. Notably, for Erdman's *Mandate* (1925), Vasily Sakhnovskiy wrote that Meyerhold's approach was pseudo-scientific, stimulating only the opinion of the vulgar spectator. 'He gives a terrible picture of Russian reality', adding on that 'authors, actors and spectators are delighted only by the vulgarity in which they are bathed'³²⁹. Even more obvious was the attack on Gogol's *The General Inspector* (1928). Blyum, who was – at the time – the critic and head of the Theatre and Music section of the Central Committee of Repertoire (Glavrepertkom), launched a fierce attack against it, claiming that 'political indifference, mysticism, formalism, merged in Meyerhold[']s *The General Inspector* in this dissonant, confused and disorganized hum'³³⁰. In 1935, the repetition of Griboedov's *Woe to Wit* was seen by Em. Beskin as 'a tribute to formalism and expressionism, which was actually wearing the stamp of the pre-revolutionary period works of Meyerhold, following his inclination on aesthete-theatre'³³¹. Formalism was also linked with the 'decadent art' (either of the West or otherwise). *The List of Assets* was accused by I. Kruti of being 'decadent erotic art', and Uriel' drew attention to its 'decadent music'.

Meyerhold had several chances to theoretically justify his work. This is to say that, although Meyerhold's productions were accused of being formalistic, he also had the chance to defend them in congresses, conferences, meetings, and personal correspondence by explaining why they were not formalistic or, if they were, why his insistence on creating them this way. However, his defence was weak, as is evident in two of his speeches made in 1936 and 1939. The first one was his speech in Leningrad and Moscow against 'meyerholditis', where he either blamed other artists for imitating him in a negative light or critiqued himself based on his previous works only, dispelling any relation to society in general. In his 1939 speech, he seemed to show some regret for his 'mistakes':

³²⁸ 'O likvidatsii teatraim. Vs. Meyyerkhol'da', p. 2.

³²⁹ Sakhnovskiy, p. 2.

³³⁰ Blyum, p. 4.

³³¹ Beskin, p. 4.

Hard as it is for me subjectively to lose my theatre, I must consider the decision to close it made by the party and our government to be correct (*applause*). I think, comrades, that it is a lesson—a good lesson for all those today who would like to smuggle in an insidious formalism, and I can say with certainty that not everyone is yet cured of this disease. I can reel off a whole list of names of directors, a whole list of productions in which insidious formalism is still being smuggled.

[...] Comrade Stalin's remark that we must learn to live like Lenin is especially necessary to us the workers in the realm of theatre. [...] So, comrades, when we talk about socialist realism in our creative work, let us bear in mind that this is possible only on the certain condition that our worldview has a firm foundation, for if our worldview does not, then there can be no such work. Hence a grasp of the bases of Marxism—Leninism seems to be utterly indispensable. [...]³³²

However, at least for the officials, both speeches proved to be insufficient. The chairman of the Committee on Artistic Affairs, Mikhail Khrapchenko, responded in *Mir Iskusstv*:

Comrade Meyerhold [...] referred to his errors, but his admission of them was to some extent formal. The party teaches us that it is not enough merely to confess our errors; we need to demonstrate their nature and their essence so that others may learn from them, above all young people. We need to show them where such errors lead, how they arise, and where their true nature lies, why such errors are harmful and how they can be overcome. He said nothing about the nature of his errors, whereas he should have disclosed the errors that led his theatre to become a theatre inimical to the Soviet people, a theatre that was closed by order of the party.³³³

Later theorists commented on whether this accusation against Meyerhold for formalism was accurate or not. Those who do, usually use the words Formalism (with the F capitalised, as Erlich suggested in his 1973 article on Russian Formalism) and formalism (with lowercase 'f') in equal measure. For example, Marjorie Hoover suggested that 'for several reasons, the word "formalism" should be abandoned by Meyerhold's accusers. It has pejorative overtones in most

³³² Senelick, and Ostrovsky, p. 461.

³³³ Ibid.

West European languages, as well as in Russian'³³⁴. Others, notably Robert Leach, identified why Meyerhold's Theatre was not only formalistic but also a good representation of what formalistic theatre means³³⁵:

Meyerhold thus aligns himself with Russian Formalism, which arose contemporaneously, and which investigated problems such as what was 'artistic' about art. The Formalists, several of whom knew Meyerhold well, could point to the way his work defamiliarized not just its apparent subject matter, but conventions themselves, in order to show that theatre is theatre, and thus throw the responsibility for the creation of meaning to the spectator.³³⁶

These two statements already manifest the misunderstandings that the use of these terms created. However, it is important to clarify the difference between the two ideas, because the reasons why the attack against both of them was so necessary are – once again – ideological. Hoover, in her article, claims that the accusation that Meyerhold's was a formalist was wrong, and she justifies this by saying that, at that time, the word 'formalism' in Russia was linked to the linguistic circles of Shklovsky and Tynyanov; this is only partly true. There is indeed a differentiation (although not always clear) between Formalism and formalism, as Erlich observes. The capitalised 'Formalism' was a movement of literary historians and philologists that flourished in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s – a school of thought not yet unified. There were several different factions within it, with its two main centres being the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the OPOYAZ (*Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka*, Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in St. Petersburg. Although it was not a homogeneous movement, the Formalists had a clear ground of agreement, which was the autonomous nature of poetic language and the necessity that it be studied as such. Their principal aim was to identify a series of traits exclusively linked with poetic language. They tried to establish what it is that constitutes artfulness and to consequently create a method that would enable them to analyse it in a scientific way. These early Formalist theorists rejected the academic eclecticism of Russian literary history, the insistence on socially meaningful critiques, and the metaphysical preconception of the Symbolist movement that preceded them.

³³⁴ Hoover, p. 236.

³³⁵ Leach, p. 27.

³³⁶ Leach, p. 98.

Despite differences, common to all the theorists of the different schools (including Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, and Yuri Tynyanov), was the fact that they were examining the evolution of literary forms in isolation from any social and historical context³³⁷. In addition, given that the term ‘formalism’ was first used by the opponents of the movement and was explicitly rejected by the Formalists themselves (Erlich), to be a formalist meant not only to focus excessively on formal experimentation, but also to do so independently of the effects on the creation and perception of art, and independently of social conditions.

Moreover, Formalism and Futurism were not two unrelated movements. Mayakovsky, the leading defender and theorist of futurism, editor of both *Lef* and *Novyi Lef* (two futurist journals), was engaged in both the Moscow Linguistic Circle and OPOYAZ. Thus, there was an active and direct exchange of ideas between the two movements³³⁸. Further, the two movements both developed around the decline of Symbolism and its metaphysical approach to reality. Although Russian Formalists were primarily concerned with establishing a scientific method of approaching literature, both linguistically and critically, their transformation of literary theory had more far-reaching results, establishing a clear connection with the Avant-Garde movement in art, as well as with all aspects of Soviet life of the 1920s³³⁹.

Meyerhold’s pre-revolution theatrical experiments were thematically and formally equivalent to the current futurist trends and gained scholarly support through the discourse of Formalism, which aimed to stimulate the consciousness of the beholder through the device of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization or estrangement)³⁴⁰.

Contemporary scholars have proved that there is a connection between the theoretical works of the Russian Avant-Garde and Formalism. Sylvia Jestrovic suggests that this connection is based on the notions of conventionality and theatricality³⁴¹. The link between the two movements lies in the concept of ‘*zaum*’ or ‘trans-sense language’, which refers to a poetic syntactical device. *Zaum* could be found in a series of theatrical experimentations, other than

³³⁷ Murphy, p. 95.

³³⁸ Bennett 2003, p. 25.

³³⁹ Droznin, p. 1.

³⁴⁰ Haran, p. 61.

³⁴¹ Jestrovic, p. 33.

the obvious use of ‘*zaum*’ language by Russian futurist poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. It is comparable to Tzara’s dada or Artaud’s theatrical hieroglyphics, being an exceptional stage language used as a self-referential sign rather than for an extra-referential purpose. ‘In ordinary speech’, Jestrovic claims, ‘the message is intended to refer to the object; in zaum, the message is the object’³⁴². It is this non-verbal or anti-verbal use of the language that influenced Meyerhold’s theatrical strategies, motivating him to change ‘the emphasis from dramatic text to the actor’s body by using masks, clowning, and improvisation’³⁴³. Jestrovic maintains that this kind of innovation, which she calls ‘transtheatrical inscriptions’, employs mechanisms from various different aspects of theatre, combining them to create one new theatrical language. She also suggests that Meyerhold’s use of ‘*ostranenie*’ is illustrative of ‘mixing “highbrow” and “lowbrow” art, marginalised conventions with popular ones, and the Occidental theatrical tradition with the devices of Oriental performance’³⁴⁴.

It is no surprise that ‘*ostranenie*’ appears in Meyerhold’s technique. ‘*Ostranenie*’ was first defined by Shklovsky in his 1917 essay, ‘Art as Technique’, as the conscious separation of established habits of reception. In everyday life, we are used to seeing things in a particular way, which prevents us from actually perceiving what we see. To become able to actually see things again, we must overcome this habitual perception. By making things strange again, we are able to re-discover them. In art, the use of unusual verbal imagery constitutes an exemplary strategy for breaking the illusion of realism. This process of making things appear strange is, according to Shklovsky, the essential task of any kind of art³⁴⁵.

Futurists were impressed by the technique. Linking it with Pavlov’s theory of association, Meyerhold too became very enthusiastic about the results that defamiliarisation might have:

I have come to regard the *mise en scene* not as something which works directly on the spectator but rather as a series of ‘passes’, each intended to evoke some association or other in the spectator (some premeditated, others outside my control). Your imagination is activated, your fantasy stimulated, and a whole chorus of associations is set off. A

³⁴² Ibid., p. 48.

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 62.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

³⁴⁵ Spiegel, p. 369.

multitude of accumulated associations gives birth to the new worlds—whole films which have never got beyond the cutting-room. You can no longer distinguish between what the director is responsible for and what is inspired by the associations which have invaded your imagination. A new world is created, quite separate from the fragments of life from which the film is composed.³⁴⁶

In addition, defamiliarisation in Meyerhold's Theatre was expressed in another way. Robert Leach observes that:

Characterization in Meyerhold's theatre, therefore, was a vehicle for (in Formalist terms) 'deformation' and 'estrangement', which often revealed social rather than personal meanings. Thus, Tarelkin, the minor bureaucrat, become 'estranged' when seen as a jester-acrobat, flying across the stage on a trapeze to escape the police.³⁴⁷

Defamiliarisation in Meyerhold's Theatre, moreover, manifests itself in the difference between the character and the actor, the exaggeration of body language and make-up, the display of the theatre's means of production, and so on. According to Jestrovic, it is used to 'emphasize indirectly the presence of the author and the artificiality of the stage world, impeding the suspension of spectators' disbelief', echoing Formalist concepts. 'Meyerhold used the style of the grotesque as a principle of distancing in theatre, where evoking "something hideous and strange" counteracts the automatization of perception'³⁴⁸.

From the perspective of defamiliarisation, Viktor Shklovsky opposed the concept of habituation, which for him is related to naturalism, and proposed a means to destroy habitual patterns and initiate an intensified restoration of conscious experience, according to the idea that 'poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression'³⁴⁹ – and, as such, found a lot of supporters among Russian Avant-Garde artists. Meyerhold himself tried to combine this notion of estrangement with the needs of the Revolution.

From the Marxist point of view, however, it seems that it was the opposite that they were

³⁴⁶ Braun 2016, pp. 318-19.

³⁴⁷ Leach, p. 74.

³⁴⁸ Jestrovic, p. 34.

³⁴⁹ Erlich, p. 629.

looking for. It was not the exceptional and the unfamiliar that they were interested in. Through discourse on, it became clear that the key concept was the identification of the ‘typical’ and not the exceptional. Indicative of this is Georgii Malenkov’s report at the agenda-setting Nineteenth Party Congress (1952):

As our artists, writers, and performers create their artistic images, they must constantly bear in mind that the typical is not that which is encountered the most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force. From the Marxist–Leninist standpoint, the typical does not signify some sort of statistical mean. The typical is the vital sphere in which is manifested the party spirit of realistic art. The question of the typical is always a political question.³⁵⁰

It is important to note that the conflict had begun much earlier. In general, as Tony Bennett notes in his work *Formalism and Marxism*, the futurists aimed ‘to revolutionize literature not by revolutionizing its content but by revolutionizing the techniques of literary production’³⁵¹. They sought to use literature to promote neither a substitute for scientific knowledge, nor revolutionary sentiment, although, in the case of Meyerhold, one could suggest that he wanted these too. They mainly aimed at the very shock effect of awareness, inducing an innovative way of perceiving reality by modifying the systems through which it is ordinarily perceived. From this perspective, the revolutionary content was – in most cases – merely an excuse for further formal experimentation, as there is no end to the possible alterations of form.

On the opposite camp, there were those who supported the value of traditional realism and the role of the ‘fellow travellers’ – notable among them being Maxim Gorky. Bennett commented the following on this group:

Arguing that literature had a cognitive function, offering a knowledge of historical development through an anthropomorphic and poetically concrete depiction of the socially typical, ... argued that revolutionary literature should aim to reflect historical contradictions and not to conjure them away through an excess of revolutionary

³⁵⁰ Sited in: Groys 1992, pp. 50-51.

³⁵¹ Bennett 2003, p. 30.

optimism.³⁵²

Apparently, this interpretation was closer to the party's call for the aforementioned 'ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism using the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal'³⁵³, as expressed by the Commissariat of Enlightenment, Andrei Zhdanov, at the 1934 Congress. To identify how this 'truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal' can be produced, one needs to go back to Gorky's theory on 'types' and the 'habitual'. As seen previously, the 'socially typical' plays a principal role in Gorky's aesthetic writings. Once again, according to him, to portray the 'habitual' is not to merely illuminate a positive example. Further, the 'habitual' might not be something important to imitate, rather something that needs to be changed. In any case, the 'habitual' is what managed to survive during and through various social changes and conflicts, and it is this very process that proves its necessity to any given society. Where formalists chose 'defamiliarisation' as a means to reinvent perception and evaluation, Gorky chose 'observation'. In contrast to the 'grotesque', he places the 'typical'.

Gorky believed that good art is art that identifies and illuminates the notions of universal significance. There are feelings, ideas, and situations that – although they might be expressed differently in different places in the world owing to national, racial, religious, state, or cultural differences – refer to ideals common to all people: 'all literary creation, in prose and poetry, is saturated with the unity of feelings, thoughts, and ideals shared by all men'³⁵⁴. This universal unification of feelings and ideas is evident in the greatest masterpieces of world literature. Above all, it constitutes a virtue to be accomplished and not an inherent trait of literature. It is the artist's responsibility to choose those 'impressions picked out of the chaos with universal significance'³⁵⁵. Expressing the universal becomes possible with the creation of types. Types are built characters and/or themes that embody all the characteristics of a particular group. As Gorky points out,

If a writer is able to extract from twenty or fifty or a hundred shopkeepers, officials or workmen the characteristic traits, habits, tastes, gestures, beliefs, mannerisms typical of

³⁵² Bennett 2003, p. 24.

³⁵³ Scott, and Gorky, p. 18.

³⁵⁴ Gorky 1920, p. 748.

³⁵⁵ Gorky 1946, p. 132.

them as a class, and if he can bring these traits to life in a single shopkeeper, official or workman, he will have created a type and his work will be a work of art.³⁵⁶

How can one make good art, that is, art that identifies and illuminates the notions of universal significance? Amazingly enough, it was not only the futurists who insisted on the importance of science. For Gorky, too, art has to be as precise as science. Nothing should be left to chance. Thus, the artist should develop a scientific methodology in his approach to the phenomena he chooses to talk about and to his art itself. This methodology is developed by studying, living, observing, and cultivating the ability to distinguish similarities and differences. Good art is made by developing all these facets.

The fabulous achievements and rapid growth of science are due precisely to the fact that scientists know the history of their own speciality. Science and literature have much in common; in both, observation, comparison and study are of fundamental importance.³⁵⁷

Gorky started developing his theory many years before the Revolution. However, in 1934, he was still tirelessly supporting the importance of portraying the ‘habitual’. His speech at the Congress proves that his whole investigation of folklore and nineteenth-century art had – as a common result – the concept that the greatest heroes in the history of literature were the ones who represented types. To create such types, the artist needs to ‘directly participate in the work of creating realities, in the struggle for the renovation of life given that such an outcome arises when reason and intuition, thought and feeling have been harmoniously blended’³⁵⁸.

Zhdanov and Gorky were not the only ones who denounced defamiliarisation. A.I. Stetsky, manager of the Culture and Leninist Propaganda Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party also showed his passionate support for the need to portray the ‘habitual’. In his speech at the Congress, he added that this need for ‘typical characters in typical circumstances’ was primarily requested by Engels himself. Above all, Stetsky claimed that artists should not forget that the new socialist state belongs to the ‘workers and collective

³⁵⁶ Gorky, p. 43.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Scott, and Gorky, p. 35.

farmers’, and that it is them who must be able to understand the artistic creation. For Stetsky, ‘to understand’ was already a decisive win over formalism, which is art without content, alien to the working people. What ‘genuine artists’ should do is get rid of the depiction of the decay of the petit bourgeoisie, and have ‘content, inspire, challenge and lead onward’³⁵⁹.

Therefore, from the Marxist point of view, it was clear that formalist art could not be combined with the art of socialism, primarily because it originated in ideologies alien to socialism itself. When Lunacharsky assigned Meyerhold to lead the Theatrical Department of the Commissariat of Education in Leningrad (TEO), the futurists were supporting Revolution and Soviet power with concrete creative art, as they did from the very first day of the Revolution (for reasons that are more complex than merely ‘being revolutionaries’). When the Revolution erupted in 1917, the Formalist/Futurist nexus of the theatrical Avant-Garde served to drive communism. Meyerhold joined the Bolshevik Party in August 1918, and that year produced Vladimir Mayakovsky’s *Mystery Bouffe*, deemed the ‘first Soviet play’³⁶⁰. However, this does not negate the fact that futurists, influenced by the aesthetic theories of Plekhanov (see Chapter 3) and positivism, became unable to portray the ‘social reality’ along with the objective laws that surround it. With this theoretical background, it perhaps becomes easier to explain Kerzhentsev’s emphatic tone in attacking Meyerhold’s Theatre. Comments such as ‘a-political’ or ‘a-social’ theatre can refer to Meyerhold only under the aegis of dialectical materialism. His theatre was political, but this was not enough. ‘Marxism’, says Bennett, ‘has always claimed to be a revolutionary science. This does not merely mean that it is a science placed in the service of social and political revolution but also that it is, as a science, revolutionary in its approach to defining problems’³⁶¹. This is exactly what Meyerhold and the rest of the futurists were accused of. They did not see the objective laws operating outside this ‘social reality’ and therefore, they excluded historical and dialectical materialism from their way of thinking. They also excluded any kind of art that was not directly useful or practical. This ‘empiriocritical’ approach to art was first rigorously criticised many years before the revolution. In ‘Materialism and Empiriocriticism’ (1908), Lenin critiqued the subjective–idealist philosophy of empiriocriticism and showed that dialectical and historical materialism is opposed to it. Ultimately, Meyerhold’s ‘fault’ was not the use of defamiliarisation. The problem was – and it

³⁵⁹ Scott, and Gorky, p. 109.

³⁶⁰ Haran, p. 61.

³⁶¹ Bennett 2003, p. 99.

was common for the formalists of the time – that, although he managed to alienate his audience from the objects of their perception, the very object used was not one that would help them build socialism. The problem was not the technique per se, but the lack of any content deriving from the socialist reality analysed under the principles of dialectical materialism.

Consequently, being accused of formalism in the Soviet Union was a severe accusation for an artist and meant much more than experimenting with an artistic form. It was directly related to ideological deviations from Marxism, and thus it was considered crucial for Marxist theorists and officials that it be discovered, shed light on, and then eliminated, irrespective of the performance's popularity or the director's good intentions.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that no discussion on theatre was ever solely about theatre as an art; they were, above all, about politics. For the first time in history, a society was built by and for workers, wherein every notion needs to be re-examined – if not redefined – as to what it means under these new socialist conditions. This was the politics that required discussion. However, even among those who agreed with the new status quo, there was no consensus as to what exactly was the best way to make theatre both creative (for the artists) and useful (for the people). It is during the period that this thesis examines, though, that this consensus was being created; it was being created with the same harshness and cruelty that defines class war.

The evidence in this study suggests that three of the characteristics that were later commonly accepted as socialist realist were officially introduced in the 1934 Congress, but were also current in the debate on theatre before that: an appropriate repertoire, the fight against individualism, and the problems of formalism. In fact, it was exactly this critical debate that changed the tradition of simply commenting on them to an official necessity of fighting against them.

Regarding his repertoire, the themes that Meyerhold chose were generally accepted as suitable. The Revolution, the Civil War, NEP, and later the implementation of industrialisation and the new arrangement of the collective life – even the efforts of the individual to adjust to new

conditions of society – seemed appropriate and did not provoke widespread conflict. Further, according to the Marxists, artistic work is a reflection of the reality in the consciousness of the artist³⁶², and therefore, it was expected of artists to be preoccupied with these themes. From this perspective, Meyerhold was dealing with topics that concerned his contemporary audience. However, the controversy over the way this reality is to be depicted was not resolved. This was because, according to Marxist aesthetics, the artist expresses – through his work – a particular vision of reality and a cognitive, moral, and aesthetic valuation of it, which the recipient, in turn, decodes based on his own knowledge and ideology³⁶³. Ultimately, the artist exploits the educative power of theatre (a term coined by Gorky) independently of his intentions. Therefore, it was not only the theme that would turn the play into a ‘socially valuable’ performance; it was primarily the artist’s approach to it and the way he would choose to confront it. Seen from this viewpoint, there were plays written by Soviet writers that could not have been turned into ‘socialist performances’ while, on the other hand, plays or even non-theatrical texts of writers of any social background could portray reality in a way (i.e., ‘truthfully’) that could help the audience draw conclusions on how reality works.

Further, the fight against individualism had been waged from the very beginning, precisely because it was linked to bourgeois mentality. In Marxist terms, individualism was the result of commodity fetishism or alienation. In broader terms, individualism was related to the capitalist right to private property, with its strong economic references to the egocentric development of the individual. Although the new socialist construct was meant to destroy this individualistic notion of personal development and replace it with the collective formation of society, it was extremely difficult to go against what most people had known until then as ‘natural’. Approximately ten years after the Revolution, with the further building of socialism under the Marxist–Leninist model and the advancement of industrialisation and collectivisation, individualism had come to be seen as an opportunist current that prevented the evolution from the ‘individual construction of the society’ to the ‘collective’. In theatre, this was expressed in two ways: (1) the artist, as an individualist who works and creates only for his own benefit, neglecting the creative power of the collective and the work of art – in this case, the performance – which does not portray the collective way of life (thus being ‘untrue’ to the depiction of the socialist reality); or (2) even worse, depicting individual solutions to

³⁶² Johnson, p. 174.

³⁶³ Ibid.

collective issues. This chapter has shown that critics and theorists interpreted Meyerhold's approach to art in both ways. Therefore, it also testifies that, independent of what exactly it would be or look like, should openly fight individualism in both its message to the audience and in its very process of creation. However, if the first post-revolution years over-emphasized the importance of the collective, by 1934, the equal importance of the individual as part of the collective (e.g., the Stakhanovite movement) had become obvious too. This was a seeming contradiction that Meyerhold's approach could not have sold, because, although he emphasized the collective result, he did so by diminishing the individual's creative initiative.

Finally, formalism was ultimately rejected because it prevented theatre from portraying a truthful depiction of reality, irrespective of whether this was indeed the intention of the artist or not. Formalist theatre had adopted a mechanistic approach to reality that, although it over-emphasized the social role of art (at a time when this quality was very much needed), it did so by neglecting the objective social laws that defined the movement of this reality. This chapter suggests that Meyerhold's use of formalism and estrangement – although intended to precisely identify what is wrong with the society – could not actually succeed in doing so because it highlighted the problem without identifying its causes, and therefore without offering any solution. In addition, in the case of Meyerhold, a director who had openly supported the Revolution, it can be claimed that the formalist approach was more of an ideological limitation to a person who had welcomed the benefits of a socialist revolution for the masses, but without adequately understanding its communist ideology. Overall, the intensity of the discussion over theatre proves its power in forming the identity of its audience.

CHAPTER 4

The Moscow Art Theatre: Conservatism &

Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, undoubtedly, Meyerhold and his theatre received critical reviews disproportionately stricter than his pioneer work might actually deserve. This is why the examination of both theatres must be put into perspective with their historical time. We often resort to analogies to talk about the past. In this spirit, the Russian revolution has been portrayed as earthquake, as a sudden shift, which in turn have created cracks in the shell of the social universe. And although it is convenient to resort to the shape of the earthquake, as it correctly emphasizes the rupture in the historical development and the dividing lines within social formations, it is not completely accurate. The study of the revolutionary moment of 1917 indicates a fluid, chaotic picture of great unrest, a long period of turbulence and instability. Something between a tidal wave and a tornado, which through its own course reconstitutes its environment. It is under these prism that this thesis looks on every action made by both theatres during their course to the more stable 1930s.

As with the Meyerhold Theatre, for the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) the first decades after the Revolution constituted a period of reassessing old practices. All the theatrical accomplishments that had made it distinguishable in the past needed to be re-examined under the new prism of socialism and of the Soviet practices inside and outside the theatre. Despite its long-standing legacy, MAT was deeply influenced by the socio-economics of the October Revolution. In

contrast to Meyerhold's Theatre perhaps, MAT was not affected from the start by the theatre debate initiated by the New Economic Policy (NEP) or its abolition. This was primarily because, as a theatre with no profound communist roots, it was not extensively inspired by ideological conflicts within its plays, in contrast to theatres and artists that bloomed around the October Revolution. Nevertheless, NEP was not the only economic policy that affected theatre. In this chapter, the post-revolutionary plays dealing with the first Five-Year Plan and the 'socialist construction' through industrialisation and collectivism are proved to be a more fertile ground for MAT. As for the second Five-Year Plan (1933-1938), this influenced not only the repertory of the theatre but also the entire discussion of what is, within and without MAT. At the same time, the threat of war – which had already initiated a patriotic approach to both contemporary and classic plays in 1933, the intra-party instability commencing with Kirov's murder in 1934 and even the turn of Comintern towards popular fronts with the 'The Comintern's Popular Front Policy' between 1934 and 1939 – shifted art towards a more conservative approach than that taken in the past; an approach that was not (and probably could not have been) inspected by the Communist Party, especially vis-a-vis its Marxist analysis. In this social framework, investigating MAT is very important – primarily owing to its popularity and potential influence on people's perceptions regarding these issues. Thus, like the Meyerhold Theatre, the MAT, while eschewing the fires of formalism, was no less affected by the strong criticism of various aspects of its artistic creation; this was neither strange nor unprecedented. MAT represented the crown of all theatrical activity in Russia. It embodied the combination of the glorious past and the promising future and influenced hundreds of people attending its performances. It was no wonder, then, that it attracted so much attention from theorists, critics, officials, and members of MAT themselves.

In this context, the current chapter follows through the changes that occurred in MAT from 1925 to the end of the 1930s. It is interesting that if one monitors the alterations in the repertory, as this chapter does, it can be seen that, after 1925, a flood of new plays by contemporary writers were introduced, and that the 1925 repertory does not look very different from that in 1935. Nevertheless, this chapter identifies a swift change in the critical perception of MAT between 1925 – when the critics were very strict towards its choice of plays – and 1935, when MAT was established as exemplary socialist theatre. What changed between these years, that caused this swift, is one of the main points of investigation in this chapter.

Both new and classic plays are explored through the lens of contemporary critics. In this way, the evolution of the criticism is investigated too, linking it with changes that occurred during the same period, especially within the artistic field, and how one forced the other forwards. Regarding productions of classical plays or novel adaptations, and given MAT's glorious past in productions of the same kind, this chapter also investigates whether an adaptation of the classics was indeed possible. What was considered as a successful adaptation, according to the principles of, opens a dialogue on the expectations that had to fulfil. Finally, based on Iampolskii's theory of the mutual correlation between critics and practitioners³⁶⁴, this chapter surveys the reciprocal relations between the overall criticism of Stanislavsky's method and the director's own renewed approach to it. This method will give the reader additional insight into the relation between Marxist philosophy and its several theoretical issues, along with the practical solutions required of artists under.

Contemporary repertoire

As seen in the previous chapter, both the individual plays and the overall repertoire of the theatres were of critical concern to Soviet officials, who were attempting to help the proletariat grasp the laws of socialism. After 1925, MAT, too, served in this quest for new plays with great enthusiasm. Without undermining the difficulties associated with them, the sheer number of plays is indicative of the efforts of the theatre itself to search for plays that could 'aid the development and the victory of the proletariat'³⁶⁵, as Lunacharsky had requested.

Between 1925 and 1938, among the 40 new performances that were staged at MAT, a majority were written by contemporary writers, such as Konstantin Trenëv, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vsevolod Ivanov, Yuriy Olesha, and Valentin Katayev. However, numbers can also be misleading. Although new plays – or adaptations of old ones – were staged every year, the number of repetitions of performances showed a profound preference for the classics (apart from Maxim Gorky). It is only natural that Russian classic plays had always been predominant in the theatre's selections. By 1958, the theatre's repertoire had the most plays by Anton

³⁶⁴ See Chapter 1 and my critical approach to Iampolskii.

³⁶⁵ See Chapter 3.

Chekhov, with 2,757 performances; followed by Maxim Gorky, with 2,342. Then followed Ostrovsky (2,220), L. Tolstoy (1,985), and Gogol (803). Among the contemporary playwrights, the most successful was M. Bulgakov, whose *The Days of the Turbins* was performed 987 times, followed by V. Katayev, A. Korneichuk, and N. Pogodin.³⁶⁶

The first Soviet play performed at MAT that moved towards the theatre's repertoire towards the new socialist ideology was staged in 1925. It was *The Pugachev Rebellion* by Konstantin Trenëv, directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko. The play was based on a historical revolt that took place in the eighteenth century, led by the Cossack Emelian Pugachev, against Catherine the Great. The performance was generally well-received, being the first one featuring the new, desirable content³⁶⁷, although critics complained that the 'people's hero' was depicted as ruthless³⁶⁸. The socialist perspective was conveyed by using a historical example to bring out the heroism and the decisiveness of the Russian people 'then' and 'now'. This historical projection of contemporary problems was to become popular. By projecting into the past issues to the present, writers of historical novels and dramas managed to deal with critical issues more freely and were able to portray the differences among them. Works such as Trenëv's *The Pugachev Rebellion*, Alexei Chapygin's *Stepan Razin* (1926), or Alexei Tolstoy's *Peter the Great* (1929) associated current Soviet policies with the honourable and radical ones in Russia's past, and suggested that the present-day enemies of the Soviet regime are the direct descendants of the villains and oppressors of the past.

After *Pugachev*, this shift in content was maintained, introducing at least one new play per year. Following Harold B. Segel's categorisation of the themes of Russian drama during the period under examination, it can be seen that they were not particularly different from those treated in Meyerhold's Theatre. Plays that presented a corrupt pre-Revolutionary society in contrast to the new, more noble ethics comprised a major category; *Pugachev* being one of them. Another main category comprised Revolution- and Civil War-related plays. Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins* belongs to this category and is an 'old-fashioned' realistic-style performance staged in 1926 by Stanislavsky and Ilya Sudakov. Ivanov's *Armored Train 14-69* (1927) also deals with the revolutionary period, adding an eastern element by setting the action

³⁶⁶ *Moscow Art Theatre: A Symposium and Appendices on the Soviet Theatre*, p. 33.

³⁶⁷ Benedetti 1999, p. 299.

³⁶⁸ Senelick 2015, p. 476.

of the play in Siberia. His *Blockade*, staged in 1929 by Nemirovich-Danchenko and Sudakov, has the same theme, dealing with the Kronstadt Rebellion.

However, the turbulent times of the Revolution and the Civil War were not the only preoccupation of Russian drama of the 1920s and early 1930s. As seen in the case of Meyerhold, the many problems of social readjustment were equally precious as a thematic source, simultaneously creating fertile ground for the renewal of comedy. Several of MAT's successful performances belong to this category. In 1928, Stanislavsky and Vasily Sakhnovsky put on Leonid Leonov's *Untilovsk*, an acerbic and angry satire that exposes the pettiness of petit-bourgeois mentality. Kataev's 'engaging' (as he called it) of vaudeville in *The Squaring of the Circle*, staged by Nikolai Gorchakov at MAT in 1928, was for a long time the most popular social comedy in the Soviet repertoire³⁶⁹. It portrays the effect of the housing shortage, a common subject of the early Soviet drama, on two married couples who share the same room. A stage adaptation of Kataev's story the *Embezzlers* was produced by Ilya Sudakov in 1928. *Embezzlers* is closer to NEP-related plays, dealing with the corruption of government officials in search of a good life during the early days of NEP.

In terms of subject matter, the early '30s were different from the previous decade, according to Segel, and were associated primarily with three major issues: the program of 'socialist construction', the implementation of industrialisation, and the Five-Year Plan, in addition to the consolidation of Soviet authority. Kirshon's *Bread* was staged at MAT in 1931, directed by Ilya Sudakov. It is set in the countryside on the eve of collectivisation and deals with the impact of the first Five-Year Plan on rural Russia. The play is based on the contrast between two types of managers – one a romantic idealist, the other a down-to-earth rationalist – and their efforts to abruptly transition from the previous style of peasant life to the new, modernised, socialist one. Afinogenov's *Fear*, staged at the end of the same year, debated the question of how far intellectuals trained in a tsarist era could be trusted. It examines the development of social consciousness in an intelligentsia whose habits and values were shaped by the former system, and are now being asked to serve socialism.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 182.

The executive figure remained Maxim Gorky, whose plays – between 1925 and 1939 – were the most frequently staged. With four plays – *In the World* (1933), *Egor Bulyuchev* (1934), *Enemies* (1935), and *Dostigaev and Others* (1938) – he prevailed over even Ostrovsky, although all of them were staged after 1933.

Overall, in terms of repertoire, MAT made a great effort to explore the possibilities for the new form of theatre that were required by the new social conditions. However, this was not always appreciated, particularly owing to the ambiguous and often hostile aesthetic environment that was unleashed and advocated for by artistic forces with strong political opinions.

a. The cultural background

MAT's repertoire was not particularly affected by the abolition of NEP, as it had never been influenced by the 'NEP-man' phenomenon and the socio-economics of it. However, it was affected by the fact that the abolition of NEP was accompanied by the predominance of those artistic forces that were able and willing to initiate a further attack on 'fellow travellers' and non-political art. Art was being more and more controlled by the ferocious attacks of the members of RAPP, which was not just any literary organization; besides having the official support of the party, they also held positions in administrative theatrical bodies and in various governmental agencies, both related to culture and not. In 1923, when the 12th Congress of the party asked for dramas on themes drawn from 'the episodes of the heroic struggle led by the working class', a significant number of playwrights responded to this appeal. However, RAPP estimated that plays loyal to the regime were far less numerous than those hostile to it (neutrals included), and they proclaimed themselves as the only true supporters of the proletariat. Fortunately, RAPP was not the only voice within the party. When the members of RAPP proposed to introduce the method of 'dialectical materialism' as the foundation of 'proletarian' theatre, Lunacharsky forcefully opposed them. Referring to fellow travellers and non-proletarian artists (such as Stanislavsky himself), he emphasized that 'it is incorrect to believe that is only accessible to those possessing full knowledge of the philosophy of dialectical materialism'³⁷⁰. Similarly, Gorky, upon his return to the Soviet Union in 1928, immediately conducted a vigorous campaign against RAPP.

³⁷⁰ Dobrenko, and Tihanov, p. 101.

Officially, the first party resolution on literature came in 1925 and, although it recognised the importance of ‘communist criticism’ and the difference between ‘fellow travellers’ and ‘socialist writers’, it declared neutrality between the opposing parties:

While it has infallible criteria of judgment regarding the class content of literary tendencies, the party as a whole must not bind itself to any one tendency in the field of literary form. Giving general leadership to literature, the party cannot support any one faction in literature (classifying these factions according to their different views on form and style), just as it cannot by resolutions settle questions of the form of the family, though in general it does and should lead in the development of new ways of life. Everything indicates that a style proper to the epoch will be created, but it will be created by different methods, and the solution of this problem has not yet been begun. In the present phase of cultural development, any attempt to bind the party in this direction must be repulsed.³⁷¹

However, the influence of RAPP and the power of proletarian culture grew considerably during this period. Thus, mistakes that are frequently attributed to the policies of the Communist Party or Soviet officials were very often the result of RAPP’s intervention. However, in turn, RAPP’s excessive freedom to intervene was an oversight on the part of the party. This vicious cycle is easily discernible in the case of Bulgakov’s *The Days of the Turbins*. The reviews (included below) portray the ideological disagreement suggested by this thesis. The bans on its performance manifest an additional dysfunction of the artistic organizational scene until 1932. Both the bans and the reviews shed light on the willingness to control theatre as means of exerting greater influence over the public.

b. The case of *The Days of the Turbins*

On October 5, 1926, Mikhail Bulgakov’s play *The Days of the Turbins* premiered at MAT. Its topic would be a bone of contention for many years to come, in both political and ideological disputes. Its opening scene takes place in December 1918, a week before Christmas. The death

³⁷¹ Brown, pp. 235-40.

of the mother of the Turbin family a few months prior, along with the return of Alexei – the oldest son, 28 years old, and a doctor – from military service have created a tense domestic environment. It was expected that this family reunion would bring back a sense of normalcy; however, history had different plans. Caught in the middle of events greater than themselves, *The Days of the Turbins* follows the fortunes of the family during the harsh winter of 1918–1919 in Bulgakov’s native city, Kiev. After having occupied Ukraine and established a puppet government under the Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky, the Germans abandon Ukraine because of the civil war that had begun in their own country. With them, the Hetman flees too. The Russian officers, supporters of the former tsarist regime that was recently overthrown by the Revolution, and all those who had volunteered in the establishment of the Hetman’s regime are left at the mercy of the nationalist and co-founder of the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party, Simon Petlyura, and the Cossacks who were his followers.

When the play opened on October 5, 1926, it was an immediate box-office success. However, there was a wide gap between the critics’ and the public’s opinion of the performance. Although most critics were impressed by the dynamism, the performance, and the technique of the new generation of MAT’s actors, and they generally recognised the successful use of Ulyanov’s designs and sets³⁷², they were also very judgemental of the play’s direction by Sudakov and – above all – were against the play itself. For a play besieged by harsh comments for being everything from apolitical to counter-revolutionary (both equally evil), the young director was charged with not being able to dramatically depict social issues in the faces of the White Guard’s officers.

There is no doubt that the worst polemics were against the play itself and its writer. The focus on the lives of a family of White Guard officers, on the consequences of their mistakes, on their psychology, and on the social instability of their class was enough for *The Days of the Turbins* to be accused of psychologism, a petit-bourgeois mentality, and a positive approach to the enemy – all of which was what Alexander Orlinskiy called ‘Bulgakovism’³⁷³. Until then, the Whites Guards had been presented solely as the ‘evil’ oppressors. Bulgakov, with his work, offered another viewpoint, which depicted them as decent, honest people in all their military and high-class, majestic glory. However, this indirect and perhaps even unintentional attempt

³⁷² Stroyeva, p. 154.

³⁷³ Orlinskiy, p. 6.

at rebuilding the image of the Whites was not the only thing that Bulgakov was accused of. The play was considered reactionary not because the Whites were the protagonists but because they were not portrayed as definitive enemies. Instead, they were presented as ‘common’ people (‘common’ in terms of class origin), with the same feelings and experiences as everyone in the auditorium. This in itself was a *casus belli*. However, there were also other aspects that could not evade the harsh remarks of the critics: the gentle figure of the intellectual (the Russian intelligentsia was portrayed as the carriers of all noble customs and humanism), a profound chauvinism (by portraying the Ukrainian Petliura’s men in darker colours, the Russian officers seemed superior), and an over-academicism (which, even if it was trying to contrast the over-modernist exaggerations of its time, was unacceptable). All the above struck fear among the officials, precisely because such portrayals could sow the seeds of a potential counter-revolutionary wave.

Orlinskiy wrote one of the most hostile reviews in *Pravda* on October 8, 1926, titled ‘Civil War in MAT’. Regarding the ideological approach of the play, he insistently repeated that the Whites were presented as the betrayed heroes while the real heroes were mentioned only in passing. Besides this being an outrageous distortion of historical reality, Orlinskiy claimed that it ‘creates a conciliatory and romantic aura around the professional White officer class, which was so severely and deservedly punished by history and the revolutionary proletariat’³⁷⁴. The play forces the audience to feel pity for the Whites and, ultimately, make peace with them. He praised the young actors for their ‘outstanding quality of acting’³⁷⁵, but scrutinised Sudakov’s constraint, expecting a more daring approach.

[...] large sin lies on young capable director Sudakov, who, with his talent, should have approached more sharply and more daringly the interpretation of Bulgakov’s creation in the spirit of authentic historical realism, without stopping before reconstructing the whole of the play.³⁷⁶

In this way, Orlinskiy declared, even if the original play is reactionary, the director not only can but must improve it. Attacking Sudakov was a common practice among many reviewers.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

The theatre critic and historian Emmanuil Beskin claimed that there were several points where the weaknesses were the fault of his directing and not necessarily of the play. For example, in the storyline, Alexei Turbin dies heroically after realizing that his death is inevitable and all that he had been fighting for was in vain. Instead,

In another directorial interpretation of this same scene, a completely different impression could have been given—the impression of ideological collapse (for which there is an appropriate word) rather than that of pure heroism and high pathos, as it sounded in the theater.³⁷⁷

Similar were the comments of Zagorskiy³⁷⁸, who blamed the director for not portraying the characters correctly. Referring to Alexei, he too emphasized that instead of making him an apologist for ‘White Russia’, he was presented as the underprivileged child of history. This critic also asserted that, owing to bad dramatisation, the play is full of irrelevant and inappropriate psychologism. Consequently, all great historical events of the time are being seen through the narrow viewpoint of the Turbin family’s domestic issues.

Both Beskin and Zagorskiy disapproved of the performance because of its appraisal of the old petit-bourgeois ideology. The play, said Beskin, glorifies these Philistines. However, life is written ‘from the other side of the window’³⁷⁹. ‘Is this made clear in the play?’, he asked. There were some hints regarding this, but it was – in general – missing. It was the theatre’s responsibility to fill this gap, but it failed to do so. In contrast, Beskin asserted that the production dwelt on a naturalistic description of the period without even indicating the class differences.

However, almost all critics agreed on the excellence of the actors. Adrian Piotrovskiy, one of the few reviewers who wrote an exclusively positive review in *Krasnaya Gazeta*, stated – regarding the acting – that the young generation ‘showed excellent talent and a great, purely MAT, and at the same time fresh, strong and vital style’³⁸⁰. He also focused on the totally Soviet origin of the topic, in which he found social and artistic value.

³⁷⁷ Beskin 1926, p. 3.

³⁷⁸ Zagorskiy, p. 4.

³⁷⁹ Beskin, *ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Piotrovskiy, p. 3.

In contrast, a critic under the nickname Starik ('Old Man') commented on the play's superficially Soviet topic and its lack of historical understanding. By using examples from the play, he portrayed how bad directing and a lack of political knowledge lead to chauvinism and other severe historical misinterpretations:

It is unnatural and therefore false, this excessive happiness of the people on the occasion of the arrival of the Bolsheviks, who hold hot iron to clear out the country from landowners, capitalists, monarchists, etc., etc. This happiness in people, which in the second picture sing 'God Save the Tsar' and latter— 'Hurrah, hurrah, to the Council of People's Commissars', is false.

The same happened with the strong, chauvinistic moods and thoughts, by which the family lives. It is not sufficiently revealed when and how they grow such a hatred for Petliura and for everything Ukrainian.³⁸¹

The only positive aspect that Starik acknowledged in the performance was the outstanding structure and function of mass scenes.

Numbers left no room for doubt. Among the 304 critiques and references, the exclusively positive ones were fewer than 10. Irrespective of the reasons for this unanimity against Bulgakov though, it is important to note that they did not derive from shared reasoning. This is because, first of all, many of the newspaper and journal critics (both 'leftists' and 'rightists'), adversaries of any 'non-revolutionary' art, would harshly attack anyone and anything that did not match with their own view of proletarian art. Their targets included Stanislavsky and the entire Moscow Art Theatre. MAT was considered a fortress of the old bourgeoisie because of its classical approach to theatre and its respect for tradition, but also because its aesthetic principles included portraying the psychological side of their heroes. Under these circumstances, *The Days of the Turbins* was – for the press and the critics – just another occasion to stir up conflict. Secondly, the fact that the Glavrepertkom wavered for a long time before deciding whether the play was suitable for public viewing or not, was proof that

³⁸¹ Starik, p. 2.

elucidating which ideological background was progressive and which was not, irrespective of the play's main topic, was a procedure much more complicated than it might appear to the contemporary theorist. It also is a sign of internal struggle. Finally, how serious the issue was for the Soviets is further evident from the fact that a public debate was organised specifically to discuss the ideological and political aspects of *The Days of the Turbins* (along with Treniov's *Liubov Yarovaya*) at the Meyerhold Theatre on February 7, 1927. Among the speakers were Bulgakov³⁸², Markov, Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Lunacharsky, and even Mayakovsky³⁸³. Through this debate, it became clear that it was much more than a personal attack on Bulgakov. The main issue discussed was to what extent the effort to implement new policies for theatre was productive.

One month later, Lunacharsky published an article in *Zaria Vastoka* (March 6, 1926) analysing the social success triggered by the two aforementioned performances. Referring to *Turbins*, he stated that the play's success was not in its box-office statistics, but rather in its renewing and refreshing theme that facilitates the re-organisation of life. Although he admitted that this particular play was – to a great extent – based on 'the love of petit-bourgeois cosiness'³⁸⁴, he also asserted that its main value was this transition towards a new contemporary thematic. It is true, Lunacharsky stated, that *Turbins* did not constitute the most progressive example of what they were looking for. However, this was not a problem:

For us, for those who want Theatre to be an organizing reflection of life, and who do not renounce the elements of struggle included in our community, and on the stage [portraying] the public interest in the most acute way, the excitement over *The Days of the Turbins* was a gratifying phenomenon.³⁸⁵

³⁸² Bulgakov attacked Orlinskiy in particular for leveling groundless accusations against him. 'Whenever he says or writes something about my plays, he says something that isn't true', he said and he went on giving specific examples. 'I have nothing against the play being criticized as much as you please, but I would like information about it to be accurate. And I would maintain that the critic Orlinskiy has absolutely no knowledge of the 1918 period described in my novel and my play.' Curtis, pp. 84-85.

³⁸³ Senelick 2014, p. 272.

³⁸⁴ Lunacharsky, 'Dva spektaklya', in *Moskovskiy Khudozhestvennyy teatr v russkoy teatral'noy kritike: 1919 – 1943* < http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/MAT_v_kritike/MAT_v_kritike_1919-1930/#Text_5 > [accessed 2 July 2016].

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

It was a ‘gratifying phenomenon’ because it already was a step forward. Undoubtedly, though, the conflict might not have become that deep if the play had not been such a huge box-office success. The play continued to be performed for decades and it was undeniably one of the greatest post-revolutionary works. Of course, unanimity was missing even among the public. There were people who fainted from excitement because, in the faces of the Turbins, they recognised members of their own family who fought in the Civil War, even against the Bolsheviks. Further, there were also people who, outraged by the profound betrayal, stamped their feet and whistled, creating a completely awkward atmosphere at MAT, which had never faced such a reaction before³⁸⁶.

Regarding the audience, Lunacharsky observed, in the aforementioned article, that the fact that the auditorium was always full was proof that society craved good theatre. However, it was also true, he claimed, that people were intrigued by ‘the forbidden fruit’.

Needless to say, there is a number of people who would run to see a counterrevolutionary play. We do not claim that we have burned all of the existing weeds or that we managed to regenerate into real citizens the significant number of malevolent commoners. To the latter, we should add those who since the beginning of time live off their fascination with the forbidden fruit. So great was the hype of censorship around *The Days of the Turbins*, that it attracted the attention of laymen. By that, the inquisitive foreign journalist meant that the great Moscow audience could not possibly be interested in a revolutionary play. There is, in his view, no contact between the great Moscow audience and that, which is shown in theatres under government orders.

Naturally, this is laughable, and we can provide evidence of the complete absurdity of all parts of the above formulation. The best proof would still be *Lyubov’ Yarovaya*. We know well the social composition of the audience that attends premiers. Of course, it is far from being working class, and far from being communist. Workers and communists do attend premiers, but, of course, in small numbers.^{387,388}

³⁸⁶ Stroyeva, p. 147.

³⁸⁷ Lunacharsky, ‘Dva spektaklya’.

³⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin noted, in his diary when he visited Moscow and saw *Turbins*, that ‘the audience was noticeably different from the ones I had seen in the other two theatres. It was as if there were not

What Lunacharsky was claiming, in essence, was that fainting from thrill or whistling in fury were both expected and normal because both social classes had access to theatre. It was not only the communists attending the performance but also an entire society full of opposition still unresolved. However, a few months later, from May 9 to May 13, 1927, the All-Union Congress of Theater took place in Moscow. This Congress served as another chance to evaluate *Turbins* and to continue a debate that would last for decades. The core of the discussion was the extent to which officials should intervene in the artistic creation in order to – on the one hand – assist artists with political content, while – on the other – not interrupt the creative process itself. There were two main standpoints. ‘The actor’, Blyum said, ‘needs to be politically educated’³⁸⁹. Simultaneously, *Novyi Zritel* asked for a ‘theatre party line’³⁹⁰. Stanislavsky, on the other hand, totally disagreed with this statement. He argued that it is impossible for an artist to seize the phenomenon of a revolution, in terms of both magnitude and tragedy. Concurrently, by requiring that the artist capture the political significance of historical facts, he is put in danger of losing the ‘soul’ of his work, according to Stanislavsky.

They tried to put a new tendency into the existing plays, they took out from the plays their soul and packed a new one, but, as you see, from this nothing came out, and the work died, as soon as they took out from it the soul that it had produced, and that’s what always happens.³⁹¹

The critics disagreed with this. They did not ignore the risk alleged by Stanislavsky, but they insisted that this was the only process that would lead to the formation of the new theatre. Instead, they that Stanislavsky and MAT to ‘either change their own traditions or learn from

a single Communist present, not a black or blue tunic in sight’. (quoted in Senelick, 2014, 272). We do not know whether Lunacharsky was referring to this comment. The truth is, however, that a lot of American articles and comments focused on the fact that several spectators identified themselves with the tragedy of the Turbin’s family. See, for example, *The New York Times*’s critique on November 7, 1926. Its subtitle is *Young Communist in Audience Who Sneers at Outset Is Moved to Tears by Bulgakov’s Play*.

³⁸⁹ *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov*, 1926, No. 57 < http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/MAT_v_kritike/MAT_v_kritike_1919-1930/#Rome_Text_296 > [assessed July 2, 2016].

³⁹⁰ *Novyi zritel*’, 1927, No. 7 < http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/MAT_v_kritike/MAT_v_kritike_1919-1930/#Rome_Text_296 > [assessed July 2, 2016].

³⁹¹ *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, 19 (1927) < http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/MAT_v_kritike/MAT_v_kritike_1919-1930/#Rome_Text_296 > [assessed July 2, 2016].

their own means in order to continue their services to progress and advance the forces of our time'³⁹².



Figure 4.1. Scene from *The Days of the Turbins*. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and Avant-Garde*, p. 214.

Overall, what *The Days of the Turbins* managed to do was to reveal an already existing division not only between popular response and critics' reactions but also between certain popular strata and the proletariat itself. In contrast to one-sided theories, Mikhail Iampolskii's approach to how censorship worked in the USSR is indicative of the importance given to theatre.

Undertaking to reflect life in art, the artist encounters in the first stages of his work certain rules and norms which hold him back. Then, he heroically wages war against these norms, overcoming them with the help of an almost mystical union with the vital forces of life in all its diversity. Censorship thus emerged as a defender of those vital forces, itself a heroic warrior battling the withering oppression of artistic norms³⁹³.

³⁹² *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov*, 1927, No. 65 – 66 < http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/MAT_v_kritike/MAT_v_kritike_1919-1930/#Rome_Text_296 > [assessed July 2, 2016].

³⁹³ Iampolski, p. 167.

The role of the censor – even when extreme declarations were made or when a forbidden play created more of a stir than one of the ‘right ones’ – was a significant part of the re-formative power of theatre. From this point of view, the extent of the division that *The Days of the Turbins* caused, made clear in the following chronicle of the bans on the performances, clearly depicts Soviet acknowledgement of the influential power of theatre.

c. The story of the bans

What makes the story of the bans particularly interesting is that it was never quite clear who banned what and why. If it was the state or the party unanimously making such a decision, that would be simpler and easier to explain. However, this is definitely not the case. Lunacharsky³⁹⁴ and the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) supported *The Days of the Turbins*. The Glavrepertkom asked for further changes but, in general, approved it. The Politburo favoured it. So did the Central Committee of the Party and Stalin himself. If it was neither the state nor the party who kept banning it, who did?

Some of the events surrounding this play have already been covered previously. On June 24, 1926, the Glavrepertkom postponed the premiere of *Turbins* until ‘certain changes were made’. On September 17, 1926, the Glavrepertkom visited the theatre and the play was rejected once again. On September 23, a closed performance was held for the press, a limited audience, and a board consisting of members of the Narkompros, the Glavrepertkom, and the State Political Directorate (GPU). Finally, on Saturday, September 24, the performance received approval from both the Narkompros and the Glavrepertkom, but not from the GPU. This was Lunacharsky’s response to the GPU’s prohibition:

At a meeting of the Narkompros board, with the participation of Repertkom, and including the GPU, it was decided to permit Bulgakov’s play just for the Art Theater and just for this season. At Glavrepertkom’s insistence, the board allowed it to make a few cuts. On Saturday evening, the GPU informed Narkompros that it was banning the play. This matter must be considered at the highest level, or else the Narkompros

³⁹⁴ He distinguished ‘stupidly dull scenes of middle-class philistinism of no interest to anyone but still he found nothing inadmissible in it from political point of view’, (Benedetti 1995, pp. 326-327).

board's decision, which is already known, must be confirmed. Rescission of Narkompros's decision by the GPU is highly undesirable and even scandalous.³⁹⁵

The letter was sent on September 27 to Rykov, Chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars of the Soviet Union (head of the government) and, three days later, the Politburo once again repealed the ban. One year later, on September 15, 1927, the resolution of the previous year's board was confirmed. This resulted in the renewal of *Turbins* only for MAT and only for the season running 1927-1928. To that, the TsK VKP(b) Orgburo (Central Committee of the CP, organisational bureau) responded with a memorandum to TsK VKP(b) Politburo (Central Committee of the CP, political bureau) on October 8, 1927, asking for a rescission of the ban because 'experience has shown that (1) this is one of the few theatrical productions providing an opportunity for young artistic forces to develop; (2) the piece is artistically restrained and useful. Talk of any counterrevolutionary themes it might contain is absolutely wrong'³⁹⁶. Two days later, the Politburo cancelled the ban once again.

What was being made clear was that the entire range of intra-party conflicts was being reflected at the level of artistic life, too. On December 29, 1928, the Proletarian Theatre Association (RAPP's theatre department) sent a letter to Stalin criticising MAT and Bulgakov very harshly. They were asking Stalin to intervene and ban *The Days of the Turbins* once and for all, commenting the following:

Instead of pushing such a major artistic force as MAT toward revolutionary themes, or at least revolutionary interpretation of the classics, [they] do everything possible to make it easier for this theatre to slip to the right, to disorganize intellectually that part of young MAT that already can and want to work with us [...].³⁹⁷

Having chosen MAT as its vessel for proletarian theatre³⁹⁸, RAPP could not tolerate this 'right-wing danger', which, from the field of politics was 'seeping into various ideological productions, in particular, literature and theatre'³⁹⁹. What made things even more complicated

³⁹⁵ Clark, Dobrenko, Artizov, and Naumov, p. 91.

³⁹⁶ Clark 1981, p. 92.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁹⁸ Clark 1992, p. 30.

³⁹⁹ Clark 1981, p. 53.

was that groups like RAPP had the party's official endorsement for being instruments of proletarian art⁴⁰⁰. Thus, they could not be easily rejected or dismissed, and they were seen to be forcing the party into additional debate. A few months later, on February 7, 1929, Agitprop's head, Platon Kerzhentsev, published an article in *Pravda* titled 'Toward the Arrival of the Ukrainian Writers', claiming that by allowing *The Days of the Turbins* to be presented on MAT's main stage, Narkompros was promoting chauvinism and right-wing bias. This caused a furious reaction from Lunacharsky, asking Stalin to intervene and clarify to Agitprop that the Narkompros was merely implementing the Politburo's resolution of the matter. Therefore, what Agitprop was doing, according to the Commissar of Enlightenment, was 'indirectly, but consciously, disavowing the Politburo's instruction'⁴⁰¹. Narkompros, claimed Lunacharsky, was very often under attack from various journalists for its support of this particular play. However, what they could not accept was to be attacked by the party's central organ (i.e., *Pravda*) for merely implementing the party line.

From 1929 to 1932, this tension was mitigated through a series of diplomatic steps made by the Central Committee and Stalin himself. Firstly, regarding the aforementioned RAPP attack on MAT and *The Days of the Turbins* (composed by Bill-Belotserkovsky), Stalin responded with a separate letter to its composer (who in the meanwhile had left RAPP) and another to the rest of the group. In the first letter, he began by explaining that left- and right-wing political danger is an intraparty danger and cannot be applied to literature, where more complicated norms apply and broader scales of evaluation are necessary. Instead, 'it would be most correct to operate in literature with concepts of a class nature, specifically, the concepts "Soviet", "anti-Soviet", "revolutionary", "anti-revolutionary", etc.'⁴⁰². Referring to *Turbins*, Stalin claimed that the reasons why Bulgakov's play is so often produced are 'probably because we don't have enough of our own plays good enough for staging. In a land without fish, even *The Days of the Turbins* is a fish. It is easy to "criticize" and demand a ban on nonproletarian literature. But easiest is not always best'⁴⁰³. This illustrates that, despite everything, '*The Days of the Turbins* is a demonstration of the crushing force of Bolshevism'⁴⁰⁴.

⁴⁰⁰ Fitzpatrick 1971, p. 236.

⁴⁰¹ Clark 1981, p. 93.

⁴⁰² Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

Stalin's response to RAPP on February 28, 1929, is undeniably a masterpiece of diplomacy. He scrutinised everything he had to, including RAPP's unfair and cruel attack on fellow travellers (including Bulgakov), while maintaining friendly relations with RAPP, supporting the defector, Bill-Belotserkovsky, and protecting Kerzhentsev. However, one of the most important documents in defence of Bulgakov and *Turbins* by Stalin is perhaps his speech given at a meeting with Ukrainian writers on February 12, 1929. There, other than repeating the irrelevancy of the right-wing danger in literature and the exhibition in *Turbins* of 'the all-crushing force of Bolshevism'⁴⁰⁵, he nullified all arguments on the basis of chauvinism by stating that:

The disgraceful portrayal of Ukrainians [in *The Days of the Turbins*] has its scandalous side, but there is also another side to it... there are minuses and pluses there. I think that there are more pluses on the whole. From a broader perspective and from the standpoint of other ways of approaching literature, the play *The Days of the Turbins* has played a big role. Workers want to see this play and say: 'Aha! No power can overtake Bolshevism!'⁴⁰⁶

In 1929, *The Days of the Turbins* was officially accepted as part of MAT's repertoire. This acceptance another small victory against the artistic extremes, both left and right, that were taking shape during the 1920s. However, there were undoubtedly many more conflicts to be mitigated.

d. RAPP and MAT

By 1930, the intolerant radicals of RAPP were not allowing any room for non-proletarian – or even neutral – art. They had openly declared for a 'dictatorship over literature' and other arts. According to them, every work of art had to portray the 'socialist perspective' of reality and, if not, it was considered either formalistic or counter-revolutionary. In 1931, RAPP organised

⁴⁰⁵ Clark 1981, p. 65.

⁴⁰⁶ Popovich, p. 52.

a conference (25 January-6 February) on theatre, at which it was confirmed that the dramatic art must be considered as a weapon of the proletariat in the struggle to establish its power. The conference was followed by several articles in magazines and newspapers declaring resentment against psychologism, petit-bourgeois mentality, and over-academism. Afinogenov, head of the theatrical sector of RAPP, declared that ‘MAT and the Stanislavsky system were hostile to proletarian theatre’⁴⁰⁷. Interestingly enough, by the end of the same year, MAT staged one of Afinogenov’s best plays, *Fear*. *Fear* is the story of Professor Borodin who expresses the idea – a result of his research – that Soviet reality is based entirely on fear. Borodin presents this theory in a paper that he reads at a scientific symposium, but Klara, and old Bolshevik, denounces him and ‘shows’ him the faults in his thinking, after which he is arrested by the secret police. Once he sees the error in his thought, Borodin submits to the new order and starts anew as a scientist ‘devoted to the party and government’. The performance was an immediate success. The irony of this was enormous, given that the play refers to a scientist (of the old intelligentsia), shaped by the former system, who managed to adapt and become useful to the proletariat. Critics admired how well the ‘idealistic’ MAT system, which was seemingly in conflict with ‘Afinogenov’s class play’, allowed the theatre to reach ‘another political level’ (Litovskiy). Others believed that ‘the conservatism of the artistic and creative methods of MAT blunts the author’s intention, softens the smoothed ideological clarity of the game’⁴⁰⁸. However, there were also those who believed that ‘the well-known theories of the first experience here were applied in a natural way, without compelling the new revolutionary conditions’⁴⁰⁹.

Despite *Fear*’s success, however, it was becoming more and more obvious that the party had to take action. They could not ignore the fact that the so-called fellow travellers, overall, supported the new socialist state and genuinely tried to imprint the diversity of contemporary life on their works. In theatre, it was mainly they, the fellow travellers, that had rejuvenated the repertory and, despite their disagreements and difficulties, posed no opposition to the basic principles of the communist revolution. The party had to intervene to protect one group and eliminate the RAPP’s blatant interventionism. Furthermore, the main problem with RAPP was not its theoretical framework but the methods they used to impose it. RAPP was suppressing

⁴⁰⁷ *Sovetskiy teatr*, p. 7.

⁴⁰⁸ Room, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁹ Kogan, p. 2.

nonproletarian writers and fellow travellers to an extent that provoked strong discontent both among the artists and within the party.

These circumstances led to the Decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (April 23, 1932) ‘On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations’. Two years later, the First Congress of the Writer’s Union took place. Both events, the results of ongoing theoretical and ideological struggle, affected the ultimate resolution of the literary issues. It is not difficult to ascertain their impact on the dramatic repertory. The combination of the contemporary reality, topical themes, and a positive hero, proclaimed by both Zhdanov and Gorky at the Congress, soon became the norm. An instructive example is Alexander Korneychuk’s *Platon Krechet*, which was staged at MAT in 1935 by Sudakov. It was considered a good example of dramaturgy owing to its portrayal of the young Soviet intelligentsia, a new and attractive subject, in accordance with the new directives. Platon Krechet, a man completely dedicated to service to the people, is a surgeon of proletarian origin and a former stoker, who fights against physicians still dwelling in the past and paves the way to bold and vital scientific experimentation. In 1939, MAT included *Orchards of Polovchansk* in its repertory, a lyrical and philosophical drama written by Leonov in 1936 and revised in 1938. *Orchards of Polovchansk* dramatises the intrusion of hostile, alien elements into a tranquil and happy family atmosphere, and is generally follows the theme of preparedness for war, which turned out to be the main focus of literature after the mid-1930s. Revisions were never an easy task, even among contemporary plays. Between 1936 and 1939, Leonov had to make several alterations to minimise his individualism and smooth over any ideological complexities. Eventually, it was accepted as another modern masterpiece. However, to revise the classics was a whole different story.

Classic repertoire

MAT’s repertoire between 1925 and 1934 proved that this new content, which would describe the new socialist reality, did not necessarily have to have a prescribed artistic form. However,

it also proved that any means available would be used to draw the public into the new reality. Trenëv, Ivanov, Kataev, Leonov, and Bulgakov had found their own way to address the great victories of the Revolution, the socialist state, and the working class; the directors had found their way to stage those victories, even if not always with the greatest of results. However, *The Days of the Turbins* and *Armoured Train 14-69* – in particular – constituted pointed examples of what Lunacharsky identified as a repertoire that aids ‘the development and the victory of the proletariat while revising relationships under the new prism of socialism’⁴¹⁰. Now it was time to see what MAT could offer – in regard to the classics – in this new paradigm. MAT was undeniably the official descendant of Russia’s realist past. However, by examining what re-adjustments were made in order to adapt to the new Marxist approach, one can understand what the classics actually meant for Soviet theorists of the time.

a. Gorky and Lunacharsky on the classics

The Congress of Writers paid particular attention to the potential assimilation of the bourgeois literature of the past into the new paradigm. Similar attention was given to its distribution among the new Soviet audience. Although not everything was in a condition to be solved, both Gorky and Karl Radek made a significant effort to examine this kind of art and identify a way of approaching it. Generally, the idea was one that had been previously proclaimed by the officials; in other words, the art of the past – especially its masterpieces – should become accessible to the masses. It is important to note that, until then, theatre was accessible only to the upper classes, and literature (not to say education in general) was a product of luxury⁴¹¹. Therefore, the best works of bourgeois literature should not be rejected, as Proletkult and leftist artists had insisted but should be studied instead.

From this perspective, Gorky examined the literature of the nineteenth century to prove that every era has its progressive writers and that Soviet artists should not be afraid of working with them. According to Gorky, the bourgeois literature of the nineteenth century could be divided into two distinct groups of writers (although it might not always be easy to distinguish who belongs in which). The first group includes bourgeois writers who, being ‘not that talented’, managed to attract their readers’ attention through their technical virtuosity. The second group,

⁴¹⁰ See Chapter 3, and Lunacharsky 1965.

⁴¹¹ Kenez, p. 73.

which was far smaller, consisted of writers who shaped ‘critical realism and revolutionary romanticism’. This second group was formed by what Gorky named ‘apostates of their class’, referring to writers who saw the decay of the bourgeoisie and its effect on the entire society, and decided to take a critical stance against it. According to Gorky, these people not only introduced liberal and humanitarian ideas into the literature of their time, but they also did so in a masterful way. Given how important ‘observation’ is in Gorky’s theory if it were possible for a member of the bourgeois class or any higher strata to speak about reality as it is, this is precisely because they were good and honest observers. Furthermore, in one of his earlier works, Gorky had praised Balzac because:

The scope of his observation, the wealth of experience of life, often endow a writer with the power to transcend his personal subjective attitude to facts. Subjectively, Balzac was an adherent of the bourgeois order but, in his novels, he exposed the pettiness and baseness of the bourgeoisie with overwhelming and relentless clarity.⁴¹²

Regarding the way this division was expressed in Russian literature, Gorky included writers such as Griboyedov, Gogol, and Chekhov in the ‘progressive’ group, without hesitating to pinpoint those whom he considered purely middle-class.

However, this does not make bourgeois art any more closely related to the proletariat as a class. ‘The literature of the bourgeois art has always been bourgeois literature; it has always served the aims of the bourgeoisie’⁴¹³, said Radek at the Congress. Indeed, the bourgeoisie itself had occasionally revolted against feudalism, a fact that justifies that bourgeois forces can be revolutionary, progressive, and inspire the portrayal of class struggle. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie not only was not a new class in Western Europe, but it had already begun showing signs of decay. At a time when art was considered to transcend class barriers and social politics⁴¹⁴, critical realism served as ‘a necessary defence both against the big bourgeoisie and against the ever more powerful onslaught of the proletariat’⁴¹⁵. It is this quality, Gorky claimed, that the big bourgeois classics contain and should not be lost.

⁴¹² Gorky 1946, p. 43.

⁴¹³ Scott, and Gorky, p. 122.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

The 1934 discussion on how the new system should deal with art of the past was nothing new. A very targeted campaign, promoting the realists of Russian past, had occurred in the first years of the Soviet Union. In 1923, the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, proclaimed ‘Back to Ostrovsky!’, preserving the past became more than a discussion on art. Exceeding the confines of art itself, it was turned into an effort to define the artistic ‘common ground’, at a time when all sorts of extreme ideas were becoming popular among left-wing artists. The already known and beloved classics would function as fertile ground upon which the proletariat would be seeded with new ideas.

Ostrovsky himself became a symbol of how realism managed to ‘fight the system from within’. In fact, this symbolisation did not occur at that time; it was merely re-inserted. The admiration of Ostrovsky had already begun in the nineteenth century through one of the ideological ancestors of Soviet aesthetics, Nikolay Dobroliubov. William Gunn, in his thesis on the influence of the slogan ‘Back to Ostrovsky!’ on the artistic creation of the Soviets, notices that ‘Dobroliubov’s appropriation of Ostrovsky as a critic of Russian society and capitalist greed created the foundation for his interpretation by Soviet scholars, as early as back in 1859’⁴¹⁶. He also notes that Lenin himself, in 1918, when asked about the selection of texts for a new collection of Russian classics, added only one thing – ‘don’t forget Ostrovsky’.

In contrast, for Lunacharsky, reaching the point of creating such a slogan was a rather long theoretical journey. Lunacharsky himself was not only a member but a co-founder of Proletkult. When the Revolution began in Russia, the future Commissariat was among those who considered bourgeois art ‘as mere entertainment without society-improving ideas as intellectual stimuli’. According to his previous theories, ‘this theatre would collapse because it was the toy of a now doomed bourgeoisie’⁴¹⁷. The co-founder of the pre-revolution Proletkult, however, very soon diverged ideologically. For reasons that combine Lunacharsky’s deep belief in theatre’s relation with reality and the importance of the fellow travellers in the formation of the new art, the Commissar of Enlightenment pushed for a drama based on the ‘correct’ interpretation of classic literature.

With two articles in *Izvestiya*, on April 11 and 12, 1923, Lunacharsky sought to prompt theatre

⁴¹⁶ Gunn 2012, p. 4.

⁴¹⁷ Szeliski, p. 414.

experts to reassess Ostrovsky – not to merely imitate him or his technique, but to learn from him. ‘Our time’, said Lunacharsky, ‘may require special techniques [...] but the bottom line should be the same here. That is why we can learn a lot from Moliere, Goldoni, Ostrovsky [...]. We go back to Ostrovsky, not only in order to assess the correctness of the main bases of his theatre, but more to learn from him some aspects of skill’⁴¹⁸. Ostrovsky was seen as an example of great dramaturgy. New theatre practitioners were encouraged to reevaluate and reframe Russian literary classics within the new socio-political context, just as he did. As Gunn observes:

Lunacharsky’s ‘Back to Ostrovsky!’ campaign inspired the greatest directors of the era to create new productions of Ostrovsky’s plays, resulting in an onstage debate concerning theatrical aesthetics; perhaps even more significantly within the cultural context of the 1920s, these productions can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger discussion regarding the future of Soviet art.⁴¹⁹

b. Ostrovsky in MAT

MAT actively participated in this discussion while trying to define its role under the new social circumstances. The slogan and the article ‘Back to Ostrovsky!’ coincided with Ostrovsky’s jubilee, and a lot of directors experimented with approaching the classics – including Meyerhold with *The Forest* (1923) and Tairov with *The Storm* (1924). Undoubtedly, all eyes were trained on MAT. Expectations were high owing to the respect that MAT was already showing towards the classics. However, even for MAT, it was a great challenge to claim the Ostrovsky tradition for itself and distinguish itself from the experimental productions of Meyerhold or Eisenstein. MAT staged three performances based on Ostrovsky’s adaptations between 1923 and 1939: *An Ardent Heart* (1926) and *Talents and Admirers* (1933), both directed by Stanislavsky, and *The Storm* (1934) directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko.

An Ardent Heart was Stanislavsky’s first bold step towards socialist plays. Written in 1858, *An Ardent Heart* is a satirical play about the old Russian society. According to Sudakov, who was in charge for the majority of the rehearsals, through this play, Ostrovsky gave the opportunity

⁴¹⁸ Lunacharsky 1923, p. 2.

⁴¹⁹ Gunn 2014, p. 56.

for the actors to support ‘the craft of acting’ and the directors to reveal that Avant-Garde experimentations were working against this craft. In a manuscript from the MAT archive recorded in December 1925, and cited in William Gunn’s “*Back to Ostrovsky!*” and forward to, Sudakov describes the process of the production in a way that illustrates the aforementioned approach:

During the production process, there was a revival in the art of acting, which was beginning to die out and was being replaced by superficial directing tricks, which were perhaps effective, but ultimately unsuccessful (Kamern[y], Meyerhold). The main purpose of the production is not to allow the models of the true craft of acting to die, which are based in the realistic school and created in the spirit of scenic truth.⁴²⁰

‘Truth’ and its depiction would become a major issue in the effort to define. In trying to approach it, *An Ardent Heart* took both a positive and a negative track. The positive track was that it included three types of ‘*samodurs*’ (domestic tyrants), typical archetypes in Ostrovsky’s writing. These ‘*samodurs*’ not only represented recognizable archetypes of the old Russian society that made the play more ‘truthful’, but also highlighted social contrasts. Both elements were to be proclaimed crucial in the formation of. On the other hand, however, its satirical aspect was on the verge of the grotesque and might have had several implications on the ‘truthfulness’ of the representation.

The limits of ‘truth’, according to the acting and directing techniques, make the dialogue between Meyerhold’s and MAT’s directorial approaches more intense. MAT’s position was that depicting ‘truth’ was possible even in the kinds of plays that belonged to the past. The production of *An Ardent Heart* was, in fact, proof of this argument. As Gunn distinguishes that:

Eisenstein and Meyerhold justified their radical production choices by making claims about Ostrovsky’s connections to popular theatre genres of the past—most notably, Italian *commedia dell’arte* and the Spanish Golden Age cape and sword dramas while MAT focused on connecting Ostrovsky to major trends in theatre history, and looked

⁴²⁰ ‘Goriachee serdtse, Materialy po postanovke, Beseda s I. Ia. Sudakovym’

to the realities of provincial life in the nineteenth-century Russia as their inspiration for *An Ardent Heart*⁴²¹.

Further, the play itself, in its original form, constitutes fertile ground for discussion of the social conditions of the time when it was written, without having to turn to Meyerhold's exaggerations. Stanislavsky's production of *An Ardent Heart* functioned as a political and social satire through the exaggerated comedic characterizations of Gradoboev, Kuroslepov, and Khlynov⁴²², the three '*samodurs*'.

The abovementioned debate was evident even in the reviews of the time. Of course, different critics held different positions; however, in general, other than Zagorskiy, most critics supported the production. Zagorskiy's review in *Nasha Gazeta* on January 26, 1926, accused the performance of moving away from realism, especially in comparison to MAT's former productions of Ostrovsky's plays:

In contrast to those productions, the current version of *An Ardent Heart* is a striking example of a broken, contradictory and teeter-tottering play, which fluctuates from everyday life (*byt'*) to eccentricity, from psychological analysis to buffoonery, and from simplicity to pretentiousness and the grotesque.⁴²³

However, this retreat from psychological realism was the least of Zagorskiy's concerns. As Meyerhold's literary manager between 1925 and 1935, Zagorskiy was more preoccupied with the fact that Stanislavsky did not have a unified concept in his approach and that he was imitating Meyerhold's restructuring method in an incompetent way. Above all, as Gunn points out, Zagorskiy considered Stanislavsky incapable of expressing any contemporary class struggle, which was his main drawback. Echoing all the aesthetic issues that have been presented thus far in this thesis, Zagorskiy's review seems closer to all LEF arguments on who should be permitted to make proletarian art, rather than an actual critique of Stanislavsky's work.

⁴²¹ Gunn 2014, p. 61.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴²³ Zagorskiy 1926, p. 3.

Interestingly enough, three days after the publication of Zagorskiy's review, Nikolai Volkov applauded the performance for the exact same reasons that Zagorskiy had panned it. According to Volkov, *An Ardent Heart* is not a play that could have been approached realistically. Thus, he praises Stanislavsky's 'exceptional intuition' to deal with it in a more fantastical way. In fact, his only disappointment was that Stanislavsky did not develop this element further.

In effect, each side of the argument had its supporters. However, perhaps the most detached approach was that of Pavel Markov (MAT's artistic director), who claimed that it was not the style that made MAT's production important. Rather, it was the emphasis placed on the different '*samodurs*'. In addition, he stated that only Stanislavsky's directing technique could create such clear archetypes. In contrast, Meyerhold's and Eisenstein's archetypes would seem like frivolous mannequins. This, he maintained, was why MAT's approach was superior.

After *An Ardent Heart*, MAT became Ostrovsky's new home. Before 1923, MAT had staged only two productions of Ostrovsky's plays. As Gunn notes, 'during the next quarter-century as Stalin led the Soviet Union, that rate more than tripled, with seven total productions'⁴²⁴. Both Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko staged plays by Ostrovsky. Stanislavsky's 1933 production of *Artists and Admirers* would run for over 400 performances, while Nemirovich-Danchenko's production of *The Storm*, in 1943, ran for 145⁴²⁵.

⁴²⁴ Gunn 2014, p. 62.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.



Figure 4.2. Ostrovsky, reimagined by Stanislavsky; scene from *An Ardent Heart* (1926).
Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and Avant-Garde*,
p. 151.



Figure 4.3. Ostrovsky, reimagined by Meyerhold; scene from *The Forest* (1923).
Source: Beatrice Picon-Vallin, *Meyerhold*, p. 185.

c. From aesthetic reassessment to ideological incompatibility

The staging of Ostrovsky's plays was only the beginning. The entire narrative of revisiting the classics with a critical view, one that would enable the audience to adopt a critical stance towards old and new social phenomena, became standardised. It also attempted to include all the masterpieces of Russia's literary past. Any name of the bourgeois past was acceptable as long as a trace to their social concerns and interests was discernible. Officially, the entire effort was additionally reinforced by organised jubilees aimed at celebrating these writers by creating new works of art influenced by them. In 1929, the Soviet Union celebrated the jubilee of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Anton Chekhov and, in 1937, the centenary of Alexander Pushkin's death.

There were several voices expressing discontent regarding these jubilees and the move to promote writers of the bourgeois past. Adrian Piotrovskiy, one of the founders of Workers' Youth Theatre (TRAM) and a Proletkult theorist, in an article published in *Zhizn' iskusstva* in 1929, explained why Anton Chekhov and Stanislavsky represented the same system and why they were both regressive and should not be cited as good examples. For one thing, Piotrovskiy did not doubt either Chekhov's or Stanislavsky's excellence. He claimed that Chekhov's works found their best expression through Stanislavsky's technique and that Stanislavsky improved his technique exactly because Chekhov's plays were masterpieces. However, this is exactly why they belonged together in the past, he argued. He re-introduced a depiction of the world that should have been the least of their concerns: the world of the bourgeois intelligentsia. In contrast to Ostrovsky and Sukhovo-Kobylin, Piotrovskiy stated:

By deliberately weakening the fable of the traditional dramaturgy of the 19th century, Chekhov put in its place the principle of ready-made psychological situations, unfolding from within the drama, opening the act after the act, with almost no forward movement of the plot.⁴²⁶

According to Piotrovskiy, a prime example of this is *The Cherry Orchard*, where everything that could have gone wrong for the family occurred before the raising of the curtain: the family is bankrupt, the orchard must be sold, and all that is left for the audience is to follow the

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

psychological downfall of the characters. The main problem with this approach, according to Piotrovskiy, is this worldview of inevitable misfortune. On the one hand, this worldview is a perfect expression of the end of the nineteenth century and the greedy nature of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the play does not show ‘characters’ or ‘types’ and it restricts itself to the demonstration of a holistic mental image, shaped by the complex conflicts between the conscious and the unconscious – ‘a curious theatrical incarnation’, said Piotrovskiy, ‘of an idealistic, metaphysical psychology’⁴²⁷. Starting from this idealistic, subjective basis of psychology, it was anticipated that Chekhov would end up in total accordance with Stanislavsky’s ‘truth of the subconscious’. Piotrovskiy continued by claiming that this kind of approach had also affected the way the dialogue was made and developed. The dialogue between the characters was no more a conscious interchange of information based on experience. Instead, it became an expression of their subconscious psychology. In essence, this is why Chekhov’s characters think too much, do not always mean what they say, are unsure of what they say, or – even more to the point – why they pause. This way of reacting, based on feelings, matched Stanislavsky’s ‘emotional memory’. From this point of view, it is not a coincidence that the stage is full of theatrical tricks (lights, sounds, etc.). These are introduced so that the actors would be intrigued by and subconsciously react in a way that would enable them to revive the right feeling required for each scene. However, this fundamentally problematic orientation, argued Piotrovskiy, could not work for the themes and issues of the revolutionary times that they were all living in. In addition, it was completely incomprehensible to him why writers, especially those supporting socialism, would want to look for inspiration to these kinds of writers, given that these ‘holistic mental images’ presuppose a different class to express them. Theatrical modernity, he concluded, must turn its back towards ‘Chekhov’, precisely because he ‘brings with him the gap between the dramatic form and the political scene of the show, the reduction of the political ambitions, and the distortion of the revolutionary direction’⁴²⁸.

Similarly, Emmanuel Beskin, theatre critic and historian, editor of *Rabis*’ and fierce opponent of MAT, expressed a very similar view, although in a much more aggressive way. In his 1929 article in *Sovremennyy teatr*, under the title ‘Chekhov Segodnya’, he sarcastically attacked those questioning the backwardness of Chekhov. He stated that Chekhov had lost people’s

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

confidence because he did no more than portray a ‘fatigue, frustration, boredom and a passive consciousness which [proclaims that] “it is impossible to go on like this”,’ but without suggesting anything else. This straddling of two boats simultaneously was, in essence, why Chekhov was accused of philistine ideology. In addition, the growth of the industrial and urban cities during the 1890s, according to Beskin, carried so many conflicts and contradictions that it would now be impossible for someone to declare themselves to be neither ‘liberal nor conservative, but a free man’, as Chekhov did.

Was Chekhov not a philistine for holding back from any ideology under times of such turmoil? Was it not philistinism to ask someone to be mild and humble and passively wait for something to come as uncle Vanya did? Or was it not philistinism to talk about the sale of the *Cherry Orchard* and not about the disgrace of serfdom?⁴²⁹

This kind of *Cherry Orchard* is dead, Beskin summed up, and it is not even a pity. Because it cannot be a pity to remove from the stage a writer that promotes narrow-minded scepticism and passivity to the audience, especially given that the theatre of today should be able to energise this audience; Chekhov was not able to do that.

d. Identifying the social necessity: Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy

Despite some amount of dissatisfaction, Lunacharsky’s call to embrace the classics was generally accepted with enthusiasm. The chief remaining question was ‘how’, a question linked to the extent of acceptable artistic intervention in the original. Further, there was a lot of ground to cover regarding what exactly ‘critical approach’ meant. Nemirovich-Danchenko, for instance, tried to use the most judgemental critics of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy to expose their social background. The difficulties he faced are indicative of the ambiguity of the entire project.

Nemirovich-Danchenko’s approach, as well as the reviews that he received, prove that – even among artists who supported putting emphasis on the classics – it was unclear what was expected of them. Particularly unclear was the notion of turning the texts into ‘socially useful’ performances, especially because what was ‘socially useful’ was still ‘under clarification’. Nemirovich-Danchenko was among the first to attempt to apply this new use of literature to

⁴²⁹ Beskin 1929, p. 4.

his work. A series of productions, featuring Dostoyevsky's *Uncle's Dream* in 1929, Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in 1930, and ultimately Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in 1937, manifest this new method of dealing with the classics – through the new lenses of social critique.

At first, when Nemirovich-Danchenko staged *Uncle's Dream* in 1929, Dostoyevsky's work acquired a slightly different social character. It became imbued with a political aspect that it did not originally have. This phenomenon was not new. As Marc Slonim observed in his 1951 article, 'Dostoyevsky Under the Soviets', the way the Soviets approached Dostoyevsky throughout the years was quite indicative of the general ideological conflicts over the role of art. In fact, this was the case with Dostoyevsky even before the Revolution. Around 1875, radical and socialist intellectuals were quarrelling on whether they should accept his political and religious views or not. When Dostoyevsky died in 1881, things only worsened, as he was hailed as a proponent of orthodoxy and autocracy by the conservatives and reactionaries⁴³⁰. Thus, when MAT staged the *Possessed* in 1913, Dostoyevsky's 'greatest onslaught on Nihilism' (as Hingley Ronald pointed out)⁴³¹, Gorky's ferocious reaction was not at all lacking a solid foundation.

Firstly, Gorky did not agree with theorists who held that Dostoyevsky was a rebel against society and its misdeeds. In contrast, he accused the writer of being ambiguous and hypocritical, 'playing the hand of governmental reaction'⁴³². Furthermore, he could not accept this – according to him – erroneous division, as his contemporary theorists did, by separating the man as an artist from his worldview as a person. If a man is reactionary, so is his writing, and, for the Soviets, this is a lesson to be learned. For Gorky, Dostoyevsky's worldview was obnoxious, dangerous, and unwholesome⁴³³, and thus completely alien and opposed to the socialist cause. By 1934, Gorky's opinion of Dostoyevsky had not changed at all. In his speech at the Congress, in which he delivered a lengthy analysis on European and Russian literature, in addition to a particularly long section on Dostoyevsky alone, he declared that:

The influence of Dostoyevsky has been and remains an especially strong one. This influence was admitted by Nietzsche, whose ideas form the basis of the fanatical creed

⁴³⁰ Slonim 1951, p. 119.

⁴³¹ Hingley, p. 55.

⁴³² Slonim 1951, p. 119.

⁴³³ Ibid.

and practice of fascism. To Dostoyevsky belongs the credit of having painted with the most vivid perfection of word portraiture a type of egocentrist, a type of social degenerate in the person of the hero of his *Memoirs from Underground*. With the grim triumph of one who is insatiably taking vengeance for his personal misfortunes and sufferings, for his youthful enthusiasms, Dostoyevsky, in the figure of his hero, has shown the depths of whining despair that are reached by the individualist from among the young men of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who are cut off from real life.⁴³⁴

In addition, to those claiming that Dostoyevsky was a seeker of the truth, Gorky replied that, even if he was, he searched for the truth only to justify the ‘brute and animal instincts of man’. As Slonim remarked, ‘most Communist critics after 1917 adopted the same line; they emphasized that Dostoyevsky’s ideology was hostile to Communism. Had he been a minor writer, it would have been easy to dismiss’⁴³⁵ – but he was not. Critics had to find a way to endorse him, given that expelling him would be too difficult. Initially, those who did support him argued that the fact that Dostoyevsky was a reactionary figure does not need to be emphasized. Instead, critics and artists should focus on his great talent and learn from that. Obviously, this approach could not have lasted long. Furthermore, at a time when the emphasis was on the ‘critical approach’ rather than on ‘classics for the sake of it’, the ideological relation needed to be clearer. From this perspective, Nemirovich-Danchenko’s production of *Uncle’s Dream* becomes particularly interesting.

In essence, *Uncle’s Dream* is a story of love, hate, deceit, greed, and a critical comment on small-town manners and morals. The elderly Prince K. comes to visit the town of Mordasoff, ruled by the authoritative Maria Alexandrovna Moskaleva. Standing reluctantly at Maria Alexandrovna’s side is her daughter, Zina, who has few friends of her own. However, Prince K. does not arrive alone. His companion and distant relative, Paul Mosgliakoff, would later become a suitor to Zina.

⁴³⁴ Scott, and Groky, p. 23.

⁴³⁵ Slonim 1951, p. 124.

Nemirovich-Danchenko's performance was a success and ran for more than five hundred showings⁴³⁶. Olga Knipper-Chekhov, as Maria Alexandrovna, displayed magnificent dynamism and authority; Maria Knebel was to be remembered for her satirical tone as a gossipmonger; and the Prince himself, played by Nikolay Khmelev, was magnificently 'played as a mechanical doll made up of uncoordinated body parts'⁴³⁷, an object lesson of the aristocracy's demise as a class. In addition, regarding the social necessity of the performance, Yuri Sobolev's review, praising the performance, focused on the issue of the individual in a political and economic structure that undermines his life; the terrifying portrayal of society is a proof of its very sickness⁴³⁸. The truth is, however, that the forced social tones of the adaptation prevailed to such an extent that it distorted the original text's meaning, especially its initial focus on the psychological complexities between Maria Alexandrovna and her daughter⁴³⁹. Thus, the question not only remained but became more complex: to what extent should or can a director alter a text in order to draw out its social connotations?

Recalling Meyerhold's adaptation of Gogol's *The General Inspector* (1926) and the fierce attacks he received for his alterations to the original, one might think that the obsession with the classics left no space for experimentation. However, if this were the case, how could the directors test their limits and identify the social spirit of a play when the social spirit itself was not the main concern of the artist? It seems that things worked somehow differently. As was proven in the previous chapter, during the 1920s, defending the classics was an issue, eluding its artistic nature, expanding to the core of the ideological field. Thus, the problem was not that Meyerhold changed the play but why he did it. Further, he received a lot of positive reviews on his brave attitude towards the classics.

The above approach is further validated by Nemirovich-Danchenko's production of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in 1930. If we examine this production closely, we can observe that Nemirovich-Danchenko emphasized the resurrection of the fallen woman, Katiusha Maslova, and de-emphasized her seducer, Nekhliudov, shifting the emphasis from the remorseful aristocrat's story to the social causality of prostitution. F. Raskolnikov's adaptation further added a character who was not in the original text – a narrator, played by Kachalov – who wandered in

⁴³⁶ Rzhovsky 2009, p. 85.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴³⁸ Sobolev, p. 2.

⁴³⁹ Rzhovsky 2009, p. 85.

the midst of the action and commented at length, addressing the audience and providing interpretations of the on-stage action. ‘Kachalov’s role became a benchmark of performance talent in’⁴⁴⁰, states Rzhevsky. Further, Anatoly Lunacharsky, in his review of the performance in *Krasnaya Gazeta*, affirmed that the narrator, although being a bit exaggerated (mainly due to the unnatural nature of a monologue by a person invisible to the characters), was a smart solution and excellently performed by Kachalov⁴⁴¹. O. Litovskiy wrote, in *Pravda*, that Raskolnikov’s adaptation did not idealise Tolstoy’s problematic philosophy but simultaneously managed to illuminate all the social issues that the writer dealt with. Litovskiy praised the performance’s innovation and competence, along with its care for masterpieces of the past. However, he insisted that theatre must not resign from the struggle to create new Soviet plays⁴⁴².



Figure 4.4. Scene from *The Resurrection* with Kachalov as ‘the author’ (the top-left corner), standing among the audience. Source: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and Avant-Garde*, p. 299.

Changing, re-structuring, re-shaping, and altering the original text in any way was not a problem in all cases. Of course, Nemirovich-Danchenko’s approach was not as radical as Meyerhold’s; however, what becomes clear is that even if this obsession with the classics

⁴⁴⁰ Rzhevsky 2009, p. 89.

⁴⁴¹ Lunacharsky 1930, p. 3.

⁴⁴² Litovskiy, p. 5.

reveals an inherent conservatism, focusing on the classics in itself in no way affected the range of experimentation that was expected of the directors, especially those in academic theatres. Nonetheless, the fact that they were expected to find ways to approach the classics, even if that meant that they had to change the original text, still did not answer the question of how they should look at them to identify the social issues that they raised. During the 1934 Congress, the notion of ‘critical approach’ was still ambiguous. This ambiguity turned legitimate admiration of the classics into a ‘creational trap’. On the one hand, there was a consensus on the need to re-evaluate the past. On the other, the very passion for the classics was the result of two factors: first, the great pride that they felt for an undoubtedly impressive and precious heritage (which, as such, is difficult to alter), and, second, the need to eliminate the exaggerations of Proletkult that proclaimed the destruction of any previous achievement. Thus, the passion was based on two incorrect motives. Although the theoretical framework had correctly identified the need for a critical approach to the classics, the artistic environment did not help artists to take full advantage of all the potential that such a critical approach could offer. The extent of this drawback is evident in the case of a 1936 production of *Anna Karenina*.

e. *The case of Anna Karenina*

The plot of this famous novel is well-known. In 1874, in Imperial Russia, it follows the aristocrat Anna Karenina, who flees Saint Petersburg for Moscow to defend the marriage of her sibling Prince Oblonsky, who had an affair with his housemaid. Anna herself endures a cold marriage with Count Alexei Karenin, with whom she has a child. When Anna meets cavalry officer Count Vronsky, they begin an affair that violates all commonly accepted norms. Vronsky promises to marry her if she will agree to leave her husband, Karenin. However, Anna feels very vulnerable to the pressures of Russian societal norms, the moral laws of the Russian Orthodox Church, her own insecurities, and Karenin's indecision. Anna and Vronsky go to Italy, where they can be together, but are unable to adjust to life there and soon return to Russia. Anna becomes more isolated and anxious, while Vronsky resumes his social life. Despite Vronsky's reassurances, she grows increasingly possessive and paranoid about his imagined infidelity, leading her to her tragic end.



Figure 4.5. On the day of its premiere, *Anna Karenina* was featured on the front page of *Izvestiya*, a fact that illuminates the importance that was attached to theatre. Articles and reviews of the play dominated the press for a long time.

Source: *Izvestiya*, No. 96, April 22, 1937.

The performance, directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko, premiered on April 22, 1937, after a long period of extended publicity. The result was an immediate success and the play would remain in MAT's repertoire for many years.

However, the final text of the play was quite different from what Tolstoy had imagined, especially in terms of perspective. The significant focus on the aristocratic way of life led to a long occupation of the stage by the former class of rulers, which had to somehow be justified. Staying true to the classic masterpiece while adapting it to the new social context led to the creation of a bizarre hybrid. This altered version, written by Nikolai Volkov and designed by Dmitriev, consisted of twenty-three scenes, switching between large social gatherings and intimate private dialogues. This new portrayal of Anna elevated the heroine from an oppressed Russian woman to an archetype. Anna was not considered a mere member of high society anymore. She represented something beyond that; she was the symbol of a new woman who

does not accept being enslaved by rules of propriety and refuses to dilute her moral standards. This new picture of Anna became a representation of all the old, negative morals that socialism had left behind. As Juzovskiy wrote in *Pravda*:

Anna, Karenin, Vronskij –they all belong to the powers that be, they are the masters of the situation, and they are crushed by the very proprietary foundations of life that they had erected and propounded themselves. [...] The old world deformed, mutilated, and smeared these [human] relationships – friendship, love, motherhood – regardless of all the merits of the Vronskijs [sic] or all the flaws of the Karenins⁴⁴³.

Despite the significant changes to the novel, the reviews were remarkably supportive. M. Tverskoy claimed – in *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* on April 23, 1937 – that ‘the production of *Anna Karenina* is a major event in the cultural life of the land of socialism not only because our best theatre has brought onstage a brilliant work by a great artist and enriched our knowledge of the past.’⁴⁴⁴ In addition, according to TASS (the Soviet news agency), this adaptation of *Anna Karenina* provided the Soviet audience with a new, revised look at womanhood through the socialist prism:

Looking at *Karenina-Tarasova*, the viewers saw with the utmost clarity, and empathized with, the tragedy of a Russian woman crushed by the unbearable burden of the proprietary social order. Chmelev’s performance raised hatred for Karenin, who is depicted in Tolstoy’s great creation as an epitome of the utter vileness of reactionary bureaucratic Russia and the hypocrisy of church morality.⁴⁴⁵

Regarding the moral aspect of the performance, however, most revealing is what Nemirovich-Danchenko himself remarked:

The theatre wanted to portray Tolstoy’s remarkable characters so that they would be alive today, as our contemporaries: so that they would stir us, evoke a response, feelings and thoughts within us, ... so that they would raise problems that could not have been

⁴⁴³ Sited in: Muza, p. 481.

⁴⁴⁴ Tverskoy, p. 220.

⁴⁴⁵ Muza, p. 472.

solved either by Tolstoy or by his heroes, but which we are solving. This play is, in the best sense of the word, deeply moral. It helps to create new morals and, in this respect, it is a Soviet play.⁴⁴⁶

However, contemporary scholars do not always accept this reception as genuine. Anna Muza, in her extended analysis and reconstruction of the performance, offers an insightful examination of the peculiarity of the specific performance that came to be regarded by the Soviet theorists as a typical socialist realist performance. Muza focuses on the effect of the mediated publication and the influence of the presence of the upper hierarchy at the premiere of the performance on the acceptance of the play. She admits that a significant part of the success of the play was related to the attendance of Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, and Ždanov. According to her, the prejudicial attitude against the old ethics of the play became more emphatic owing to the presence of the very people who were the official leaders of the fight against those ethics: ‘encased in this mirror-like structure, the first-night audience felt elated yet also belittled and threatened by the symbolic body of the Soviet state, whose duty to discipline and punish informed the production’s concept and staging’.⁴⁴⁷ However, this is only partially true because this was not the only performance attended by the upper hierarchy. Almost every premiere of a major performance, especially at MAT, was attended by the upper hierarchy. Secondly, the immense success of the performance was evident in a number of different ways, not merely by virtue of its acceptance by officialdom. Not only had it become a permanent fixture of the repertoire of MAT, but it was also adapted for a radio version; seventeen theatres put on an adaptation of it in 1937 alone, and in 1938, nineteen additional theatres did so. Twelve years later, after the war, twenty-two theatres continued to incorporate the play in their repertoire. Further, as Muza notes, in 1939 Eyzenshteyn already regretted that ‘as a spectator, [he] did not experience that force that would clasp [his] throat, make [him] breathe unevenly, gasp for air’⁴⁴⁸. However, if Muza was right, and the success of the performance was related to the fact that ‘that controlling, dominating surveillance, overpowering both the stage and the audience, seems to have been necessary for the participants to reach an emotional climax’, Eyzenshteyn’s comment proves that – in 1939 – this element was absent. Thus, even if the initial success was linked to extra-theatrical

⁴⁴⁶ Nemirovich-Danchenko 1936-1937, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

elements, it seems absurd to think that the performance endured for so long after its premiere for these reasons alone. Her closing comment, based on Alla Tarasova's remark of 1960, is also contradictory, where the once-celebrated protagonist of *Anna Karenina* declared that 'it used to be a good show. And now it's so wretched. Mass scenes have become so pathetic. All is covered by dust'⁴⁴⁹. For Muza, this statement constitutes proof that 'the dusty Stalinist spectacle of terror stirred pity in the heart of its former star'⁴⁵⁰. However, in contrast, it proves that not only was it not a 'Stalinist spectacle of terror' but rather that, for some reason, it was genuinely a massive success.

Thus, the peculiarity of this performance does not lie in the relationship between its success and its mediated publication, but on the very notion of what was considered successful. Both Muza and Rzhnevsky, in his own assessment of the performance in *Modern Russian Theatre* seem to overlook the fact that, although indeed not socialist, *Anna Karenina* takes a clear stance on the feudal system that existed in Russia at the time. Politics – not only in the Russian government but also at the level of individual characters and families – religion, morality, gender, and social class were being examined and criticised on stage. All of these suited the Soviet system of the time very well, but not solely for the reasons that Muza and Rzhnevsky provide. Muza notes that the historical context did affect the artistic result. 'Thus, rhetorically and visually', she claims, '*Anna Karenina* was associated with major victories in socialist construction and situated at the very core of Soviet political life'⁴⁵¹, relating the success of the performance to its social significance and political momentum. Rzhnevsky is more disapproving, linking the 'panicked search for safe stereotypes and the noncontroversial self-flagellation' with the trials of 1936-1938 and the successive arrests of the two administrative directors of MAT (Mikhail Arkadiev and Yakov Boyarsky)⁴⁵². They both conclude that because of the unstable and insecure situation, officials asked for and received a deliberately supportive performance, which – owing to this support – was massively publicised. The problem, however, was not that a particular performance was being promoted for political purposes (this was and is happening anyway), but that these political views affected the performance by misrepresenting the very aesthetics of its artistic creators (rather than by physically influencing its result).

⁴⁴⁹ Nemirovich-Danchenko 1936-1937, p. 497.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 468.

⁴⁵² Rzhnevsky, p. 89.

To further examine what was wrong – or at least strange – with performances, such as the ‘new’ *Anna Karenina*, the social context should not be eliminated in the light of the political actions of the trials and the arrests. The socialist state, and the Communist Party itself, had devoted a lot of effort to improving the social status of women. Women, immediately after the revolution, began to be treated more equally. Divorce, over the years, became more restricted but was much easier to obtain than before. The fate of children was a serious legal issue too. In general, the socialist state had managed, in a very short time, to cover a great distance in the equality of working women, along with their social equality. On the one hand, *Anna Karenina* and her profound example as a strong, independent woman with equally strong ethical standards supported the social values that the socialist state tried to establish. Soviet reviews of the play deliberately pointed to this very fact. Tverskoy, for instance, in his review, observed that:

The performance raises problems of new human relationships. We become fully aware of new relationships of men and women, husbands and wives. Love, as Engels brilliantly foresaw, will become genuine love only in a socialist society. We are constructing new bases for morality through our experience, we often pay with our suffering. A structure of relationships is already being created immeasurably superior to anything that existed before, because the falsehood that lay at the base of marriage, the family, love in the old society, the falsehood that inevitably flows from the exploitative character of that society, has been extirpated. But the vestiges of capitalism in people’s consciousness have remained, they are alive and hard to eliminate.⁴⁵³

Vsevolod Ivanov similarly commented that:

Righteousness, sincerity, honour, inner spiritual beauty – that’s what we demand from people, that’s what the spectator demands in the theatre. And the outstanding Soviet actress Alla Konstantinovna Tarasova has known how, through her flair as an artist, to capture this inner thirst, this longing of the Soviet spectator, and she has satisfied his

⁴⁵³ Tverskoy, p. 5.

expectations by her performance of the role of Anna Karenina. [...] Therefore, *Anna Karenina* is a national performance on the stage of the Russian national theatre.⁴⁵⁴

Thus, it could be claimed that the critical over-appraisal served not only political purposes but also social purposes. MAT took advantage of this critical element and magnified it to illuminate contemporary issues that were indeed of great concern. Thus, the problem was not that political insecurity required safe stereotypes, as Rzhnevsky would claim; instead, the problem was that by comparing the socialist system with the old bourgeois one, it was claimed that all contradictions have been resolved. Therefore, if on the one hand, Anna was a good example, on the other, she was also the one-eyed king in the land of the blind. The fact that the treatment of women had improved, relationships had changed, and society was being built on completely new standards, the very fact that the quality of life of the working class was considerably better than before cannot be enough to claim that all challenges had been resolved and that the socialist state was living in times of bliss, having exterminated class struggle. In fact, this is essentially the heart of the grave dialectical error that lies behind this peculiarity of artistic creations of the time. If the Communist Party, defined as the avant-garde of the working class, supported the idea of the end of class struggle, then it could be very difficult for artists to perceive this on their own. For this reason, drawbacks should not be looked for in any tangible restrictions on artistic creation, nor even in the climate of political terror, as Rzhnevsky suggests, but in the retreat from Marxist ideology.

f. From realism as essence to classicism as form

Anna Karenina was indeed considered a great success. Alla Tarasova, as Anna, was awarded a Stalin State Prize and made a deputy of the Supreme Soviet. MAT was awarded the Order of Lenin.⁴⁵⁵ Undeniably, the entire performance received great publicity and support. However,

⁴⁵⁴ Ivanov, pp. 269.

⁴⁵⁵ However, Muza's description of the story is not one hundred percent accurate. Rather than MAT being rewarded for *Anna Karenina* with the Order of Lenin to support the specific kind of theatre, Arkadiev personally contacted Stalin to ask him to award the theatre, as according to him 'the theatre dreams of going to the Paris Exposition under the title – Order of Lenin Theatre. It seems to me that these are worthy sentiments and good dreams. I don't think I would be overly subjective if I said that the theatre has earned this award'. Stalin replied to Molotov stating that the request was legitimate. Further, in any case, the Order of Lenin was a more generic award for the overall contribution of theatre.

all things considered, within this frame of artistic creation – one that advocates for the classic past, that defends itself from political deviations expressed in art, that espouses the educational character of theatre regarding all goals that the state promotes, and that congratulates the critical stance of artists, even if expressed in the ideologically simple approach of adherents such as Nemirovich-Danchenko – it still made sense for *Anna Karenina* to have the full support of the officials. Yet, making sense does not necessarily mean being dialectically consistent. If the purpose of was a truthful and all-round reflection of social reality through artistic means, then *Anna Karenina* was problematic in many ways.

First of all, when comparing Anna with her own social environment, it makes no sense, in a Marxist way of speaking, for her to be able to draw such progressive conclusions for the role of woman, especially in non-proletarian surroundings; Anna may be progressive, but bourgeois nonetheless. Soviet critics, however, somehow overlooked this fact. Izgoev wrote in, *Vechernjaja Moskva*, that, watching Tarasova's brilliant, heartfelt acting, one forgets that Anna is one of the highly-placed ladies in the court circle⁴⁵⁶. He also stated that Karenina's tragedy is by no means a tragedy of a high-society woman⁴⁵⁷. The fact that Anna went against her social standards only to be crushed by the rules of propriety can indeed be considered a progressive critical approach on behalf of Tolstoy. However, this does not make Anna any more revolutionary than she was at the beginning of the novel. It barely manages to prove the destructive power of the rules of propriety. Thus, Anna was not the revolutionary example that the critics tried to portray.

Secondly, looking at Anna in the context of contemporary Soviet social conditions, it was still very difficult for the proletarian audience to draw the conclusion that artists and officials very ambitiously aimed for. Even if Anna is indeed a revolutionary figure, she is still an aristocrat. Therefore, should the audience admire her or despise her? And if what Anna did was right, does this mean that the aristocrats were also admirable? This goes against the whole spirit of the Soviet ethos, which aimed at criticising the old system and, via this critique, portraying the superiority of the new one.

⁴⁵⁶ Izgoev, p. 3.^[SEP]

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the most crucial inconsistency of the play was that it portrayed the new social reality as much more superior than it actually was. It ignored the ongoing class struggle and the fact that there were still many steps to be taken towards realising socialism; it drew a picture of life that had no challenges. Marxistically, it depicted a society in which all dialectical contradictions had been resolved. However, this was not the case.

William Gunn, in his essay on the use of the slogan “Back to Ostrovsky!”, he claimed that, especially in the thirties, the return to the classics was linked with the officials’ drive for consistency and predictability. In his dissertation for the University of Southern California, he stated that ‘in 1932, the concept for a predictable and consistent artistic platform was put forth by the Party’s Central Committee, and at the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 the doctrine of socialist realism was presented as the only acceptable artistic theory in the Soviet Union’⁴⁵⁸. A few years later he added that ‘because the art of socialist realism aimed for consistency and predictability [...] the state made an increasingly forceful and calculated attempt to portray the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavsky as the ultimate arbiters of theatrical truth in the Soviet Union’⁴⁵⁹. It would be very difficult to demonstrate that this doctrine was put forth as early as 1934. As seen in previous chapters, the Congress displayed great openness in terms of artistic creation. This was proclaimed not only by the artists but also by high officials like Zhdanov himself. However, Gunn’s comment is very insightful in describing the artistic field of 1937 as reinforcing the ‘consistent’ and the ‘predictable’.

At some point, the combination of classics with socially useful performances ceased to work. This was perhaps because social necessity was misunderstood by the officials. If art in 1937 reflected a scheme of ‘consistency and predictability’, then society had been convinced of that, irrespective of whether this was true or not. In other words, if art depicted a society without any problems, then the society truly believed this. This does not seem to be a problem exclusive to the arts, but rather of the Communist Party’s direction.

⁴⁵⁸ Gunn 2012, p. 1.

⁴⁵⁹ Gunn 2014, p. 63.

Stanislavsky and dialectical materialism

For reasons that go beyond theatre itself, and thus the scope of this thesis, the official party line may have deviated from the Marxist direction in the manner of art that was necessary to build socialism. It lost the universal spirit proclaimed by the Congress and turned towards simple, superficial nationalism. However, this did not prevent Stanislavsky from further developing his method, given that he relied on previous theories and their evolution, as well as on the more favourable climate created by contemporary developments. The aesthetic analyses of critics and theorists of the previous period, along with the solutions to prior bureaucratic setbacks (that is, before the emergence of ideological issues), led to distinct results in art, even at the end of the 1930s. Stanislavsky's change towards a more contemporary scientific method demonstrates an effort to understand how the goal that was set for theatre in 1934, meaning to take advantage of the cultivating power of theatre and set it under the scope of socialism.

One of the things that made this change possible was that RAPP no longer existed. By 1932, with the liquidation of all creative organizations, RAPP had lost its power. Several of its members were absorbed by the Union of Writers, but by not being a separate faction, they were unable to launch attacks as fiercely as before. This made a great difference, given that RAPP's targets were not limited to the performances themselves, but extended to the actual process of theatre-making. Stanislavsky's system had been:

[...] declared to be idealistic and inimical to proletarian art. It was accused of being 'an-historical', dealing with 'abstract timelessness' of reducing 'multiform social qualities into a few basic laws of the biological behaviour of man in general' and of translating 'socio-political problems into the language of ethico-moral concepts' and transforming the 'complex processes of the actor's perception of reality into primitive, childlike credulity, naiveté and the 'creative if'.⁴⁶⁰

The attack on the system itself meant that, according to RAPP, it was impossible for Stanislavsky to stage any valuable performances, precisely because the problem was his own mentality and approach to art.

⁴⁶⁰ Benedetti 1999, p. 335.

Secondly, after the foundation of the Union of Writers and the Union of Theatre Workers, criticism was levelled in a more organised way; its main goal was to create a model of socialist art under the aegis of socialist realism, rather than having artists hurling condemnations at each other. Maxim Gorky, first leader of the Writers' Union of the U.S.S.R., welcomed the foundation of the Union, declaring that 'the Party and the Government are also taking away from us the right to order one another what to do, offering us in return the right to teach one another. To teach, meaning to share with one another our experience. That is all. That is all, nothing more'⁴⁶¹. Further, regarding 'non-party' artists, the foundation of the Union was the only way to create an environment open to tolerance, a statement that introduced and officially embraced the 'fellow travellers', not only within the Union but also within socialist artistic creation in general. Gorky remarked that 'those who were considered non-party men, who were "wavering", have recognised—with a complete sincerity I cannot doubt—that Bolshevism is the single most active idea guiding their work and, in a word, their art'⁴⁶². This stance towards 'non-party men', although not new, clearly established an attitude of recognition and acceptance towards fellow travellers. Not only were artists such as Stanislavsky or Nemirovich-Danchenko welcome to continue their work⁴⁶³, but this new form of organisation of the artists created an environment where opposition was expressed among the artists themselves, in a way that would allow discussion and the drawing of conclusions, rather than permitting personal attacks from outsiders who were self-proclaimed protectors of proletarian art.

Thus, while there was perhaps a better system and climate for artistic criticism, its goal had changed. The fact that the general direction of the field was turned towards a more nationally focused art did not obviate the fact that MAT, and particularly Stanislavsky, were accused of psychologism, petit-bourgeois mentality, a positive approach to the enemy (Bulgakovism), reactionary talk of counter-revolution (e.g., RAPP), the distant figure of the intellectual, right-wing bias, over-academicism, and a conservative approach to the classics, both during the 1920s and the 1930s. Hence, to an extent, RAPP might have been largely correct; Stanislavsky's system, at least in the beginning, was indeed alien to proletarian art. Unfortunately, although almost all critics understood the formative power of theatre, not all of

⁴⁶¹ Garrard, p. 41.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Further, neither RAPP nor any other artistic organization ever actually seized a play. Only officials had the power to do that.

them were able to explain precisely why Stanislavsky's theatre stood in the way of identifying and accepting the new socialist identity. Further, it is perhaps no coincidence that Stanislavsky changed his method during the 1930s and not earlier. Thirty years prior, perhaps nobody would have accused him of 'psychologism'. This is because, during the late nineteenth century, 'psychologism' was not perceived as a negative attribute for a work of art; in contrast, it was considered rather progressive, given that it was a time when psychology was being accepted as a science for the first time. However, during the first 40 years of the twentieth century, enormous changes occurred in scientific thought, changes that now need to be examined in order to understand how thinking had changed during those years, especially in terms of psychology, and why 'psychologism' was regarded as such a negative quality. Ultimately, it was the ideas that had changed; another piece of evidence that theatre, in this case through the experimentation and the personal research of Stanislavsky, was moving theory forwards.

a. Science versus 'psychologism' in Stanislavsky's system of acting

From *The Days of the Turbins* to *An Ardent Heart*, and from *Fear* to *Uncle's Dream*, and *Anna Karenina*, almost all of the performances staged by MAT, irrespectively of their director, were accused of 'psychologism'. In fact, 'psychologism' for Stanislavsky was quite often the equivalent of Meyerhold's 'formalism', meaning that not all critics or officials were actually aware of what 'psychologism' in theatre actually was before levelling an accusation. Even these unjust accusations, however, do not invalidate the argument of 'psychologism'. Stanislavsky's first brush with psychology appeared the moment he decided to bring science into the preparation for a dramatic role. From the very start, he was particularly interested in identifying a scientific method of triggering actors' inspiration and to make them perform every day without becoming mechanical⁴⁶⁴. To achieve this, he relied on the recently established science of psychology to discover specific sources of inspiration. Rose Whyman, in her book *The Stanislavsky System of Acting*, tracks the influences of contemporary scientific thought on Stanislavsky. According to her, he was inspired by associationist psychology (e.g., that of Edouard von Hartmann) and several pre-Freudian scientists and philosophers who focused on the function of the 'psyche' and the relation between the unconscious and its expression through feelings. All of these were based on Hegel's perception of consciousness as the foundation of reality, which became very influential in Russia when it was first introduced at

⁴⁶⁴ Whyman, p. 1.

the beginning of the nineteenth century. Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, in his *Nature-Philosophy*, studied nature in relation to its underlying spiritual laws. Friedrich Nietzsche spoke about the hidden realities within human beings. All these theories, says Whyman, along with the emergence of the symbolist movement, in which Stanislavsky became involved, undoubtedly influenced the director, who defined the process of his system as ‘the subconscious creativity of nature itself—through the artist’s conscious psycho-technique’⁴⁶⁵.

Stanislavsky’s desire to introduce science into theatre was not always discernible. In some cases, his own writings make it a challenge to prove this scientific appeal. In 1925, he declared that:

Can there exist a system for the creative process? Has it really got laws that have been established for all time? In certain parts of the system, like the physiological and psychological, laws exist for all, forever, and in all creative processes. They are indubitable, completely conscious, tried by science and found true.⁴⁶⁶

However, in 1938, in the preface of his *An Actor’s Work on Himself*, he would go on to say: ‘Do not look for any scholarly or scientific derivations. We in the theatre have our own lexicon, our actors’ jargon which has been wrought out of life’⁴⁶⁷. According to Jonathan Pitches, this inconsistency could be explained in one of two ways. Either Stanislavsky simply changed his mind or, as Sharon Carnicke puts it in *Stanislavsky in Focus*, like any artist, Stanislavsky incorporates science only when it inspires his imagination⁴⁶⁸. Irrespective of whether he admits it or not, Stanislavsky uses conventional associations of science such as rigour, clarity, objectivity, and experimentation to validate his findings on how inspiration is generated:

In the expectation of these new triumphs of science, I have felt there was nothing for me to do except to devote my labours and energy almost exclusively to the study of Creative Nature—not to learn to create in her stead, but to seek oblique, roundabout ways to approach her, not to study inspiration as such but only to find some paths

⁴⁶⁵ Whyman, p. 4.

⁴⁶⁶ Pitches, p. 1.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

leading to it⁴⁶⁹.

By studying human behaviour for over 40 years, by observing himself while acting, and by experimenting with directing, Stanislavsky developed a theory to identify a commonly accepted method of acting and combine it with the process of approaching a character. The more he learnt, the more he wanted to know:

I absolutely agree, we need specialists. The curious thing is, I am talking about very difficult psychological problems, about the creative mind, and haven't read more than a couple of books on psychology. It amuses me and bewilders me at the same time.⁴⁷⁰

This scientific approach to acting was itself a revolutionary methodology. The difficulty with Stanislavsky's method was that it was based on pre-revolutionary science, leading him to focus too much on the unconscious and on the confidence that human nature responds linearly – notions incompatible with the new ideological status quo of the Soviets. Thus, if a specific memory was evoked, it would invariably provoke a certain feeling. This idea was related to the prevailing belief of positivism at the time, the belief that scientists were rapidly discovering the laws of nature's single unified system, that all we can know is our sensations, and that knowledge should be confined to pure experience. This theory had already been forcefully attacked and rejected by Lenin in his key text *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, where, on dialectical materialist grounds, he argued that human perceptions correctly and accurately reflect the objective external world and not the other way around. Stanislavsky, however, inspired by the Newtonian school of determinism and influenced by empirio-critical philosophy, established a system wherein, if one follows the constituent elements of the psycho-technique, a set of predictable conditions will occur that will stimulate unconscious creativity. It is only in this way, he claimed, that the actor's behaviour on stage will appear natural, spontaneous, and real. However, when Stanislavsky failed to produce this natural effect, he did not question the theory. He simply focused on improving his execution.

⁴⁶⁹ Pitches, p. 10.

⁴⁷⁰ Benedetti, p. 338.

From the Marxist point of view, this reliance on the unconscious was not the only drawback to Stanislavsky's approach. Stanislavsky recognised feelings as the subject matter of art⁴⁷¹. His main goal became to identify how they are created and conveyed, by proclaiming their ascendancy over everything else. Seeing 'feeling' as natural, it became his goal to find the way for this 'natural' truth to be expressed on stage. Focused on the logic and consistency of feelings, he argued that – in so far as they were little researched by science – they could never be scientifically translated into practical instructions and/or training for actors, or even provide a foundation upon which to build dramatic roles.

All things considered, it was through this prism that his earlier teaching experiments (which led to the first 'period' of the Stanislavsky method, known as 'emotional memory') should be viewed. Inspired by this conscious effort at emotional recollection, which supposedly helped the actor relive an experience and eventually evoked the desired feeling in him, Stanislavsky created a model that had exemplary results in pre-revolution theatre. Marxism, on the other hand, had an entirely different idea of how reality works. In 1917, when the theoretical background of Marxism became reality, the philosophical scheme also became the principal philosophical method. In addition, given that in the core of his system's theory was – until then – a philosophy completely alien to Marxism, which accepted the dominance of consciousness over matter, it was almost impossible for Stanislavsky to understand where the problem lay. A series of remarkable changes in scientific thought, however, along with a personal change of status – and of course the overall societal changes – made Marxist theory conceivable and applicable to Stanislavsky's theatre.

b. The change in the psychological background

Over the span of 20 years, from 1917 to 1937, science moved on from these theories very quickly. Stanislavsky's theory had to compete and survive in a rapidly progressing scientific field. Particularly from the perspective of Marxism, science was given a new and different quality. The materialistic perception of history had now – as its starting point – the argument that production and the exchange of its products formed the basis of social status. Historically, in every society, the distribution of products, and with it the division of society into classes or castes, is regulated according to what is produced and by which method, along with how the

⁴⁷¹ Whyman, p. 14.

products are exchanged. Thus, the ultimate cause of all social changes and political upheavals must be sought not in the heads of men, not in a growing understanding of eternal truth and justice, but in the changes in production and exchange. They must be sought not in philosophy, but in the economy of that era. This perception dramatically changed the way science was perceived, and the science of psychology was no exception.

When, in 1859 Darwin's, *Origin of Species* was first published, it initiated the start of an immense shift in science because, for the first time, the evolution of humankind became detached from widespread religious reasoning, an assertion that radicalised thinking in many domains, particularly natural science. One of the main contributions of this new theory was that the scientific laws of nature could be discovered and studied. Darwin's impact made it believable that scientific law was discoverable, separating it from the personal perceptions of the observer. By moving one step forward, this new approach to science and the study of animal behaviour encouraged materialistic analyses of mental events and gave new impetus to Stanislavsky's investigation.

Darwin influenced innumerable scientists after him. Among them was Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, whose scientific work was based on Darwin's theory that information about human beings can be derived from the study of animals. Pavlov maintained that the theory of conditioned reflexes could help interpret psychological behaviour. To summarise his theory, classical conditioning includes learning to relate an unconditioned stimulus that causes a particular response (i.e., a reflex) with a new (conditioned) stimulus, such that the new stimulus causes the same response. With this theory, the human mind could be studied in an objective and demonstrable way that not only would explain how it works but could also predict how it would react to given conditions⁴⁷²; this theory was very useful for Stanislavsky's investigations.

Eventually, the combination of a Marxist methodology of science and the development of psychology came about with Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky saw human psychological development as the result of interpersonal connections and interactions with the social environment. Although Vygotsky admitted that some basic cognitive processes are common to both humans and higher animal species, he expressly and deliberately focused his own theory on those

⁴⁷² Pitches, p. 88.

cognitive processes that are unique to humans. In his pivotal work, *Thinking and Speech* (1934) – through an examination of the critical contradiction between theories of psychology of form and behaviourism – he developed a Marxist interpretation of consciousness, showing the historical nature of its formation and its co-existence with social action.

c. Stanislavsky's quest in dialectical materialism

This rapid progress of science meant that, during the 1930s, the early psychological approach upon which Stanislavsky had based his theory was obsolete; a fact that Stanislavsky did not accept easily. He initially believed that the problem lay in the terminology he was using⁴⁷³. He first turned his 'magic if' into a 'creative if' to avoid the mysticism implied by the word 'magic'. Then, he unhesitatingly asked Afinogenov, his main adversary, to propose terminology that he would consider appropriate⁴⁷⁴. Afinogenov, of course, could not revert with better terms because Stanislavsky was wrong; the problem was not in the terminology but in a deeper understanding of his method.

A further step towards a more materialistic method was taken when, in 1929, Stanislavsky was asked to team up with Lunacharsky and the magazine *Iskusstvo* to determine how to advance Marxist aesthetics. Stanislavsky's contribution would have been his insight into the past and his significant background in realism. His disposal to help advance Marxist theory, although not a proof of agreement or understanding, manifested nonetheless a willingness to declare, for the first time, ignorance in the face of this new theory that he might not be ready or capable of grasping.

As a confirmation of Vygotsky's theory that man's consciousness is shaped by his social environment (without necessarily having been consciously motivated), Stanislavsky found that the former technique could not find its footing in the new theatrical roles and that his prior internal approach to a character could not always be conveyed to the audience. However, the problem was not the method itself. As Piotrovskiy said, the method perfectly matched Chekhov's psychological pre-revolutionary works (Piotrovskiy 1929); in the meanwhile, however, history had moved forward. The new social conditions had created new plays and

⁴⁷³ Benedetti, p. 337.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 342.

new heroes that could not be approached using the old techniques. This was where the context of what the critics identified as ‘psychologism’ was hidden.

During the 1930s, Stanislavsky modified his method. Elements that always concerned him were set in the proscenium, under the prism of recent scientific developments. He turned his attention to the importance of physical action and continued experimenting in that vein. He finally developed the concept of ‘active analysis’ in 1934, when working on *Three Sisters* at the Opera Studio (Whyman). With this new, evolved technique, he would no longer examine a play via round-the-table analysis, which had characterised rehearsals in an earlier period, but set the actors ‘on their feet’ and encouraged them to find actions that would match their character. These were the first steps towards what was later named the method of ‘physical actions’ – a technique where the performer builds up a succession of activities on his part to accomplish tasks required by the given conditions of the play. The idea is that, with such ‘active’ analysis, the emotional life of the character could be stirred and translated into the performance more proficiently than through emotional memory.

The changes in Stanislavsky’s later work demonstrate how he evolved throughout the span of his life, from his perception of acting as expressing something vague and imprecise, to very specific tasks and actions. The emotion of a scene is not to be sought by directly accessing the actor’s feelings, but is a by-product of the actor’s experience, which is, in turn, composed of the sequence of logical physical actions that the actor has chosen. As Andre Van Gyseghem put it, ‘he had now to be able to realize, in shape and motion, the psychology of a man’⁴⁷⁵. Ultimately, theatre worked as the driving force in the formation of even Stanislavsky’s personal socialist identity.

Conclusion

Although MAT had several problems with many officers that were assigned as artistic–political advisors by the Soviets, there is no sign of an overall rejection of socialism, not even during the difficult first years after the Revolution. On the contrary, both Stanislavsky and

⁴⁷⁵ Gyseghem, p. 49.

Nemirovich-Danchenko supported socialism to the very end. Indicative of this, perhaps, is Stanislavsky's letter to Stalin in 1935, wherein, in order to achieve 'genuinely creative theatre', he asserted that:

We need an experienced, cultivated communist director, who would assist V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko and myself to repair our relationship for the sake of the creative management of the theatre [...]. In addition, we need to strengthen the party organization of the theatre with a cultivated and qualified manager [...].⁴⁷⁶

He did not even reject the possibility that his method might be in need of renewal. Further, from Chekhov's nineteenth century to socialist realism, even without such rapid economic–political developments, theatre would have inevitably changed. Stanislavsky was broad-minded and receptive enough to understand this. Nemirovich-Danchenko had realised, too, that a new society had emerged in Russia and that theatre itself had to adjust to the new conditions. Like Stanislavsky, he backed up his beliefs with public statements about the help received from the party and the importance of socialist realism⁴⁷⁷. At the same time, MAT was, in general and for reasons stated in this chapter, the beloved child of the Soviet state. Eventually, the Soviets took advantage of the theatrical ground to set new, complex social ideas in an already familiar theatrical frame: the classics. Further, MAT had willingly followed in the field in which it felt most at ease.

At the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Gorky conducted an extended analysis of the importance of the classics. Lunacharsky held up Ostrovsky as the example that artists should follow in the quest of 'truthiness' and 'critical stance'. Further, MAT made a genuine effort to relate the social phenomena of the time in which the novels or plays had been written to their contemporary equivalents. However, in general, the classics were approached with 'pride and prejudice', by officials, by critics, by artists in general, and also by the public itself. This chapter has identified the roots of this underlying conservatism in the emphasis that was put on preserving the classics by forcibly extracting a social necessity that would potentially help the proletariat understand the laws of socialism, and not necessarily on understanding and portraying the complexity of the new social reality. This conclusion is further supported by the

⁴⁷⁶ Benedetti 1995, p. 354.

⁴⁷⁷ Slonim 1963, p. 316.

fact that the new Soviet drama, as in the example of *The Days of the Turbins*, was received with stronger theoretical conflict among critics and officials on the very issue of its aim, while the adaptations of classic novels or plays were regarded in terms of their success as adaptations and in terms of bringing the performance closer to the contemporary reality (as we have seen in the case of *Anna Karenina*). In other words, while the first case (the new Soviet drama) was focusing on the theoretical aspects of socialist art, the second (the adaptations of the classics) aimed at the practical issues of form, undermining the importance of content. In other words, by employing the classic literature of the past to avoid the formalism of the extremist present, art was guided to a different kind of formalism.

However, irrespectively of whether the official aesthetics were in a position of identifying this contradiction, society – and theatre as part of it – kept working according to its own rules. The fact that society affected the way Stanislavsky was perceiving the process of approaching a role, along with the more stable theoretical and critical system that was launched with the foundation of the Union of Writers, suggest that it was indeed possible for this conservatism to be overcome – an example of Marx’s dictum that ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’⁴⁷⁸. From a Marxist point of view, were it not for the war and the preparations for it, which changed the priorities of the economic base, the ‘social existence’ would have identified the mistake, and ‘men’s consciousness’ would have worked towards a solution. Nevertheless, history had different plans about how socialist realism would evolve in Soviet Russia during and after the war.

⁴⁷⁸ Marx 1977, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>>, [assessed in March 14, 2018].

CHAPTER 5

General conclusions and discussion

Introduction

This chapter will summarise the findings, set the position of the current thesis among research already published in the field, state its limitations, and identify possible future directions for research.

Recapitulation of purpose and findings

This thesis began by attempting to illuminate theatre as the driving force in the formation of socialist realism. This was made possible by setting theatre at the centre of the investigation of a broader topic –in this case, socialist realism. This premise was based on a series of traits attributed to theatre available to us owing to the flourishing of the field of theatre studies in recent decades. On the one hand, with the rise of theatre studies as an independent discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus of research shifted from the actor to the director, illuminating the fact that staging itself is a complex work of art that cannot be studied adequately using currently available means of analysis and classification. On the other hand, far from being a purely historical discipline, theatre studies began to redefine itself as the discipline that would understand theatre in accordance with its contemporary artistic practice and social surroundings.

Accordingly, early research on socialist realist theatre had been mostly restricted to text-based analysis of the first decades of its existence, leading to genre isolation that prioritised drama in its more classical form over other combinations or expressions of the performing arts, such as circuses or dancing, and to a simplification of the laws of Marxism relative to theatre under socialism, interpreting it as having a linear relationship to the economy. These restrictions downplayed the importance of theatre and its integral role in the shaping of the characteristics of socialist realism. ‘The theatre’s potential to be educative and empowering, to enable critical and ethical engagement, to awaken a sense of social responsibility, or to raise an audience’s sense of its own political agency’⁴⁷⁹ was undermined. This thesis, in contrast, is based on the proposition that the ability of theatre to connect with the audience in an immediate and direct way played a very significant role in the integration of the theoretical and philosophical aspects of socialism during the first few years post-revolution into a form of artistic expression with specific traits. Further, and perhaps more importantly, theatre, more than any other language-based kind of art, has the ability to adapt and change daily, responding immediately to audience and public reaction.

From this perspective, theatre greatly helped in forming the image of socialist realism as an artistic movement. As this thesis proved, theatre was also of great significance in the formation of the socialist identity itself. As seen in the previous chapters, from a Marxist point of view, the cultural materialist approach to theatre identifies economic material factors as the determining forces shaping society – and therefore, theatre production and reception as well. At its simplest (and most reductive), a Marxist perspective on theatre would propose a straight, vertically conceived relationship between the economic structure (base) and theatre (superstructure). Yet, even in its most reductive presentation, it is still difficult to pinpoint how the economy affects theatre without using over-generalisations or oversimplifications. In other words, it is difficult to identify, using the laws of economics, the link between socialist realist theatre, early-twentieth-century capitalism, and the path to its eventual overthrowing by socialism. This thesis investigated this relationship by exploring how critical reception of a performance influenced its production. By doing so, it proved that what made theatre so capable of forming socialist realism was its ability to form the new socialist identity through its close relationship with the audience. Theatre was seen as the vehicle that would teach the

⁴⁷⁹ Freshwater, p. 55.

working class what socialism is. In this way, it also revealed, to a significant extent, the relationship between the economy and theatre.

We have gone to great lengths to identify what exactly this ‘socialist identity’ was that socialist realism was trying to form (i.e., what its identifying traits were). Reviews of the time reveal that there was a simultaneous effort to identify and come to a consensus regarding what these traits were, and which theatrical style would best suit their delivery to the audience. This overlapping of goals made things even more complicated. Katerina Clark, discussing Gladkov’s Soviet novel *Cement*, describes this contradiction very clearly. Commenting on how *Pravda*’s rhetoric and themes had intervened in the conception of that novel, she observed that ‘*Cement* provides the most striking example of the complex evolution of socialist realism and the dialectic of the literary and extra-literary forces that accompanied it’⁴⁸⁰. By extension, it can be said that this dialectic was even more complex in theatre.

The contemporary reviews and general perception of Meyerhold’s Theatre had three main elements in common: the choice of the repertoire, the fight against individualism, and the (mainly scholarly) debate on formalism. All three of these elements were closely connected to the various ongoing ideological discussions on socialism and the need to educate the new proletariat about it. Theatre was regarded as an exceptionally efficient means of educating the masses and it became the chosen mode for disseminating the knowledge that the proletariat had to acquire. Other than the people commissioned by the State within the theatres to supervise the various phases of theatre production, the press played a significant role too. The reviews of the performances virtually document this ongoing theoretical struggle. Indicative of this were the criticisms of Meyerhold’s productions of *The General Inspector* for its ‘apolitical stance’⁴⁸¹, as well as of *Bedbug* and *Bathhouse*, which were accused of a bureaucratic absurdity that, in Gorky’s words, could not help the proletariat ‘develop [its] revolutionary self-consciousness’⁴⁸². However, the struggle to meet these social and political demands was even more obvious in Olesha’s *List of Assets*, wherein the altruistic gestures of the heroine were not sufficient to portray the man of the new age – the new socialist man. These statements are

⁴⁸⁰ Clark 1981, p. 70.

⁴⁸¹ See, Chapter 4.

⁴⁸² Scott, and Gorky, p. 52.

indeed in accordance with Clark's remark that the 'revolutionary martyr [of the pre-revolution times] was replaced by a dynamic man of action'⁴⁸³.

The same intensity was seen for the notion of individualism (or rather the lack of it), which, again, was considered part of the new socialist identity. Accused of authoritarian tendencies in his directing and of over-focusing on the exceptions of the past rather than on the mainstream socialist future, Meyerhold was renowned as a theatrical genius who was creating an anti-social atmosphere and engaging in restricted self-criticism and narcissism. All of these accusations were amplified to an extent that clearly elucidates the theatre's power to influence.

Even the discussion on formalism was more proletariat-centred than it might seem. From this perspective, formalism was rejected and fiercely attacked based on the assertion that it kept performances from presenting honest and truthful portrayals of the real world. The formalist theatre had embraced a mechanical and emotionless way of dealing with reality, one that could not efficiently explain the laws of reality (in a socialist reality, this means the laws of socialism) to its audience, turning theatre into something useless or even hostile to the proletariat. Lacking knowledge regarding the laws of socialism makes it impossible to build.

In the case of the Moscow Art Theatre, it is, of course, no surprise that it attracted a similar amount of attention. Even without its glorious past and prestige, MAT would still be indispensable for the new socialist state because of its significant popularity. In MAT, the Soviet state had inherited an already established and well-accepted theatre that people were eager to defend as their own. The only thing the officials needed to add was an ideological 'movement forward'. Indisputably, this combination of emotion, admiration, and social service ended up in a bizarre blend, whose massive success would amaze today's spectator. At the same time, however, it was a success that proved the Soviets wrong.

According to the Soviets, MAT's repertoire was closer to their expectations than Meyerhold's. Of course, in this general estimation numerous disputes over other plays that never became part of the repertoire are included too. In general, MAT's realistic past helped it maintain content closer to the official guidelines. These guidelines were formulated officially by the

⁴⁸³ Clark 1981, p. 68.

First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, but they existed even before that. MAT was indeed very familiar with this aesthetic. By adding ‘episodes of the heroic struggle led by the working class’, it reached the point that the officials would have imagined of socialist realism, combining the classics with contemporary social phenomena. Ultimately, MAT achieved the greatly desired element of social education by introducing newly written plays and re-interpreting classics and novels of the past. Nevertheless, the forced infusion of social necessity and socialist meanings into plays written far before socialism existed led to mistakes that were unfortunately soon considered as norms by the Soviets.

In combination, these results suggest that there is a relationship between the directing choices of these two theatres and the message that the Soviet officials wanted to communicate to the audience. However, it is important to remember that this was not 1917 anymore and the revolutionary times were long gone. In 1931, Lunacharsky said the following about Gorky: ‘Perhaps the great majority of outstanding literary phenomena and significant writers appear as a result of major social changes, of social catastrophes’⁴⁸⁴. The 1930s were not the years of great social change. This was a time when the changes of the recent past were on their way to becoming normalized. It was a time of economic stability and growth. and throughout human history, a stabilizing era is usually associated with conservatism⁴⁸⁵. Further, it is not possible to separate conservatism from its economic nature (defence of private property). Since socialism is against the concept of private property, socialist realism must be linked to a different kind of conservatism. It takes the form of ‘socialist conservatism’, a type of conservatism that defends the interests of the working class because it closely follows the socialist construction and its revolutionary characteristics (a new type of communist party, democratic centralisation, etc.). Nevertheless, it was a Soviet form of socialist conservatism in which the revolutionary Theatre of Meyerhold could not fit. However, from this perspective, it was unclear to what extent MAT was socialist realist. In the modern view of socialism, the conservatism that theatre displayed during the 1930s would be unacceptable. Thus, the conservatism that this thesis identified in MAT (in Chapter 4) indicates that this kind of theatre should have never been considered socialist realist. Contemporary views of socialist realist theatre suggest that it must have something of Brecht’s revolutionary form or at least the

⁴⁸⁴ Lunacharsky 1965, p. 214.

⁴⁸⁵ Dagger, Ball, and others, ‘Conservatism’, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2018) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/conservatism>> [Accessed March 13, 2019].

philosophical framework of Marxism (Bullitt 1976). Thus, the question that needs to be answered regarding socialist realism is not whether MAT's productions were socialist realist or not, because this answer would not help define what exactly socialist realism is. In contrast, by identifying this inclination towards traditionalism, it would be much more beneficial to establish whether this conservatism of Soviet theatre of the 1930s was inevitable or not. Unfortunately, this thesis cannot answer this question. That is because the answer would require simultaneous sociological research into the causes of the development of this conservatism, and that exceeds the scope of this thesis.

However, even if a general answer regarding the conservatism of Soviet socialist realist theatre is still difficult to give, examining – in detail – the characteristics developed by both theatres can offer some very useful conclusions. Within the frame of socialist realism, theatre turns to a very important issue primarily because it helps in the understanding of concepts integral to socialism. The main differences between the two theatres examined in this research illustrate the criteria that Soviets gave to theatre of good quality, which soon after became synonymous with socialist realism.

Firstly, Chapter 4 provided significant evidence that all three main directors of MAT (Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Sudakov) demonstrated a creative response to criticism. Letters by all three of them prove that, even when they disagreed with popular or official opinions, their reaction was one of self-criticism oriented towards the requirements of official proclamations (Benedetti 1995; Clark, Dobrenko, Artizov, and Naumov 2007; Nemirovich-Danchenko 1968). Meyerhold seemed to be less 'adaptive', who – as seen in Chapter 3 – made it easier for his official adversaries to continue the ideological attacks against him by holding strong opinions⁴⁸⁶.

At the same time, MAT's old-style realism somehow seemed more relevant to contemporary Soviet critics than Meyerhold's internal class struggle. Interestingly enough, although Meyerhold was definitely closer to Marxist ideology than Stanislavsky had ever been, it was the latter who managed to evolve his directing technique to meet the requirements of socialist realism⁴⁸⁷. As a result, from the psychological external world of Andreyevna as an individual,

⁴⁸⁶ See, Senelick, and Ostrovsky, p. 461.

⁴⁸⁷ Benedetti 1999, p. 356.

he managed to create the large, crowded scenes of *Armored Train*, making the actors function both as a crowd and as a set of individuals, getting closer and closer to the final monumental style that socialist realism became synonymous with.

Finally, there is a whole different philosophy on how they formed – and then transformed – their well-known techniques and methods. On the one hand, Meyerhold condemned the naturalistic actor for excessive ‘liveness’ on stage and created Biomechanics, as a more structured and formal method of acting. Biomechanics was Meyerhold’s call for external expression and elimination of emotion, a technique that would become popular in the decades to come. In contrast, for Stanislavsky, the actors are there to create a real, emotional, and truthful imitation of the character they are playing, and to be so life-like that they seem to become their character. However, inspired by the development of science, Stanislavsky changed and evolved his technique, changing this internal procedure of creating a role with a more external one, the so-called ‘method of physical action’. From a different starting point, Stanislavsky reached the kind of external expression that Meyerhold was looking for, without the latter’s formalistic approach. This technique proved to be more appropriate for the socialist realism of the time.

Overall, contrary to contemporary expectations that present socialist realism in the context of glorified communist values supported by the super-human proletariat⁴⁸⁸ – a picture that seems perhaps closer to the early futurist depiction of socialism – it seems that the Soviets of the 1930s considered MAT a better representation of socialist realist theatre than that of Meyerhold. The Congress, critics, and officials all wanted socialist realism to educate the proletariat – MAT fulfilled this expectation. Despite the struggle to identify what the people should be educated with, the debate on the role of the theatre in this was proven to be irreplaceable in the very formation of socialist realism. By trying to establish the new socialist identity, theatre – through various means – established socialist realism itself. In other words, the very debate that was described in preceding chapters was the driving force that defined the kind of theatre that was required to fulfil the needs of the society.

⁴⁸⁸ Korin 1971, p. 95.

Relationship with previous research

These findings build on the work of the researchers reviewed in Chapter 1. Although extensive research has been carried out on socialist realism, researchers have not treated theatre on an equal footing to other kinds of art. Research on theatre – as such – has been mostly been restricted to examining the texts rather than the performances as independent phenomena with their own rules and means of mediation. Most studies have focused on other artistic forms, predominantly literature, fine arts, music, and architecture. Whenever socialist realist theatre has been studied independently, it was done primarily by focusing on its textual form – the drama.

More contemporary PhD theses (such as Decker's 2013; and Gunn's 2012), including the present one, have begun focusing on – from various perspectives – dramatic performances as independent phenomena. This thesis has studied theatre from the perspective of its reception, focusing on the critical dialogue that each performance initiated, in order to explore the dimensionality and importance of theatre in the new socialist state.

The findings of this thesis make important contributions to the general discussion on socialist realism. Among the primary aims of this research was to investigate why it seems so difficult to define socialist realism. For example, as seen in the first chapter, there are scholars who maintain that socialist realism was a totalitarian art imposed by high-ranking Soviet officials (including Stalin); at the same time, other scholars claim that it was but the natural evolution of a long-standing realist tradition in Russia, only manifesting in this form under the new social conditions. This is only one among the many contradictions that follow this artistic movement. Undoubtedly, it is a complex and diverse phenomenon. However, the extent of the debates during the 1930s, found in newspapers and in the theoretical works of officials and scholars, prove that, above all, socialist realism was definitely not imposed from above. What can be claimed is that there were elements requested of the artists, and found in the theoretical debates of the 1920s, that became eventually were incorporated in what became known as socialist realism.

It is clear that this is not an entirely new approach. Gutkin, in 1999, had already identified the ideological ancestry of the socialist realism of the 1930s in the aesthetic debates of the 1920s. Dobrenko has also noticed that, although socialist realism was the result of the Avant-Garde's

degradation, it was also the natural response of the arts to the ongoing social and economic changes. Other scholars have also proven this correlation between the emergence of socialist realism and the ongoing struggle, with the several aesthetic theories put forward by groups such as Proletkult, Pereval, LEF, and the Association of the Proletarian Writers (Ermolaev; Robin 1977; et al.). Socialist realism was the gradual crystallisation of common ground among the aesthetics of the various groups and the societal needs of the new socialist state. The additional importance of this study is that it has managed to prove the link between socialist realism and the wider society in a more straightforward way, precisely because theatre has an immediate effect upon its audiences, a trait unavailable to other art forms studied hitherto (such as novels or the fine arts). Each individual spectator is able to interact – in regard to their reception of the play – with the rest of the audience as well as with the theatre artists (whether on stage or not), turning the experience of a single performance into a very concentrated dialogue, irrespective of whether the audience participates physically in the performance or not. Thus, every single performance during both the 1920s and the 1930s was perceived by the state as an intense ideological debate; an extension of the one going on outside the theatre.

Regarding the link of socialist realist theatre with its long-standing realist past, Gutkin made a significant comment about the Soviet novel that can also be applied to theatre. She noted the dead-end of socialist realism's efforts to maintain the status quo of the great past while moving forward to the revolutionary future⁴⁸⁹. Lunacharsky's declaration of "Back to Ostrovsky!", Gorky's admiration of the great realists of the past and adaptations such as Nemirovich-Danchenko's *Resurrection* and *Anna Karenina* illustrated the Soviet theatre's impotence regarding 'synthesis' (in the Marxist sense of the term), promoting instead only a mere sterile imitation with a lack of genuine creativity. However, more contemporary approaches to socialist realism, such as those proposed by Paperny (2002), Pern (2010), Bazin (2011), and Blower (2013), by defining realism in a more open-ended manner – precisely as the First Congress of Soviet Writers did in 1934 – have re-initiated a dialogue on the 'realism' of socialist realism. This thesis adds to this dialogue by supporting the form-openness of socialist realism, making realism into art that attempts to provide a true and all-round reflection of social reality through artistic means, independent of its representation in terms of form. If contemporary scholars do not limit their understanding of realism to the tight confines of a

⁴⁸⁹ Gutkin, p. 4.

sterile reproduction and imitation of life, but rather understand it as Kuhirt envisioned it in 1974 – as ‘a provocation regarding the nature, the internal dialectics, the appearance and the perspectives of realism’⁴⁹⁰ – then, within the limits of socialist realism, we can envision not only performances such as Stanislavsky’s *The Days of the Turbins* and Sudakov’s *Embezzlers*, but also (if not primarily) Meyerhold’s *The General Inspector*, *Mandate*, and *The Last Decisive Battle*.

Limitations and issues facing the study

Unfortunately, owing to practical constraints, this thesis cannot provide a complete review of the literature on socialist realist theatre of the Soviet 1930s. This is due to both methodological and personal limitations. The lack of available data and extensive prior research, the initial lack of precise research questions, the limited sample size and access to sources, and personal boundaries are among the most important restrictions on the current research.

a. Methodological limitations

1. Lack of available data

This study was unable to investigate the entire phenomenon of socialist realist theatre, primarily because the phenomenon of theatre is impossible to be studied in its entirety; investigating the performances in any given period is beyond the skills of any one person. This is because the diversity and the complexity of associated phenomena are so great that even the given methods of analysis and historical approaches of theatre prove insufficient to incorporate the various perspectives and elements of any given performance (not to mention the entire theatrical phenomenon). Every component of the stage (e.g., actors, voice, movement, costumes, sets, music, rhythm, space, time, action, text, etc.), behind-the-scenes elements perceived by the spectator only indirectly (e.g., directing, articulation of non-verbal communication, the effect of the theatre-space, etc.), and even extra-theatrical aspects (e.g., historical time, political and social issues, economic factors, etc.) contribute to the final result

⁴⁹⁰ Blower, p. 129.

of the performance to such an extent that one cannot rightly say that theatre has been examined if all of these factors have not been taken into consideration. One reason why this thesis could not assess all these factors was the lack of time and space. Another is the obvious fact that a great amount of information is lost the moment a performance is over.

2. Lack of prior research studies

The limited prior research dedicated to the study of socialist realist theatre is also among the reasons why the current thesis could not reach definitive conclusions. Although perhaps not among the most important research questions, it was the researcher's intention to come up with a more precise definition of socialist realism by studying its theatre. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously in this thesis, the restricted perception of socialist realist theatre as an independent phenomenon by scholars put an additional limitation on the current research, which thus became a more exploratory than explanatory project. As a result, instead of focusing on what socialist realist theatre looked like, this thesis attempted to determine whether it actually existed as an independent movement. Ultimately, even if the thesis did not conclusively define socialist realist theatre, it offered valuable background information and addressed issues that can now be refined for more systematic investigation and formulation of new research questions.

3. Longitudinal effects and sample size

The lack of prior research, along with the current research's limitations, is also among the reasons this study was not restricted – from the very beginning – with respect to the period under investigation. Initially, this study intended to present and compare four different periods in Russian's post-revolutionary cultural history, in terms of a theoretical and practical exploration of socialist realist theatre. These four periods were: (a) the origins of socialist realist theory in the nineteenth century and the first decade after the Revolution (1870-1927); (b) from the end of the New Economic Policy era (1921-1928) until the outbreak of World War II (1928-1939); (c) the Great Patriotic War (1939-1945); and (d) the final years of Stalin's leadership (1945-1953). Eventually, the project changed both in terms of the period covered

but also, and more importantly, in terms of focus. Not only did it become limited to a much shorter period (1928-1939), but it also changed its emphasis from the general (and over-ambitious) portrayal of Soviet theatre to the examination of the performances of two specific theatres, namely, the Meyerhold Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre. The new boundaries set to the thesis altered the research question itself. By focusing on the performances, it was much easier to identify the important role that theatre played in the formation of the new socialist reality. Thus, instead of trying to determine how theatre changed throughout the years, taking on its shape and meaning in socialist realism, the thesis aimed at understanding why theatre proved to be so valuable to the new socialist state. Although this new question turned out to be much more illuminating for an understanding of socialist realist theatre, it created an inconsistency in the way the information was gathered. While, in the beginning, the aim was to base the argumentation on the theoretical work of scholars of the time, examining what they believed socialist realism to be, the reviews turned out to be much more enlightening because the scholars of the time did not focus on theatre per se. Therefore, although a significant number of contemporaneous critical reviews are included in the current research, it is the writer's view that the data gathered could have been more extensive. Longer extracts and more general reviews of the two theatres might have given a better impression of society's reaction to the efforts and experimentation of the two theatres. In addition, given that the reviews of specific performances provide insights into how the methods of the leading directors (Meyerhold and Stanislavsky) were received, a longer sample of reviews might have given a better insight into how these new aspects of socialist identity were combined with the actual practice of theatre-making.

4. Access to data

This study required data and/or documents not always easily accessible. Several reviews were attained as secondary sources from previous studies and theoretical works that included parts of the reviews as quotes. The two main issues with these kinds of reviews were that they always needed to be double-checked in terms of translation and that they were, quite often, presented only in part. Thus, even in the case of easy-to-find reviews, it was not always easy to accept them as fully reliable. The procedure of evaluating the sources was also not always easy because access to the primary source was not always granted. The University of Edinburgh

provided the researcher with a series of online databases that made the assessment of several of them possible. Reviews published in newspapers and magazines such as *Pravda*, *Izvestiya*, and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* were made available through the University's online databases and digital copies of the newspapers. It was more difficult to gain access to original copies of newspapers such as *Zhizn' Iskusstva*, *Krasnaya Gazeta*, and *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (to name a few). It should be stressed, though, that this limited access did not prevent the researcher from following through on the study. The collection of outdated reviews from newspapers of the time, on sites such as teatr-lib.ru (a theatre database built by the theatre-historian Anton Sergeev) or the Moscow Art Theatre Archive, made the cross-checking and retrieval of invaluable information possible.

b. Limitations of the researcher

1. Cultural and political bias

Although complete objectivity is never fully achievable, socialist realism has inspired, throughout the years, several biased studies. Its relationship with a different economic and political system has led a lot of scholars to make assumptions based more on political disagreements than rational arguments. This kind of approach was, of course, much more common during the Cold War. However, as seen in the first chapter, even more recent studies have been influenced by cultural and political bias leading to a negative outlook towards socialism and everything related to it. These approaches often made it difficult for the present study to extract information on texts that were more focused on their political disagreements with socialist realism than conducting an objective study. To avoid similar inconsistencies, it is this researcher's belief that judging another political system solely by the values and standards of one's own experiences in a different system does not and cannot lead to a fair and objective examination. Therefore, in the present thesis, a deliberate effort was made to examine socialist realism from the perspective of socialism. In my opinion, this is not a limitation. However, it is included in this section because, in the broader view of relevant studies, it might seem so.

2. Methods and issues during data collection

This entire study is based on qualitative research on the phenomenon of socialist realist theatre. The particular case-studies (Meyerhold Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre) were selected for being ‘information-rich’ and illuminating. The fact that several studies have been conducted on these two theatres gave the researcher access to many secondary sources that led to primary ones. By focusing on socialist realist theatre, rather than examining the specific theatres independently, the research question quickly changed from a general exploration of the phenomenon of socialist realism to the question of how exactly this movement aided in the formation of the characteristics of the new society, introducing theories and methods of theatre studies. The reviews revealed an intense – although largely unintentional and unplanned – exploration of theatre’s ability to shape social identity and educate the people accordingly. This change of focus may have rendered the initial research design inadequate because the way data were being collected may have affected the quality of the findings. Fortunately, the flexibility of qualitative research, relative to unpredictable and emergent findings and the exploratory nature of approaching the reviews, not only did not limit the results but, in contrast, revealed a completely new aspect of the use of theatre – one much more linked to the social framework on which this research was trying to shed light.

Regarding the collection and analysis of data derived from carefully extracted information and the review of extensive archival material, significant analysis was conducted into the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and relationships. The research began with an extensive period of exploration and continued by confirming and recording the findings, based primarily on analytical principles rather than rules. In order to attain a more holistic perspective, the entire phenomenon under study was handled as a complex system that is more than simply the sum of its parts. This is why, in both cases, a significant effort was made to incorporate the way both theatres built their methods of teaching and directing (Meyerhold’s Biomechanics and Stanislavsky’s two phases of his method). Because the focus from the beginning was on the various complex interdependencies and system dynamics that cannot be reduced – in any meaningful way – to linear, cause-and-effect relationships, and/or a few discrete variables, a deliberate effort was made to remain context-sensitive at all times. All results and findings were placed in their social, historical, and temporal contexts. This is why the theoretical work of the time (mainly by Lunacharsky and Gorky), the relationships

between theatre and the literary controversies of various groups, as well as the important political changes and the ideological struggle over them were included. The researcher was always careful regarding the possibility of generalisations over time and space. Further, it is in the researchers best interest to emphasize the possibility of transferability and adaptation of the same movement in different settings, and therefore each specific historical period should be studied according to its own temporal and spatial characteristics.

Future directions

When combined, the aforementioned results suggest that the contemporary tools of theatre studies can offer a lot, not only in terms of the historical research of a specific theatrical phenomenon but also on its historical relationship with its society. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to conduct in-depth analysis of the relation between the party, the intra-party struggle, the economic and political choices according to the laws of socialism, and the way in which all these affected the society, shaped social opinion, and therefore influenced the way the reviewers perceived a performance and the theatre artists perceived their role in the depiction of these political changes. However, contemporary research questions regarding the audience's reception of a performance⁴⁹¹ can shed light on significant aspects of past societal conceptions. They can also reveal whether this overwhelming struggle between theatre practitioners, reviewers, and government officials actually had the same impact upon the audience that they expected it to have. Another possible area of future research would be to investigate the emphasis on different kinds of performing arts, such as opera, dance, or circus, in regard to the expectations of socialist realism. The same could be explored regarding professional and non-professional theatre, following Mally's research on the same topic. Examining the different forms of socialist realist theatre in different cities and provinces could offer additional information on the various forms of socialist realist theatre in the USSR. William David Gunn's thesis concludes by stating that:

In the hands of Eisenstein, Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, the dramatic works of Alexander Ostrovsky became part of a larger discourse about the future of Soviet art

⁴⁹¹ Such as Peter Eversmann triptych of '1) Who goes to the theatre? 2) Why do they go there? And 3) how do they evaluate their visit?' (Eversmann 2004, p. 134).

and theatre. The monumentalists ultimately won their battle with the iconoclasts, and the Moscow Art Theatre became the model Soviet theatre and the ultimate authority on the art of acting. ⁴⁹²

Although true for the most part, it would be still very interesting to examine whether this ‘monumentalism’ is an inseparable part of socialist realist theatre. Particularly fruitful could be the examination of the Soviet socialist realist theatre after the death of Stalin or that outside the USSR, to confront the totalitarian narrative attributed to the particular movement. The fascinating debate that took place during the 1930s was not always the case. Zhdanov applied socialist realism in a different way than Lunacharsky did, and this is worth being examined, particularly given that this was mainly the kind of socialist realism that was exported to other socialist countries⁴⁹³. Finally, the evidence from this study suggests that future studies may reveal further valuable information on how this multi-disciplinary approach to theatre and its critique (from theatre practitioners to scholars, politicians, engineers, and workers) contributed to the formation of modern perception theories.

Contribution to research

In addition to the provision of some directions for future research, this study has made three major contributions to the literature on socialist realism. First, the use of theatre-studies tools and the examination of socialist realism from the perspective of theatre revealed that there are numerous theatrical phenomena of the specific period in question that are either incorrectly categorised as ‘socialist realist’ or incorrectly categorised not so. As a result, formulating a definition of socialist realism has proven to be extremely difficult. This study may not have been able to come up with an adequate definition; however, by illuminating the extra-theatrical and extra-artistic aspects of the phenomenon of socialist realism throughout the years, we now see that an overall reconsideration of what exactly comprises socialist realism is needed. In this way, theories regarding the contemporaneity of socialist realism faced in the first chapter (see, e.g., Pern 2010) might be more easily approached and understood.

⁴⁹² Gunn 2012, p. 174.

⁴⁹³ See, for example, the very interesting article of Viviana Iacob, where she describes how the utilitarian aspect of socialist realism became the necessary and sufficient condition for creating theatre in Romania after 1945.

Secondly, in the same vein, the re-evaluation of the well-studied theatres of Meyerhold and MAT under the aegis of socialist realism offered new insights into what socialist realism is. Accordingly, it should not be off-limits to reconsider various important theatrical figures and identify them as socialist realist, whether they be directors, playwrights, or actors – and whether they agreed with the status quo or not.

Finally, the study further revealed that theatre-studies tools can be used to investigate not only theatre per se, but also social phenomena. Of course, this combination of theatre and social sciences is not new. It does, however, elevate the study of theatre to a primary role in the study of society, owing to its ability to be a driving force in the formation and transmission of receptive codes.

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