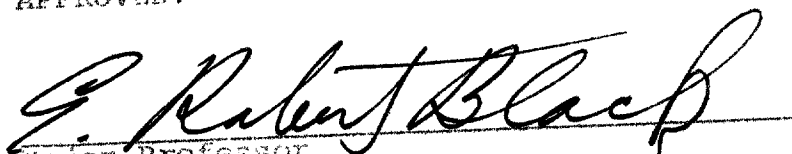
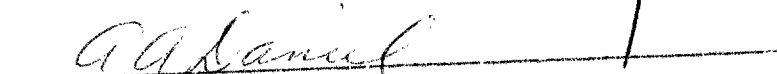


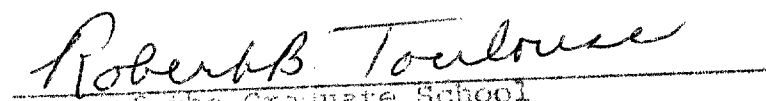
VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD: TOWARD POLITICAL EXPRESSION  
IN THE THEATER

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VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD: TOWARD POLITICAL EXPRESSION  
IN THE THEATER

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## INTRODUCTION

A man of unusual theatrical talent, born into a politically chaotic time in his nation's history, Vsevolod Meyerhold focused his talent toward making the issues of government the essence of the theater. As a "comrade" of the Communist People's Party that changed the Russian way of life after 1917, he was a respected citizen. His was one of the names most spoken in theatrical circles during the years 1900 to 1935. "The dominant director outside the Moscow Art Theater,"<sup>1</sup> he devoted his stormy career to a "continuous quest for new ways of approaching the construction of a play."<sup>2</sup> An experimenter by nature and an ardent Lenin-Marxist, he believed "the purpose of theater was political,"<sup>3</sup> and not only wholly embraced the October Revolution of 1917, but began an "October Revolution" of his own in the theater. He demanded a complete overthrow of both style and subject matter, and set about to discover the new forms that he felt would speak for the new spirit sweeping the nation.

Meyerhold believed in Communism and saw in its ideology the opportunity for relief of the ills which had beset his

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth MacGowan and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1955), p. 469.

<sup>2</sup>P. A. Mazlov, The Soviet Theatre (New York, 1935), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup>Magn Hunt, The Live Theatre (London, 1962), p. 146.

country for generations. His place, he felt, was to spread the good tidings, and his popularity with the working-class audiences who flocked to the theaters during the 1920's seemed to prove that the Russian people were eager to hear the news. His career is the chronicle of his search for a means of expression of propaganda on the stage and his experiments were bold and radical. In view of the fanatic power and ideological struggles which took place in the upper levels of the government, the length of time that Meyerhold was left alone to experiment is amazing. But as the years went by, he became completely disenchanted with the new life in Russia and the countless unfulfilled promises. And, as his experiments strayed further away from the party line, his loss of favor and popularity increased. It climaxed with his imprisonment in 1939 and his mysterious death shortly thereafter.

To study Meyerhold's efforts in depth is to study him as a part of a changing Russian political and cultural scene. His biography must reflect the way of life of the nineteenth century Russia into which he was born, for it is necessary to understand something of the old Russia in order to understand the new Soviet Union. A study of the events of the revolution of 1917 and the years which followed under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin will be discussed correlatively with the actual details of Meyerhold's career and theatrical experiments. Therefore the following study will be divided into five sections which coincide in part with the political changes in Russia

which were so large a factor in molding his dramatic thought. First, a basically introductory chapter viewing the influences of government upon literature and the arts during the nineteenth century. Second, Meyernold's early years of purely theatrical experimentation and his association with the Imperial Theaters, from 1898 to 1917. Third, the Revolution of 1917 through the Civil War of 1920, and the opening of Meyernold's own theater, the time during which propaganda on the stage became all-important to him. Fourth, his years of operating this theater successfully until the advent of the purge of the 1930's. And finally, his ultimate loss of favor and subsequent exile.

## CHAPTER I

### ART AND ARISTOCRACY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY RUSSIA

The first half of the twentieth century has been a time of change and chaos for the vast country of Russia, today officially named the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, though more commonly called the Soviet Union or Soviet Russia. In the brief span of fifty years, this nation in northern Europe and Asia has undergone an unparalleled upheaval that has included a minor and major revolution, a civil war, and two world wars. Strife, intrigue, and power maneuvers have dominated the domestic political scene more fully since the great Revolution of 1917 than in the years leading up to it. This revolution was ". . . the most radical event in more than a thousand years of Russian history and the greatest political and social upheaval in modern times."<sup>4</sup>

One of the most unusual developments of this period was in the arts. In spite of domestic and international stresses, many major contributions were made in literature, architecture, theater, and most particularly in music and ballet.

The theaters and the moving picture houses remained open throughout the revolution--Karsavine was

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<sup>4</sup>Sidney Marcave, Russia, A History (Philadelphia and New York, 1964), p. 477.

appearing in a new ballet. Chaliapin was singing. At the Alexandrinsky there was a revival of Meyerhold's production of Death of Ivan the Terrible, and at the Kirvoye Zerkalo a 'sumptuous version' of Schnitzler's Reigen.<sup>5</sup>

Only the years 1935 to 1945, beginning with Stalin's great purge of literary and artistic talent and lasting through the cessation of World War II, showed a noticeable wane in the quantity of artistic endeavors.

The devotion to the arts evidenced by the people of twentieth century Russia is particularly noteworthy in view of the fact that the nation as a whole has no long history of cultural achievement. From the pre-Christian warring nomadic tribes that settled the plains and steppes of Russia to the early eighteenth century peasant, the people had neither time nor interest in establishing a permanent body of art and literature. A few folk songs, dances, and legendary folk tales are the only pre-eighteenth century contributions.

Even during the eighteenth century, theater and drama did not flourish, though by the latter half of the century, a vogue for small companies of serf actors began. "Moscow set the example of privately-owned serf troupes; Petersburg and the provinces followed."<sup>6</sup> The Serf Theaters lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, but made little real contribution since no national drama was available to them and they mainly imitated European theaters.

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<sup>5</sup>Alan Moorehead, The Russian Revolution (New York, 1956), p. 242.

<sup>6</sup>Marthe Blinoff, Life and Thought in Old Russia (Clearfield, Pa., 1901), p. 54.



Russia's cultural isolation from the rest of Europe had ended during the reign of Czar Peter I from 1682 to 1725, and minor contributions in the field of literature began to appear upon the eighteenth century scene. Catherine II, who reigned from 1762 to 1796 also encouraged authors, for she wanted Russia to be culturally abreast of the rest of Europe. But it was not until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1812 that Russia's Great Age of literature began. The contact with the French armies began a spread of European influence which

stimulated Russian intellectual life to an unprecedented degree. With astonishing rapidity European culture was assimilated by the Russian educated circles and transformed and enriched by Russia's peculiar gifts. Thus the new Russian literature could make a great and lasting contribution to European letters and sensibility. The Russian novel of the nineteenth century equaled as a human document and as an artistic achievement the West's highest accomplishments.<sup>7</sup>

The Great Age of literary expression began with Alexander Pushkin, perhaps best known for his verse novel, Eugene Onegin, (1823-1831), and his historical tragedy, Boris Godunov (1831). Among his many brilliant contemporaries, the most talented were Michael Lermontov, novelist and poet; Sergeevich Griboedov, whose social comedy Woe From Wit (1825) would serve some hundred years later as one of Meyerhold's outstanding vehicles; and novelist and dramatist, Nicholas Gogol, whose dramatic masterpiece, The Inspector-General (1836) and great novel, Dead Souls (1842) are classics of Russian literature.

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<sup>7</sup>Hans Kohn, ed., The Mind of Modern Russia (New York, 1955), ed.'s preface VIII.

The some seventy years of the great Russian classical period in literature, or the "Golden Age," as it has been labeled, "started with Pushkin at the beginning of the twenties and lasted until the eighties and nineties of the nineteenth century, when the masters of Russian literature had either disappeared from the stage or were singing their swan songs."<sup>8</sup> But this period is marked by a rather sharp break in the philosophic approach to art, and a rough grouping may be made of the generation of the eighteen-forties and that of the eighteen-sixties.

The division was brought about to a large extent by the beginning of the reign of Czar Alexander II in 1855. His immediate predecessor, Nicholas I, had brought a rather abrupt end to the era of cultural reform instigated some one hundred and twenty-five years before by Peter the Great. In an attempt to halt revolutionary activities that were demanding a constitutional monarchy, Nicholas instigated strict censorship of all publication, and in 1848 launched an open campaign against many writers. Russia's military collapse during the Crimean War, which began in 1853, coupled with internal corruption, left the country in need of vast reform measures. Upon the death of Nicholas I in 1855, Russian literature benefited by the era of reform inaugurated by the new Czar, Alexander II. Though his emancipation of the serfs later proved but a token political reform and merely delayed revolutionary activities a

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<sup>8</sup>Paul Wiliukov, Outlines of Russian Culture, Part II, "Literature" (New York, 1942), p. 31.

few years, his enlightened cultural views opened the door to another high period in literature, roughly the sixties to the eighties of the nineteenth century, which rounded out the "Golden Age."

The three outstanding names of the many masters of this period are Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev. Count Leo Tolstoy, with his novels War and Peace (1869) and Anna Karenina (1877), Fedor Dostoevsky's novels Crime and Punishment (1866) and The Brothers Karamazov (1880), and Ivan Turgenev's four important novels, best known of which was Fathers and Sons (1861), led the way to world-wide recognition of the Russian literary genius.

The brief art-for-art's sake period, with its Byronic heroes, that had resulted from the early European influence was gone forever from the Russian literary scene. From the beginnings in the "naturalistic school" of Pushkin and Gogol in the eighteen forties and fifties, an epoch of artistic realism, reflective of social reform, psychological thought dominance, and growing Russian nationalism reached a height in the eighteen sixties and seventies "that has left an immortal legacy in a number of highly original and truly national works, which have gradually become the common property of world literature."<sup>9</sup>

The assassination of Alexander II by a revolutionist in 1881 brought abrupt changes in Russia's political life that again bore an influence upon the artistic climate. Alexander

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<sup>9</sup>Miliukov, ibid., p. 40.

III imposed rigid censorship and police supervision of intellectual activities with the passage of the Law on Exceptional Measures in August of 1881, which remained in effect until 1905. Restrictions were placed on newspapers and all publications, and censorship was employed with renewed zeal to eradicate revolutionary ideas.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, Dostoevsky died in 1881, Turgenev virtually stopped writing and died two years later, and Tolstoy abandoned literature completely. Russia's "Golden Age" was at an end.

But the next twenty-five years was by no means a fruitless period, and it has subsequently been labeled the "Silver Age" of Russian literature. Though the writers who appeared at this time were not as outstanding as their predecessors, "in all branches of letters the number of talented writers had never been so great, their public so large or the general level of its culture so high."<sup>11</sup> One of the leading names of this latter nineteenth century period is Maxim Gorky, novelist, dramatist, and essayist, whose lifetime revolutionary activities enabled him to be the one major writer to maintain his influence after the Revolution. Gorky's drama The Lower Depths (1902) is a classic of Russian naturalism. Anton Chekhov's hundreds of short stories and many outstanding plays, such as The Seagull (1896) and The Cherry Orchard (1904) earned him international recognition as a great realistic artist.

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<sup>10</sup>Harcave, op. cit., p. 314.

<sup>11</sup>Vladimir Weidie, Russia: Absent and Present, translated by Gordon Smith (New York, 1952), p. 83.

Whereas prose writing had dominated the "Golden Age," the poets became the leaders of the revolt against the earlier literary forms that marked the latter part of the "Silver Age" and the pre-Revolution years. A new movement that was influenced by the French symbolists "conceived a crusading spirit of innovation with an effort at re-evaluation of the whole Russian literary past."<sup>12</sup> The neo-romantic literary and artistic movement in Europe had come to Russia and the poets and artists were already beginning to turn in revulsion against the pre-occupation with social problems in art and literature. Constantine Korovin was the first of Russia's leading painters to embrace Impressionism, and he was soon followed by Golovin, Bakst, Bencis, and Sudzeiter, who all designed stage scenery as well and therefore bore a pronounced influence on theatrical production. This movement was dedicated to art-for-art's-sake, and embraced members of the ballet and music world as well as poets and painters. The leader of this cult was Sergei Diaghilev, the dancer and ballet master, who gave the name "World of Art" to the movement. He published a magazine under that title and gained the recognition of all Europe for this particular type of Russian art.

Valery Bruiushev, Andrew Bely, and Alexander Blok were the leading poets of this new wave of symbolism. Though their efforts by no means put an end to other literary and artistic groups, they did bear a decided influence on the arts in Russia,

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<sup>12</sup>Donald W. Treadgold, Twentieth Century Russia (Chicago, 1964), p. 85.

particularly after 1905. Much of the aestheticism and mysticism in Meyerhold's early experiments were a direct result of the "World of Art" group.

In addition to the revolt against realism, "the symbolists shared with certain of their rival and successor schools the aims of rejecting the 'social command' for art and of developing appropriate techniques and forms for expressing their own individuality, philosophical convictions and mystical insights, and anticipations of the future."<sup>13</sup> This rejection of the "social command" reveals another aspect of the censorship which has always dominated Russian art. Since the early nineteenth century writers had been subjected not only to the periodic restrictions imposed by the Czars, but to the far more subtle judgement of the "censorship of the Left." The Russian intelligentsia from whose ranks came the early revolutionaries deemed any art that did not serve as a tool for social improvement as treasonable to the revolutionary cause. There developed among this group a so-called "social command" and though in the early days they lacked political authority, in many respects they held tight rein over the Russian literary world from 1850 on. After the Revolution of 1917 and the ensuing Civil War, this "censorship of the Left" became a political weapon unrivaled in past history.

These "left wing" revolutionaries were quick to embrace a new political science that was influencing thought in Germany

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<sup>13</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., p. 85.

and France and had begun to find its way into Russia. Based on the writing of Karl Marx, a mid-nineteenth century German political philosopher, the principles of scientific socialism were to lay the groundwork for modern Communism. To achieve his goal of an organization of the international working-class, Marx had built his theoretic principles on the foundations of dialectical materialism as stated by the early nineteenth-century philosopher, George Hegel.

Briefly and simply, Marxism begins with two basic propositions. First, matter exists and nothing else does. Second, matter changes constantly in accordance with the 'laws' of the dialectic; that is, it changes by the interpenetration of opposites, through which quantitative change becomes qualitative and the anti-thesis of a given thesis is itself denied to form a new synthesis, and so on over and over again. The two propositions combine to form the philosophy of dialectical materialism.<sup>14</sup>

Hegel had used the term "dialectical materialism" to denote a type of investigation which, through historical and evolutionary study and by the use of a critical analysis of concepts and hypotheses, would lead to the highest level of self-awareness and freedom. Marx was more concerned with the idea that matter, that is the material or objective universe, exists independently of the mind. Basically this means that the mind merely reflects the material reality of the general environment. The study of history proved, according to Marx, that in every historical period, the economic system by which the necessities of life were produced determined the social,

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<sup>14</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., p. 46.

political, and intellectual development of the period. Viewed in this light, history becomes a struggle between the ruling and oppressed social classes, the exploiter and the exploited--indeed, a Capitalistic system of society. From this premise, Marx concluded that the only avenue to complete social and intellectual freedom lay in common ownership of all means of production and distribution and the total abolition of private ownership. All material goods produced under this communal or collective economy would be shared equally on a basis of need. This, in theory, is Marxist Communism.

Yet Marx was the first to realize that such an economic and political system could not be established with anything less than revolutionary methods. Therefore he advocated a seizure of power by the proletariat (the working class), and the formation of a central government to control production and distribution. In time, he felt, the need for this central control would diminish as the classless society became firmly established--dictatorship of the proletariat would be the rule.

Small-scale working class movements were growing in strength across Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century and Marx died believing that World Communism was imminent. Though in France and Germany the Communist parties were active and influential, nowhere were the Marxists so able to sweep aside the old traditions and implant themselves as firmly upon a nation as in Russia. France, Germany, and most of the rest of Europe had embraced democratic principles of government during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the spirit



of discontent necessary for revolution was negligible. But Russia had remained an autocracy. The virtual enslavement of the vast peasant population, the all-embracing power of the nobility, and the totality of the Czarist regimes created a fermenting society completely ripe for the revolutionary ideals of Communism.

As previously noted, many of the reform measures instigated by Czar Alexander II during the middle of the nineteenth century had been halted abruptly by Czar Alexander III who took his father's place in 1881. Rigid censorship and oppression of the peasant class and of all minority groups became the rule. It is understandable that the revolutionary propaganda which was finding its way into the hands of the workers was eagerly received.

In 1894 Czar Nicholas II ascended the throne. He was a weak-willed man who took little or no interest in the problems of his people. In a vain attempt to find a cure for his only son, a hemophilic, he allowed himself to fall under the influence of various fanatics and quacks. Notable among these was the Siberian nurse, Gregory Rasputin, whose strong influence over affairs of state was almost unbelievable. Nicholas seemed constantly guided by fear and hysteria. He increased his autocratic power, the oppression of the people, and police control over all aspects of life. Reaction among the populace led to mounting acts of terror and attacks against high government officials. The more outspoken of the socialist leaders

were insistent in their cry for reforms, but the cry went unneeded.

And at the same time that the Revolution was emerging on the Russian political scene, Vsevolod Meyerhold was beginning his emergence into the Russian theatrical scene. As he was a man of the theater for many years before he became a political spokesman, the foregoing discussion of literary and political trends serves primarily to establish overall cultural and social patterns of life in Russia at the time he began his career. These trends must be related then to the growth of Russian drama.

Before viewing the theater and its drama specifically, the following summary of the Russian literary achievement of the nineteenth century serves to relate it clearly to the political atmosphere:

Then, as today, the backward conditions of Russia made a free political life impossible. Under these circumstances, literature became the outlet for the debate about Russia's character and mission. In Russia's great age the creative individuality of the thinker and writer, though limited in the ways of expression until 1905, remained essentially free. This freedom even under an autocratic government, this possibility of spiritual and intellectual opposition to the government--which vanished in the unfortunate years after Lenin's seizure of power--was the foundation of Russia's great age.<sup>15</sup>

Russian theatrical development was aided significantly by the many major authors of the nineteenth century who chose a dramatic form in which to clothe their ideas. Gogol and Dostoev

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<sup>15</sup>Kohn, op. cit., viii.

both wrote for the stage, as did Turgenyev, and, late in his career, Leo Tolstoy. Alexander Ostrovsky was another of the leading literary figures of the second period of the "Golden Age" and is most often represented by his plays The Snow Maiden and The Storm. Count Alexey Tolstoy,<sup>10</sup> wrote the play Tsar Fyodor, which was the first production of the Moscow Art Theater in 1898, and several other historical verse dramas such as The Death of Ivan the Terrible and Tsar Boris during the eighteen-sixties and seventies. The "Silver Age" and turn of the century brought the talents of Chekhov and Gorky to the fore, as well as playwright Leonid Andreyev, noted for his Life of Man and He Who Gets Blasted.

The theater, encouraged by national literary trends, flourished during the nineteenth century. At the century's beginning St. Petersburg and Moscow both had state dominated theaters, as did many smaller cities. Strict control and censorship was imposed on these theaters and in the main, the repertory, which was mostly European imitation, pleased the audience that was made up of the merchant class and petty officials. But by mid-century, efforts were becoming increasingly strong to nationalize the repertory of the theater and to free the stage from state control. Peasant theaters and "people's theaters" were organized by the dozens during the eighteen-sixties and seventies. And in 1882 the professional theater was officially freed from the state controlled monopoly, though government censorship continued.

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<sup>10</sup>Referred to as A. N. Tolstoy and not to be confused with either novelist Leo Tolstoy or the later Soviet writer Alexey N. Tolstoy.

Around this time theater across Europe was joining the major revolt against romanticism which had already taken place some fifty years before in literature in general. Just as, a brief century before, romanticism had replaced the Baroque concept of the "divine right of kings" which had evidenced itself in the artificial, over-elaborate court theaters, so now "it became necessary to revise the Romantic doctrine of the individual soul . . . which was no longer adequate in the face of the very material difficulties which time had brought on."<sup>17</sup> These difficulties were the direct result of the industrial revolution and the ensuing creation of a large new class of working people, the modern proletariat. Science and industry, which were the determinants in the growth and progress of the nations as wholes, were also leading factors in the growth of the new dramatic form, naturalism.

[Naturalism] had an extroverted approach to reality. It turned its back on Spanish palaces, dashing heroes and sinister villains in black capes. Instead it walked into everyday living rooms, the cottages of laborers, the police courts and brothels of the sordid real world. In the same way it forewent the high moral discussions of a Schiller or Goethe and began to agitate for specific social reforms.

An objective study of life--such was the ideal of men like Zola, Ibsen, Hauptmann, Strindberg and Shaw. Naturalism did not usually rise to cosmic heights. That was not its purpose. Instead it tried to seize life in its very hands, to dissect

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<sup>17</sup>Mordecai Corellan, How Theatres for Old (New York, 1962), pp. 152-153.

it with the curiosity of a surgeon. To change life for the better, you must know life.<sup>18</sup>

Naturalism found its first theoretical disciple in Russia in the Moscow Art Theater, organized in 1897. And it is here that the study of Meyerhold's career may specifically begin, for he was one of the original members of the acting company of the newly-formed Moscow Art Theater. It is somewhat ironic that he began his career in this stronghold of naturalism, for all his subsequent work was a direct denial of the naturalistic style.

The foregoing discussion shows clearly that in 1898, as Meyerhold commenced his career, he was able to step into a Russian cultural atmosphere that was vital and thriving, despite political discouragement. For a man of his great talent, the opportunity and stimulus were limitless.

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<sup>18</sup>Corelik, ibid., p. 153.

## CHAPTER II

### MEYERHOLD'S "THEATER THEATRICAL"

1898-1917

The city of Moscow witnessed the opening of a new theater in 1898, produced and directed by Constantin Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. These two young men had dedicated themselves to scenic naturalism and to complete realism in all aspects of production. They struggled for funds to launch their new venture, and the first production was met with lukewarm response. But when, in the late fall of the year, they opened Anton Chekhov's play, The Sea Gull, the Moscow audiences "discovered them." A theatrical institution had been born that was to gain world-wide fame and to lead the way in Russia for the next forty years.

The character of Treplov in this production of The Sea Gull was portrayed by the young actor, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Born in 1874 in Penza, near Saratov, his wealthy Lutheran family of German-Jewish extraction had named him Karl Maximov. Maximir Meyerhold. In 1895 he had embraced the Greek Orthodox Church and had changed his name to Vsevolod Meyerhold. After a brief period of studying law, interest in the theater led him to enroll as a student in a drama class taught by Danchenko at the Moscow Philharmonic. From this association he was asked

to join the company of the newly-formed Moscow Art Theater. He made no noticeable mark as an actor, yet he remained with the company for four years. In 1902, his demands for artistic freedom became too great, and he left, parting on a friendly basis. Though he differed greatly from Stanislavsky in his whole basic approach to theater, Meyerhold respected the great teacher. The deep bond of admiration and affection between the two of them lasted through their lifetimes.

Certain aspects of the character of Treplev made it an almost prophetic role for the young Meyerhold to play at the beginning of his career. "Considered in retrospect, no other Russian artist could have more appropriately delivered that fine rebellious speech which was Chekhov's own bitter cry:

To my mind the modern theatre is nothing but tradition and conventionality. When the curtain goes up, and by artificial light, in a room with three walls, these great geniuses, the devotees of holy art, represent how people eat, drink, love, move about, and wear their jackets when from these commonplace sentences and pictures they try to draw a moral--a petty moral, easy of comprehension and convenient for domestic use; when in a thousand variations I am offered the same thing over and over again--I run away as Baspassant ran away from the Eiffel Tower which weighed upon his brain with its vulgarity. . . . We need new forms of expression. We need new forms, and if we can't have them we had better have nothing.<sup>1</sup>

The heart of the dispute between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky lay in the recognition of the audience or spectator. Meyerhold believed the aim of dramatic expression was dramatic

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<sup>1</sup> Morris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York, 1936), pp. 35,36.

communication and that the spectator must become a recognized part of the expression. He felt that Stanislavsky scarcely realized the audience existed and was concerned only with his stage and actors. Meyerhold wanted to break down the barrier between stage and spectator. His conflict with Stanislavsky reflected a much larger debate that was taking place in theaters across Europe--presentationalism versus representationalism. Naturalism and realism, relative newcomers in the world of drama, were being subjected to criticism. Experimentation to find new forms was underway. Meyerhold left the Moscow Art Theater to conduct his own experiments and to crystalize his own thinking.

He spent the next two years, from 1902 to 1904, doing a series of independent productions in the smaller cities of South Russia. He organized his own company and opened in Sebastopol with Chekhov's Three Sisters, which he then took on a brief tour of the small cities near Odessa. During this time he served both as director of his company and as one of the actors. He was consciously trying to rid himself of the influence of the Moscow Art Theater and the naturalistic style. After a brief trip to Italy in 1903, he continued to work in South Russia, mostly in the cities of Cherson and Tiflis. He was more determined than ever, as a result of a brief exposure in Italy to the Weininger influence, that a production should not aim at expressing real life, but "should exhibit the activity or spirit of life, and for this purpose should be



simple, highly concentrated and abstract, and not heavily charged with details, diffuse and verbose, if it is to be a perfect spirit communication.<sup>2</sup>

Though Stanislavsky was primarily dedicated to realistic theater, he conducted some experiments with the more non-realistic modes, as evidenced by his well-known production of Maeterlinck's The Blue Bird. Upon Meyerhold's return to Moscow in 1905, it seemed natural that he would be chosen by Stanislavsky to direct a small workshop dedicated to this experimentation. An old house on Pavarskaya street was selected for a studio and a group of expressionist painters given the task of redecorating it. Meyerhold was given a company of young and inexperienced actors who rehearsed during the summer of 1905. He chose for their undertaking Maeterlinck's The Death of Tintagiles and his directorial approach was primarily impressionistic. But by the time the play opened in the late fall of 1905, Moscow audiences were scarcely in the mood for experimental theater.

For the activities of the revolutionaries had been steadily intensifying. The preceding January thousands of people had marched upon the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to present their demands for social and constitutional reform. They had been met and fired upon by Czarist troops and hundreds had been killed and wounded. The day went down in history as

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<sup>2</sup>Quintly Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York, 1925), p. 55.

"Bloody Sunday," the first decisive step on the revolutionary path. Strikes and riots throughout Russia followed and the uprising continued to grow until the fall of the year. On October 14 a council of workmen's delegates called for a general strike which was soon in full sway, accompanied by increased rioting. And in the midst of this strike, Meyerhold opened his play, or tried to. But the theater seats were empty, and Meyerhold left to join the mobs in the streets.

The 1905 Revolution was brought under control in December when Czar Nicholas II promised to establish a representative assembly. Though Meyerhold had wandered the streets with the angry mobs, he had not joined their ranks. But he had become infused with the spirit of the Revolution which was to remain with him in the coming years. Though nearly fifteen years would elapse before he would try to speak out for the Revolutionary ideals upon a stage platform, his first genuine interest in politics began at this time. His awareness of the need for a new political way of life in Russia revealed itself in a rebellion against the old theatrical aristocracy. Meyerhold was a rebel by nature, and believed in the overthrow of everything that was synonymous with the old Czarist Russia--in the theater, in politics, and in the Russian way of life.

It is doubtful that even under normal circumstances his production of The Death of Tintagiles would have been successful--the young company was incapable of fulfilling Meyerhold's demands, and he was too unsure of his own approach. The only

real value lay in providing him a further opportunity to try out his theories in an experimental surrounding. But Stanislavsky was disappointed in the results. Meyerhold had so dehumanized the actors that they seemed mere segments of the painted decor. To Stanislavsky the actor was the standard bearer of theatrical expression. He could no longer find room for the radical young innovator. Meyerhold again left the Moscow Art Theater.

His thoughts turned in the direction of the Greek theater which he had been studying and from January to November of 1906 he worked again in Tiflis, where he organized a company called "The Comrades of the New Drama." He restaged Tintagiles, this time with a mystical quality that he felt reflected both the Greek theater and his growing interest in the Russian revolutionary movement. He also produced Maeterlinck's Sister Beatrice and Schnitzler's Cry of Life.

His experiments at this time were primarily in three areas of production. First, he used color motifs to help establish mood and character. He viewed color somewhat as a psychological tool, but primarily as a symbol. Certain elements or groups of characters in a play would be costumed and lighted in similar shades, the color designed to be symbolic of the place that group of characters occupied in the theme of the play.

Music had previously been used in the theater mostly as a means of between-act entertainment with little thought given the mood values involved. Meyerhold sought to have special

music written that would become an actual part of the dramatic expression. In later years, this interest in music would lead him to associate himself with many of Europe's leading composers.

And finally, he began to experiment with posing his actors in non-realistic body positions. The movement took on a dance-like quality. This innovation was more radical than the use of color and music, and would occupy much of his time and thought in later years.

In the early fall of 1906 he received an invitation from the famous Russian actress, Vera Komissarzhevskaya to become managing director of her company in St. Petersburg. The invitation was instigated by the actress' brother, Feodor Komissarzhevsky, another of the outstanding Russian directors of the period, who was in sympathy with Meyerhold's revolt against naturalism. Like Meyerhold, the brother and sister had both abandoned the stifling techniques of the Imperial Theaters and Vera had organized her own company, "The Dramatic Theater." Meyerhold spent two years with her during which time he produced about a dozen plays. The two concepts which dominated his direction during this period were stylization and symbolism.

Meyerhold stated his belief in the atmosphere and purpose of stylization: "The expression by all expressive means of the internal synthesis of a given epoch or phenomenon, the reproduction of their concealed characteristic features, such as

are to be found in a deeply concealed style of any artistic production.<sup>3</sup> In speaking of the method of achieving this purpose by the use of color and design, he said:

The Theatre of Conventions does not seek variety in the mise en scene, as is the case in the naturalistic theatre, where the wealth of planes produces a kaleidoscope of rapidly changing poses. The Theatre of Conventions strives zealously to manage the line, the group association, and the color blending of the costumes, and in its inactivity gives a thousand times more notion than the naturalistic Theatre. The notion on the stage is produced not by motion in the verbal sense of the word, but by distribution of lines and colors, and by the axiomatic crossing and vibrating of these lines and colors.<sup>4</sup>

His technical innovations were in keeping with his aim of stylization. He replaced the stage in depth with a scenic platform, thereby bringing the upstairs area close to the audience. Color motifs were established for each role and carried through in costumes and lighting. Every attempt was made to keep the actors as two-dimensional as possible, showing them in a bas-relief of sorts, that is, as a sculptured blend with the scenic background. Their movements were slow and rhythmical and they were given predominant keys or notes in which to speak, almost as in recitative.

The spoken lines and movement patterns of groups in crowd scenes were handled in the unified fashion of a Greek chorus.

<sup>3</sup>Anna Irene Miller, The Independent Theatre in Europe (New York, 1931), p. 363.

<sup>4</sup>Miller, ibid., p. 364. Terms of theatrical style such as naturalism, constructivism, etc., appear uncapitalized in the body of the text. Where capitals appear in a reference, they will be used as originally printed.

This was in direct opposition to the realistic method Stanislavsky had adopted as a result of the influence of the Meiningen Players. The realistic approach to non-scenes called for each actor to be given individual lines to speak and a movement pattern that, though it blended into an overall picture, was uniquely individual. Again Meyerhold sought the symbol--the unison lines and movements symbolizing the crowd rather than a representational realistic approach.

Though Meyerhold functioned as a directorial dictator in that he controlled every detail of production, he did give almost equal status to the artist who designed the scenery. The stage designer became all important for the first time in Russian theater. Meyerhold viewed himself in relation to his production much as a conductor of a symphony orchestra. His was a symphony of painting, light, color, and movement, and the scenic designer dominated the most important orchestral section. Yet if a comparison could be drawn with a symphony orchestra, his was a symphony without soloists. The over-all effect of the stylization allowed no room for virtuosic performances in any one area.

Though his productions were highly theatrical, there was little of the theatrical about his personal appearance. He was "quick, spicery, rather tall, with a prow of a nose and a shock of unruly hair."<sup>5</sup> The huge, soft white collar which he

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<sup>5</sup>Corelik, op. cit., p. 303.

preference for comfort's sake became a physical trademark. His restlessness and driving intensity revealed itself in his constant physical activity. He could never sit still in a rehearsal, but rather performed all of the intricate movements of all the actors himself. The one time that he poured a glass of water over his own head to demonstrate to an actor is but one of many examples of his complete and constant physical involvement in all his directing.

The dramatic literature most easily adapted to stylization was the symbolic drama and it was to symbolism that Meyerhold turned during this two-year period with "The Dramatic Theater." Maeterlinck and Ibsen interested him particularly, as well as the Russians Bryusov, Ivanov, and Alexander Blok. One of the aims of the symbolical theater was to make the audience a creator alongside the playwright, director, and actor--the spectator uses his imagination to create what the dramatic artists imply. Symbols of life rather than life itself are offered on the stage, and the spectator is left to imaginatively apply the symbols to whatever degree he wishes in order to make the stage action become reality. Meyerhold stated that in addition this audience "never forgets for a minute that it is seeing actors who are playing, and the actors never forget that an auditorium is before them, a stage is beneath them, and decor is along the sides."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Nikolai Corchulov, The Theatre in Soviet Russia, translated by Edgar Lenman (New York, 1957), p. 58.

In the symbolical theater, the design suggests rather than depicts. Simple set pieces become suggestive of locale-- a bush for a garden or a tree for a forest. There is no place for decor for mere ornamental purpose. All color and movement must be linked with the entire decorative idea. Meyerhold's devotion to the theater of Greece shows itself at this time:

If the Symbolical Theater wants to eliminate decor . . . does not want footlights, subordinates the playing of the actors to the rhythm of diction and to the rhythm of plastic movements . . . if it anticipates a renaissance of the dance and attracts the audience to active participation in its work, will such a Symbolical Theater not lead to a renaissance of Antiquity? . . .  
Yes!<sup>7</sup>

The first production Meyerhold staged at The Dramatic Theater was Ibsen's Redde Gabbler, which opened on Nov. 10, 1906. A new front curtain had been hung, on which was painted a Greek temple and a sphinx. Meyerhold had mounted an entirely antirealistic staging of the play in which the correspondence between mood and color predominates. The following description is found in both Slonim and Gorchakov with no original source quoted:

The stage seemed filled with bluish-green-silver mist. The background was blue. On the right side, a huge transom, the whole height of the stage, represented a window. Underneath stuck out the leaves of a black rhododendron. Outside the window, the air was greenish-blue. In the last act, the twinkling of stars pierced the bluish mist. On the left, the whole wall was occupied by a huge tapestry representing a silvery gold woman with a deer. Silver lace decorated the top and the wings of the stage. Greenish-blue carpet covered the floor. Green-white vases held large white

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<sup>7</sup>Gorchakov, ibid., p. 59.



chrysanthemums. White furs were thrown over a strangely shaped sofa, on which Leada reclined-- in a sea-watery green dress. It shimmered and flowed at her every movement, and she resembled a sea serpent with shiny scales.<sup>8</sup>

But the critics were not in favor of this new staging, for they felt that the design, color, and lighting hampered rather than helped Kommissarzhevskaya, their beloved and favorite actress.

Following the opening of Leada Gabbler less than two weeks later was the premier of Maeterlinck's Sister Beatrice on November 22, 1906. This is considered the best of Deyerhold's productions at the Dramatic Theater, for here his own creativity more nearly matched the great talent of his leading lady. His aim in Sister Beatrice was to dematerialize the stage in order to express the mystery which he felt resides in Maeterlinck's play in such a way that the spectators realized it as effectively and intensely as Maeterlinck had done.<sup>9</sup> He chose to set the play all in blues, greens, and grays, and created the appearance of painting in Medieval churches. The movement and speeches of the nuns were like that of a Greek chorus. Kommissarzhevskaya's performance as the Virgin and as Sister Beatrice was brilliant and the critics realized that Russian theater had a real potential that lay beyond the confining realm of realism.

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<sup>8</sup>Marc Slichin, Russian Theater, From The Empire to the Soviets (Cleveland and New York, 1961), p. 136.

<sup>9</sup>Carter, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

the little showman, an enfant terrible and Columbine masquerade by the leading symbolist poet Alexander Blok, premiered in December of 1906. Even the hostile critics allowed it its appeal. Other productions during 1907 included plays by Amreyev, Kozlov, Solovov, and Hofmannsthal. None achieved real success or unanimous critical applause. The final production of Stanislavsky's Belshazzel and Verisimilitude was also a failure. Meyerhold's insistence on an almost flat, motionless quality and his attempt to dematerialize and make marionettes of the actors became too much for his leading-lady employer. She dismissed him in early 1908 with the following letter:

I saw that we were by degrees changing the stage into a laboratory for the stage manager's experiments. The spectators looked at us disinterestedly, in perplexity shrugged their shoulders and ultimately left us. The tension between the theaterier and us was persistently broken, and every meaning of our work was disappearing. What you are seeking is not what I am seeking. The road which leads to the puppet show, toward which you have been traveling all the time . . . is not mine. To my great regret this has come to me in full in just the last few days and after much thinking. I look the future straight in the face and I say that we cannot walk together upon this path.<sup>10</sup>

Again Meyerhold's total unwillingness to lose his artistic principles and cost him a position. Not only had Stanislavsky and Komissarzhevskaya taken up arms with him, but the fiercest attack in the press was vicious and intense. The Russian critic Sergei was violent in his opposition to Meyerhold's theater of

<sup>10</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 207.

the director and constantly upheld the place of the actor as the foremost means of theatrical expression. He declared: "Meyerhold, with his incorporeality, his negation of realism, and his contempt for life, is a very great and innate enemy of the theater."<sup>11</sup> Anatol Lunacharski, who was to become Meyerhold's chief adversary during the Soviet regime, wrote an article in 1907 attacking the director's art as "cecaevent."

None of the criticisms seemed to disturb Meyerhold. If anything, it nurtured his imagination. He was totally dedicated to his belief that the theater of antiquity was the greatest form the theater had ever known. He believed that his symbolic theater would restore the ancient bond between spectator and stage, and that theater would be brought to the heights of greatness once again.

He was not unemployed for long. He journeyed to Pinsk, where he produced four plays in rapid succession, most notable being Balaganchik. Here he came briefly under a Japanese influence, and substituted screens for standard scenery. Much of the action took place in the orchestra, and the auditorium lights remained on during the entire play to assure that there would be as little separation between audience and spectator as possible.

While he was conducting these experiments in Pinsk, the painter Golovin, one of Meyerhold's favorite scenic designers,

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<sup>11</sup>Kugel, Teatr i iskusstvo, 1907, cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 63.

talked with V. A. Teliakovsky, Director of the Imperial Theaters of Petrograd. Golovin told him that Meyernold had been fired from the Dramatic Theater primarily because his intensity had almost killed everyone connected with the productions. Immediately Teliakovsky called Meyernold in and offered him the directorship of the two operations that made up the Imperial Theaters--the Imperial Opera at the Mariinski Theater and the Imperial Dramatic at the Alexandrinsky Theater. The news came as a great shock to the companies of both theaters, but Teliakovsky justified his decision by declaring that any director who caused such a storm of fury must have something to offer. His decision was particularly unusual in light of the fact that Vera Kommissarzovskaya had quit the Imperial Theaters three years earlier, finding their techniques too stifling. And Meyernold had been such too radical to keep his position with the actress-manager. Yet the new position was offered to him and he accepted it immediately. So in 1906 he began an association that would last over a decade.

As the director of the Imperial Theaters, Meyernold had such freedom, both personally and artistically. He was a relentless worker and in addition to his many productions in each of the two theaters, he traveled abroad on several occasions, and conducted private experimental groups outside his regular duties. New ideas and influences were constantly revealing themselves in his productions. Yet his primary goal remained one of finding the best visible symbols for expressing poetic

thought on the stage. He devoted his art to the frank acceptance of the playhouse as a playhouse, an emphasis upon sheer theatricality.<sup>12</sup>

Though in spirit Meyerhold continued to support the revolutionary cause, he did no productions during these years at the Dramatic Theater and at the Imperial Theaters that could be considered propaganda pieces. This is understandable, for the Imperial Theaters were State controlled and the State still was the Czar. Obviously Meyerhold either buried or ignored his personal political preferences. Or perhaps the fact that the intensity of revolutionary activities had slowed somewhat--or had in reality been driven underground--lessened the force of daily agitation. Or perhaps Meyerhold, intent on establishing his own fame and career, was more concerned with the prestige the directorship of the two most important theaters in Petersburg brought to him. Or he was so absorbed with learning his craft and perfecting his techniques that nothing else mattered. Whatever the reason, political expression was not yet of real interest to Meyerhold.

He sought inspiration in the oriental and medieval theaters and never lost his devotion to the theater of ancient Greece. He studied the Commedia dell'Arte techniques and was intrigued by the marionette theater. His belief in the "Theater Theatrical" was intense and earnest. His revolt against the

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<sup>12</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 372.

realists' attempts to faithfully and accurately represent life on the stage was totally honest and compatible with his basic nature, even though his honesty and earnestness were questioned by many of his contemporaries.

At the time Meyerhold came to the Imperial Theaters of Petrograd he was under the influence of the circus and of music hall performances. The spectacular occupied his thinking. Commedia dell'Arte studies had intensified his interest in pantomime. So, for his production of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde at the Marinsky in 1909, he sought a musical foundation for the actors' movements and tried to instill the methods of the mime in the singers.

The first production to receive widespread attention was Molière's Don Juan, 1910, at the Alexandrinsky Theater. Here all the various influences of the previous five years of travel and study seemed to fall into place together. Golovin designed the scenery and together they decided to establish the luxurious and elegant atmosphere of Molière's theater at the court of Louis XIV of France, though it might be said that Meyerhold's love of the theatrical was more influential in this decision than a strong desire for faithful reconstruction. The footlights and front curtain were disposed of and an apron stage that thrust deeply into the auditorium was built. House lights were left on throughout to intensify the excitement and gaiety, and he flooded the actors not only with standard lighting, but with hundreds of candles on the stage. Perfume

was scattered through the auditorium so the audience could breathe in the luxury. Borrowed from the oriental theater, the scenery was changed before the eyes of the audience,<sup>1</sup> not by "prop men" who merely wore dark clothing, but by several small Negro boys, again reflective of Voliere's Versailles. Prompters in ornate costumes sat on the stage. The actors, most of whom were masked--the Greek influence again--played at the front of the proscenium and toward the audience.<sup>1</sup> Meyerhold had done his utmost to make the spectator a part of the performance and to solve the problem of space on the stage by totally abandoning the picture-frame, box stage. Meyerhold had brought his "theater theatrical" to full bloom. "This production was enormously successful with both the press and the public."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time Meyerhold established his own studio, the "Interlude House," at 33 Galernaya Street in St. Petersburg, which he operated during 1910 and 1911. Because his participation with the Imperial Theaters prevented his using his own name, he chose the pseudonym of 'Dr. Dapertutto.' Under this name he published a theater magazine called The Love for Three Oranges, in which he glorified the techniques of the Commedia Dell'Arte. He wrote several articles and translated a number of plot outlines for improvisational comedy. It was at Interlude House, a time referred to as his 'Dr. Dapertutto phase,' that Meyerhold laid the groundwork for bio-mechanics, an acting

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<sup>13</sup>Corchakov, op. cit., p. 65.

technique exclusively of his own making. Though the form would not take shape fully until after the Revolution, the beginnings were clearly evident in the work done at the Interlude House. Here he began to rank motion, gesture, and pantomime as supreme over language and illusion.

The audience at Interlude House was seated at tables, much as cabaret theater would be today. The actors moved among the tables, trying to engage the spectators in the action of the play. Entrances and exits were made through the audience and the actors would frequently sit at the table with the theater-goers, or on the stairs leading to the stage platform.

The two concepts that occupied most of Meyerhold's thinking during the time at Interlude House were the use of puppet-people and the grotesque. His production of Columbine's Scarf, a pantomime by Schnitzler and Donnanyi, in October, 1910, used as its theme the idea that humans are only puppets in the hands of fate and therefore mechanical and soulless in their actions and reactions. His method of developing this theme was the use of the grotesque. Rather than a mere exaggeration for comic or satiric effect, Meyerhold viewed it as a "capricious and scoffing attitude toward life."<sup>14</sup>

(The grotesque is) a deliberate exaggeration and reconstruction (distortion) of nature and the unification of objects that are not united by either nature or the customs of our daily life. The

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<sup>14</sup>Meyerhold, "Balagan," Liubov' k trom apel'sinam, No. 2 (1914), pp. 28-29, cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 59.



theater, being a combination of natural, temporal, spatial, and musical phenomena, is itself outside of nature. It finds that these phenomena invariably contradict our everyday experience and that the theater itself is essentially an example of the grotesque. Arising from the grotesque of a ritual masquerade, the theater inevitably is destroyed by any given attempt to remove the grotesque--the basis of its existence--from it.<sup>15</sup>

Meyerhold's battle with the critics continued. "Kugel called him a monster, the artists of the Imperial Theaters were reluctant to work with him, and for Davydov he was 'an enraged kangaroo escaped from the zoo.'"<sup>16</sup> Meyerhold fought back enthusiastically. He wrote an article explaining his thematic approach to Columbine's Scarf, and in November of 1912, published a book in which he attempted to justify his return to the theater of antiquity, though he was not apologetic for his techniques. During this same year and a half (1910-1911), he produced The Ransom of Life at the Alexandrinsky Theater and Electra at the Marinsky, and was strongly attacked by the critics for both productions. He also went to Paris for a brief time, where he staged a performance of D'Annunzio's Pisanello.

Just why Meyerhold closed Interlude House is not entirely clear. Certainly not as a result of the critical attack, for he seemed to thrive upon it. But a few months after its closing, upon his return from Paris, Meyerhold opened another

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<sup>15</sup>Vsevolod Meyerhold's, V. Rebnov, and Ivan Aksenov, Amula Aktera, Moscow, GYEM, 1922, cited in Corchakov, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>16</sup>Glavin, op. cit., pp. 205-206.

studio, referred to simply as the Studio on Nevsky Prospekt Street in St. Petersburg. He dedicated this Studio, which remained in existence about two years (1912-1914) primarily to the teaching of his own acting techniques. The following is quoted from the prospectus for the new Studio:

To develop in the actors the mastery of movement in conformity with the platform where the play goes on . . . the meaning of the 'breathal'; the value of the gesture in itself; the self-admiration of the actor in the process of acting; the technique of using two stages, the stage and the forestage; the role of the outcry in the moment of strained acting; the elegant costume of the actor as a decorative ornament and not a utilitarian need, the headgear as a motive for the stage bow; little canes, lances, small ruffs, lanterns, shawls, mantles, weapons, flowers, masks, noses, etc., as apparatus for the exercise of the lines; . . . parade as a necessary and independent part of the theatrical appearance; various forms of parade in conformity with the character of the general composition of the play; geometrization of the design into the mise en scene, created even ex improviso; the mutual relation of the word and gesture in existing theaters, and in the theater to which the Studio aspires.<sup>17</sup>

The students were required to master the styles of Italian improvizational theater, the Commedia dell'Arte. He taught them to make the best spatial use of the stage and to conform movement to the overall design values of the mise-en-scene. Music and rhythm were employed as teaching tools with the actors creating space and movement patterns to the musical themes. Geometric forms were practiced--movement in squares, circles, or rectangles. Suppleness, strength, and control of the whole body was demanded as completely of his student actors

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<sup>17</sup>Oliver N. Saylor, The Russian Theater (New York, 1922), pp. 216-217.

as it was of dancing attendance. The needs of his companions were being more deeply seen.

Neyerhold began a regular publication which he entitled "The Journal of the Department," dedicated to expressing his theatrical views in print. Though the attacks from the critics continued, he received no notice by them. He was producing steadily at the two Imperial Theatres, while, on the side, he was tireless in his energies and was constantly at work on a half dozen different projects. The following partial list of the productions that he directed at the two Imperial Theatres gives some indication of the variety in plays and operas that he produced during this period:

<u>At the Tsar's Court</u>	Wagner
<u>Tristan and Isolde</u>	Wagner
<u>Don Juan</u>	Goldoni
<u>Boris Godunoff</u>	Musorgsky
<u>The Red Tavern</u>	Sydneyeff
<u>The Living Corpse</u>	Telstov
<u>Cyphous</u>	Wink
<u>Hostages of Life</u>	Sologub
<u>Jackarane</u>	Leon Ostrov
<u>Electra</u>	Strauss
<u>Queen of the Day</u>	Cluck
<u>The Stone Guest</u>	Puschkin and Dargomizsky
<u>The Snow Maiden</u>	Linsky-Hruslov
<u>The Storm</u>	Ostrovsky

He sojourned briefly into the world of the cinema, again intent on being the reformer. He directed two films in 1915 and 1916, with no particularly outstanding success.

The one final production of this pre-revolutionary period which deserves consideration was The Unknown Woman, by Alexander Blok. Neyerhold staged it in 1914 with actors from his own

italian. Elements of the Oriental theater, the theater of the grotesque, and the Italian folk theater were employed in an attempt to stylize the subtle lyrical drama. Theatricality was employed successfully to convey the new poetic quality of Blok's writing. It was also a significant production in that it marked the first appearance of the use of a constructivist piece in the staging. *Podizye*, which bore no resemblance to a realistic bridge, was used merely as an apparatus for the actors to move upon. In the following years, constructivism was to become Meyerhold's main interest for a period of time.

Meyerhold's work during this period from 1908 to 1917 may be summarized by the word "experimentation." The same term characterizes his whole life. But during the years covered in the foregoing discussion his experiments were primarily theatrical in nature. Establishing the "theater theatrical" was his goal and was sufficient to absorb his rebellious spirit. Now he was ready to turn his attentions to political expression.

While he had been laying the foundations for his more important work to come, Russia as a whole was moving steadily toward rebellion. The political situation was growing more serious as the years went by from 1908 to 1917. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 found the country ill-prepared for war against Austria and Germany. The Russian troops, lacking supplies and transport, and with inefficient leadership, suffered loss after loss. Dissatisfaction over the reports from the battlefield spread over the people. Yet, despite



## CHAPTER III

### THE THEATER AND FILMFIELD UNDER THE NEW COMMUNISM, 1917-1920

Czar Nicholas II was totally incapable of halting the onrush of the Revolution. Germany was winning the war on all counts, and the Russian people were highly suspicious of Nicholas, for they knew him to be dominated by his German wife. And he was completely under the control of Rasputin, whose influence extended even to making military decisions. Resentment toward Rasputin was so strong that a group of aristocrats murdered him in December, 1916. Riots and revolutionary agitation increased to such a high pitch that once again Nicholas ordered his troops to fire upon the people in the streets. Instead, the soldiers joined the ranks of the rioters. "Petrograd in 1917, like Paris in 1789, was the weathervane of the revolution. The rest of the country followed its example as soon as the news of its activities could spread."<sup>1</sup> Nicholas II was forced to abdicate in March, 1917, and the Russian Czarist empire was at an end.<sup>2</sup>

"On the night of February 26, 1917, the audience returned from Meyerhold's production of Dostoev's Maskerade through

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<sup>1</sup> Marcave, op. cit., p. 479.

<sup>2</sup> That the so-called February Revolution took place in early March reflects the slight difference in the old and new calendars.

side streets and alleyways because trucks and bullets were racing through the main thoroughfares. By the next day the February Revolution had taken place.<sup>3</sup> Inside the theater Meyerhold eagerly received information from couriers and frequently interrupted the performance for news bulletins from the fighting front. The excitement in the audience ran high.

In the theaters in Moscow and Petrograd excitement also ran high among the actors and other theater workers. Some, particularly those in the old Imperial theaters, began to be concerned for their own futures as it became increasingly evident that the old regime was crumbling rapidly. But most of the outstanding theater-men viewed the Revolution as their own personal emancipator. Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, Komisarzhhevsky, Nikolai Evreinov, and Alexander Tairov had long sought freedom to pursue their artistic ambitions without interference. Their new ideas of theater could, they hoped, find a place in the new regime of political life. They looked forward to a release from the persecution of the government and press which had plagued them throughout their careers.

Meyerhold had spent the previous fifteen years going from one influence to another, trying a variety of styles and techniques.

Nothing could hold his attention long because in the disintegrating Russia ideas had grown threadbare and the form of things theatrical became all

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<sup>3</sup>Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 97.

important. Dressing-rooms were liable to be searched by the police and over everyone's head there hung the dread of Siberia; better, then, experiment with Maeterlinck or Molière than new plays which might contain the seed of sedition. . . . [The time had come] to throw off their shackles and emerge free men. In unity lay their strength. Over the Kremlin flew the scarlet banner of Revolution. A new world was born.<sup>4</sup>

The new provisional government made many immediate changes in the status of the professional theater during the eight months between the February Revolution and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks the following October. The old star system began to crumble and the actor to take his place as a citizen and worker. Financial support to the old Imperial Theaters was cut off, and these two theaters were placed on an equal footing with the Moscow Art Theater, the Komisarzewskaya Theater, and the Kamerny Theater of Alexander Tairov, which had never been subsidized. The theater could deal with religious subjects which had been forbidden before, and could perform on church holidays. And the stage platform could take its place as a strong propaganda weapon for Communist ideals. To Meyerhold and his contemporaries the future held great promise and they plunged headlong into theater dedicated to the Revolution. Of Meyerhold himself, Carter says, "The story of his subsequent career is the story of his conversion to Communism and the new industrial civilization, and his search for a theatrical form capable of efficiently communicating their

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<sup>4</sup>Andre Van Gyseghe, Theatre in Soviet Russia (London, 1938), p. 12.



spirit and message. He was now preoccupied with the Communist matter and banner."<sup>5</sup>

Meyerhold's style of theater was particularly well-suited to this spokespersonship. The materialistic realism of the new philosophy went hand-in-hand with Meyerhold's revolt against illusion and naturalism. He openly admitted to the audience that the actors were people like the selves, a part of the new masses and not living incarnations of their roles. The bare lighting equipment, exposed scenery, elimination of the front curtain and the depth stage--all the techniques which Meyerhold had believed in and with which he had experimented all seemed a positive reflection of the stark concern with the material truths that characterized revolutionary thought. Always a revolutionary in theater, he had found his place in the great political Revolution of his country.

Though the abdication of the Czar in March, 1917, brought his regime to an end, the real political fate of Russia was not decided until the following October. A power struggle developed between the two major opposing factions of the Socialist party, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. The old aristocracy, who had come to be known as the White Russians, had by no means recognized the new red government. And officially Russia was still at war with Germany. The summer of 1917 was a complexly troubled time. A provisional government was established, but it was incapable of holding power for long.

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<sup>5</sup>Carter, op. cit., p. 66.

The man most responsible for the establishment of Russian Communism was Nicolai Lenin. For over twenty years before the Revolution, he worked single-mindedly toward his goal. Though much of the time he was in prison and exile, he wrote articles and books propounding his theories and took part in countless conferences with European and other Russian socialist leaders. When the overthrow of the Czar came in March, 1917, Lenin was in Switzerland, but soon returned and took his place as leader of the Bolsheviks. When the Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government in November, 1917, Lenin became the head of the new government.

In much of his teaching he had dealt with the problem of how the Communist party should behave when the day ultimately arrived that the power was placed in its hands. He believed completely in Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat," yet the Party must have power to instigate collectivization and to suppress those who would oppose it. Genuine democracy could come only when the masses understood the historical truths now known only to the party elite. "Organization of party takes the place of the party itself; the Central Committee takes the place of the organization, and finally the Dictator takes the place of the Central Committee."<sup>2</sup>

Lenin assumed his place as the ruthless dictator of the new left-wing government.

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<sup>2</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., p. 88.

The wheel had now turned almost full cycle from Nicholas to Lenin, from autocracy back to autocracy again. The bolsheviks had now betrayed or were about to betray nearly every political slogan that had brought them into power. . . . 'Bread and Peace' had been at the heart of the party's program from the beginning. What Russia was now about to receive was famine and civil war.<sup>7</sup>

And on November 23, 1917, Lenin, at the head of the Soviet Council of People's Commissars put the Marxist code into law.

The abolition of private ownership in land was followed by the nationalization of the banks, of the merchant marine and all industrial enterprises. The stock market was swept away, and so were the rights of inheritance. All state debts were annulled, and gold was declared a government monopoly. Wages of the People's Commissars were pegged at 500 rubles a month for single people with additional payments for families. The old criminal courts were supplemented or replaced by 'Revolutionary tribunals' made up of a president and six peasants, workers and soldiers, and any citizen could appear as a lawyer. Men and women were declared equal in law, and the strict Czarist code governing marriage and divorce was abolished; a civil marriage now took the place of the church ceremony and divorce could be obtained by either party of the marriage merely asking for it. All titles were submerged into the universal 'citizen' or 'comrade.' The church was permitted to continue but in a drastically truncated form; its lands--and they were enormous--were confiscated and religious teaching was forbidden in the schools. The state religion was now Leninism.<sup>8</sup>

Two months later, in January, 1918, a People's Commissariat of Enlightenment was established with Anatol Lunacharsky at its head. One of its provinces was the theater. The listing of the tasks of the Theater section included

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<sup>7</sup>Moorehead, op. cit., p. 269.

<sup>8</sup>Moorehead, ibid., p. 261.

The general guidance of theater work in the country on a broad nationwide scale: . . . to give localities directives of a general character on administering theater work, in the interests of unifying this last and aiming at a systematic and (insofar as is possible) a uniform application to life (within the limits of local conditions) of the Theater Section's tasks . . . to create a new theater connected with the rebuilding of the state and society upon the principles of socialism . . . to cooperate in unifying all creative and research forces concerned with theater ideology . . . to subordinate the theaters to the Bolshevik ideology and to give them indications of a repertorial character to link them with the popular masses and their socialistic ideal.<sup>9</sup>

Meyerhold was given the official capacity of Deputy Chief of the Petrograd Theater Section. As part of his job, he established a repertory committee to pass on the choices of plays made by the theater. Onto this committee he placed the leading symbolists who were his old friends and a few of the young cubists and futurists. As there was no readily available repertory suitable to the new doctrine, Meyerhold set about to create one from existing dramatic literature. There was nothing timid about his editions and revisions of classic dramas. In fact, "the childlike exuberance with which he revised the masters reminds one strongly of the mishandling of standard plays and novels by the Hollywood Studios."<sup>10</sup>

The year from the summer of 1918 to the summer of 1919 found Meyerhold out of Petrograd and the theater, though there seems to be some disagreement as to exactly what he was doing.

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<sup>9</sup>Corchakov, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>10</sup>Ben W. Brown, Theater at the Left, Providence, Rhode Island, 1938, p. 55.

Slonin and Carter both state that he was imprisoned by the White Army. Slonin<sup>11</sup> says he was on a theatrical tour. Carter says he had gone to the Crimea to recuperate, but does not say from what.<sup>12</sup> After his escape, or the arrangement of his release by influential friends, he joined the Red Army. Slonin suggests this was merely a means of returning to Moscow, while Carter and Flanagan imply that he served as a fighting soldier.<sup>13</sup> The other authors make no mention of this period at all.

Whatever Meyernold's part in it, the Civil War in Russia was in full swing. The Revolution seemed to be on the brink of disaster. The politically and socially backward masses of Russia were not ready to embrace the revolutionary utopian ideals. The war with Germany had drained industrial production and the chaos that ensued in the factories during the Revolution led to a shortage in all areas of supply. "The Reds faced an internal situation verging on total catastrophe. Hunger and disease were widespread, and industry and trade were at a virtual standstill."<sup>14</sup> Conscription of labor forces to work in the fields and factories was carried on at a war-time military conscription pace. Workers marched to military bands and were depicted in the newspapers as heroic soldiers.

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<sup>11</sup>Slonin, op. cit., p. 244.

<sup>12</sup>Carter, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>13</sup>Hallie Flanagan, Sniffing Scenes of the Modern European Theatre, New York, 1928, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., p. 159.

but the masses of the people were not moved by these devices and the fighting continued. Death became an almost blessed release in the battle against cold weather, hunger, and Red soldiers who were more vicious to their "comrades" than landowners had ever been to their serfs.

Yet the theater remained active in Moscow and Petrograd.<sup>15</sup> Just as it had two years earlier during the worst fighting of the Revolution, now at the height of the Civil War theater seemed to be moving forward surprisingly successfully.

Meyerhold's next acknowledged theatrical venture was a short-lived experimental theater created with the blessing of the Bolshevik government. Called "The Hermitage Theater," it opened in July of 1919, performing in the Winter Palace in Petrograd. He participated also in the Theater-Studio, and later with the State Exemplary Theater in Moscow. In all three he served more as mentor and advisor than as actual director. Several lesser-known directors, many of whom had studied with Meyerhold at Interim House, were employed to direct productions which Meyerhold rewrote and produced. There was much opposition among the press, the government, and other theater artists to Meyerhold's drastic script revisions. Many felt that the classics should be left untampered and resented his adaptations, even though they agreed with the political thesis he was putting forward.

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<sup>15</sup>The name of the city of St. Petersburg was changed to Petrograd in 1914, and would be changed again in 1924 to Leningrad.

Among Meyerhold's critics was Lenin himself, who tended to be conservative in his views toward the arts. He recognized the vast propaganda possibilities of the theater, yet tended to agree with a large group led by Stanislavski and Danchenko, that the great classics would serve to educate the people as they were, that is, without major revision. But though criticism was leveled, Meyerhold continued to receive the support of the government. There were several reasons for this. The new Bolshevik government still had to make room for the many strong elements of the opposing factions such as the Mensheviks, anarchists, and Leftist socialists that were left among their ranks and had to tolerate a somewhat liberal ideological program. Secondly, Lenin was not inclined to impose his own taste in interfering with any given work of art as his successor Stalin was to do later on. Lenin really wasn't much interested in the theater, and it is known to have had personal dislikes for certain plays, but he never interfered with them for this reason.<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, Meyerhold had shown himself to be a completely loyal Party member, dedicated to Lenin and to Marxist Communism, and as yet the Party had not the strength and security it would have in the following years that would enable it to purge loyal Party members. And, finally, the new Congress of the Soviets was far too busy with widespread internal problems to devote much time or money to

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<sup>16</sup>John Gunther, Inside Russia Today (New York and Evanston, 1962), p. 342.

the exploits of Meyerhold or any other radical artist. The preoccupation with war and domestic chaos was a full-time job.

It was during this year and a half of near total catastrophe across the nation as a whole that Meyerhold was working with the three experimental theaters previously listed. But it was not until November of 1920, almost simultaneous with the end of the Civil War, that the new government was able to give him the funds necessary to establish his own permanent theater. The new theater was housed in the old Zou Operetta Company quarters on Sadovo-Trubnaya Square in Moscow, and opened under the name of The First Theater of The R. S. F. S. R. Here Meyerhold was to remain for seventeen years as sole head, controlling every detail of production. The name of the theater would be changed five times in the next six years, finally becoming the Vsevolod Meyerhold State Theater, the name commonly associated with his work from this point on.



## CHAPTER IV

### HIGH-POINT YEARS

1922-1929

The old building in which Meyerhold opened his new theater had been a hall for political meetings after it had been abandoned by the Son Operetta Company. It was drab, damp, unheated, and thoroughly lacking in physical comforts. Meyerhold was unconcerned with the surroundings--in fact, he felt the asceticism bespoke the hardships of the Civil War which was still underway. He stripped both stage and auditorium to emphasize the coldness and emptiness. The proscenium cornices and front curtain were removed, and in the auditorium the railings were taken down from the loges and the seats and benches detached from the floor so they could be arranged at random to further stress the feeling of an informal meeting.

In October, 1920, Meyerhold launched the first of what was to be a long series of productions. From the beginning he was destined to receive the severest criticism, yet would hold a great popularity among the huge audiences of workmen, soldiers, and intellectuals who packed into his theater. Though his efforts left the people puzzled, confused, and critical, still they came.

A detailed look at the script revisions and staging of this first production reveals clearly some of the methods Meyerhold used and would continue to use to glorify the "victorious proletariat." The play, Les Aubes (The Dawn), had been written by the Belgian poet, Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916). Meyerhold undertook to make the script contemporary and to "Sovietize" it. The play had been written as an abstract poetical drama in which Bolshevik ideals about the mass and the individual had been only subtly and rather weakly incorporated. Meyerhold turned the indecisive, conciliatory hero into a model of Bolshevik strength and leadership. He built the rather inactive, unimportant proletarian mass of the original play into the major element, writing in new crowd scenes and establishing them as focal points. As Verhaeren had provided no "class enemies" against whom the masses could rebel, Meyerhold introduced them into the script by inserting scenes in which autocratic leaders of government and businessmen on the Stock Exchange trembled at the sound of distant revolutionary gun fire.

Verhaeren's play was directed against militarism, imperialism, and parliamentarianism, but the proletarian poet had not foreseen that Bolshevism and a Soviet regime would appear in the world. This mistake was corrected: words were 'inserted' about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and about expanding the rebellion into a 'world-wide proletarian revolution.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Corchakov, op. cit., p. 136.

The technique of drastically revising old plays would be employed by Meyerhold steadily in the years ahead. Unusual as it may seem to alter a play to such a complete extent, Meyerhold had justification. No Bolshevik, Soviet dramatic literature had been written. P. A. Markov, a member of the Theater Department of the People's Commissariat of Education and the dramatic critic of the Moscow newspapers Pravda and Isvestia from 1924 to 1935 explains it this way:

The alterations he made in plays were inevitable and artistically legitimate. During those revolutionary years the artistic demand for the recasting of old plays was seconded by social necessity. It was not only a matter of this or that interpretation of a character; the producer made the characters attractive or repulsive according to class feeling. Nor did this alteration consist merely of "cutting"--a technique accepted in even the most conservative of the theaters. It was a question of the radical revision of the text, a process capable of imparting to it a character much closer to the life of today than the author could ever have dreamed of. In this way Meyerhold breathed new life into old plays.<sup>2</sup>

But Meyerhold was not content to stop with the script revisions in his search for political expression in Les Aubes.<sup>*The Dawn*</sup> He invented stage business to further strengthen the theme. Messengers read bulletins from the front, where the Red and White armies battled out the Civil War. Bursts of applause from the audience greeted them. Uniformed soldiers waving red banners marched across the stage and the actors wandered in and out among the audience, instilling the atmosphere of a public meeting or demonstration. The emotional intensity of the

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<sup>2</sup>Markov, op. cit., pp. 67, 68.

audience deepened Meyerhold's belief in the union of stage and spectator.

A chorus, dressed in ordinary clothes as a symbol of the proletarian mass, remained in the orchestra pit, alternately singing patriotic songs and injecting explanatory remarks which helped to intensify the audience reaction. Meyerhold's early devotion to the Greek theater made the chorus an important device to him.

Meyerhold further Sovietized the drama through the scenic design. He worked with designer V. Dmitriev to create a setting which consisted mostly of large cubes placed randomly about the huge, bare stage. Mobiles of red and gold circles and silvery tin triangles hung from above. Long ropes were stretched from the fly area overhead to the floor, giving definition to the stage areas like rays of light. Both the intent and effect were a complete abstraction of form and composition. Though this setting was not truly constructivist in form, it did provide the link between Meyerhold's earlier experiments and the constructivism which was to follow.

The evening ended on a high emotional key with the entire cast and audience singing the "Internationale." The effect upon the audience was startling. Though the majority failed to comprehend the strange new presentation, they had realized an intense emotional experience.

Such an intensity of emotion was galvanized into action in that theatre that the play became a living thing, a struggle between life and death, the future life

and the future death of those very people sitting in the theatre. To them it was an emotional call to action as direct as any speech, any distribution of leaflets or any newspaper report. It was a translation into theatrical fact of Meyerhold's own slogans 'Art cannot be non-political,' 'Art is class Art' and 'The theatre is the tribune of agitation.'<sup>3</sup>

The critics were not kind to Meyerhold's production of Les Aubes. The Leftist critic Shklovskii wrote:

Verhaeren has written a bad play. The revolutionary theater is being created in haste, and hence the play has been hastily accepted as revolutionary. The text has been changed. There is talk on the stage . . . about the regime of the Soviets. The action has been made contemporary, although I cannot say why the Imperialistic war takes place with spears and shields. In the middle of the second act, it seems, a messenger comes on and reads a dispatch about the losses of the Red Army at Perekop . . . But because the action has been made contemporary, the dispatch is torn out of its context and the artistic effect which it was supposed to produce is not achieved.<sup>4</sup>

Lenin's wife, Natalia Krupskaya published a letter in Pravda attacking the "modernization and distortion of Verhaeren questioning whether the cubist and abstract style of Meyerhold's staging was actually 'proletarian.'<sup>5</sup> The Central Committee of the Party branded Meyerhold's philosophy as "bourgeois" and called his style "corrupted senseless taste, alien to proletarians."<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter Meyerhold gave up his official position with the Theatrical Section of the Education Commissariat, though he continued to receive

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<sup>3</sup>Van Gysegheem, Theatre in Soviet Russia (London, 1938), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Shklovskii, Rhod Konia, p. 67, cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 420.

<sup>5</sup>Slonim, op. cit., pp. 245, 246.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 246.

financial support for his theater from the Party. And he continued his "search for a dynamic form that would express collectivist aims and the industrialization of society along with a depersonalization of the individual."<sup>7</sup>

Meyerhold was not the only Russian director who sought to revolutionize the theater in the early 1920's but he was the most outstanding and the leader of the group. Alexander Tairov of the Kamerny Theater shared Meyerhold's negation of the past and revolutionary aspirations, as did Eugene Vakhtangov, though the latter was somewhat more concerned with utilizing psychological acting. Several lesser known directors followed suit. Meyerhold and those who directly adhered to his rejection of all pre-Revolutionary theater as unsuitable for educating the masses became known as the Proletcult (Proletarian Culture Movement).

Another group, led by Stanislavsky and Danchevko, felt that the great classics of the theater were sufficient to educate and instruct as they stood and the organizations who adhered to this philosophy were called the "academic theaters." Oddly enough, the official Soviet regime gave more support to these traditional theaters than to the Proletcult groups. This was explained in part as a financial necessity-- funds for official subsidy were most limited and were to be channeled only into well-established, proven organizations.

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<sup>7</sup>John Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre and Drama (New York, 1966), p. 196.

Perhaps more important to this decision was Lenin's personal artistic taste, which in spite of his radical political bent, was basically conservative. Therefore, at a time when Meyerhold and his associates were struggling to reshape the purpose and form of the theater completely, Stanislavsky continued to work steadily on in his old established patterns.

The audiences who attended the theaters in the early years following the Revolution had demands and expectations quite different from those of their parents. Where formerly only a small, exclusive group could be counted on to attend productions of high artistic quality, the new working class audiences flocked to the theater in large numbers. The old bourgeois outlook was dying rapidly as the new socialist culture arose, and with its death went the old popular peasant theater that had specialized in farces and operettas. The political play and historical chronicle came to the fore. Only a relatively few of the most esteemed "academic theaters" in the large cities survived, and they continued to draw their audiences from the same small group that had supported them before the Revolution. The new mass audience "did not look upon the theatre as an easily accessible and frivolous course of entertainment, but as a powerful artistic force for the re-education and reconstruction of men and women. . . . They demanded of the theater not merely relaxation and amusement. They wanted to understand things and to foresee."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Markov, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

country experienced an increase in attendance. This response was in part a reaction to the years of exclusion of the peasants from the old theaters, and in part a result of the free admission, established as a provision of state subsidy by the new Soviet government. Beyond this, the Russian people seemed to have an innate taste for acting and for theater, and a deep desire to learn of the changes that were taking place around them.

New themes and new audiences opened the way for new theatrical forms. And Meyerhold was ready with the new forms. His years of experimentation, the comprehensiveness of his study of theater in other countries and other generations had prepared him to lead the way into a new era. "His technique was particularly suited to the requirements of older plays which had to be given contemporary or topical significance and of purposeful new plays in which the immediate message was primary."<sup>11</sup>

And it was "the message" which Meyerhold now embraced wholeheartedly. Prior to this time he had explored form primarily as a means of determining the truest theatrical essence and expression. Now he had something he wanted to express.

He is a born revolutionist, not an evolutionist;  
 he would smash the old mold to release a new truth.  
 He is heart and soul with the new government: why haggle  
 over the relation of propaganda to art when there are  
 millions of workmen, soldiers and peasants illiterate

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<sup>11</sup>John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1954), p. 540.



or half-educated, seizing each bit of encouragement which the theater can offer them in their advance toward the communistic ideal?<sup>12</sup>

On May 1, 1921, Meyerhold restaged Mayakovsky's Mystery-Bouffe which he had produced two years before. He reworked it, bringing in new characters and making it topically current, but some unclarified confusion concerning overly expensive scenery costs brought on Party criticism that caused Meyerhold to disassociate himself with the production.

About the same time, he began to work in earnest with the young actors who had enrolled as students with him. He was formulating his new theory of bio-mechanics, based in part on the puppetry approach to acting with which he had previously experimented, and in part on his belief in dance-type movement on the stage. By the following spring he felt the group was well-trained enough to expose them to the public. This he did on April 15, 1922, when his production of Fernand Crommelynck's Le Cocu Magnifique (The Magnificent Cuckold) opened. Simultaneously the name of the theater was changed from the First Theater of the R. S. F. S. R. to The Theater of the Actor--the Free Workshop of Vsevolod Meyerhold Attached to the State Supreme Theater Workshops.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>13</sup>This lengthy burdensome name was kept only a few months, for in the following autumn the title became the Theater of the State Institute of the Theater Art--Vsevolod Meyerhold's Workshop.

The Magnificent Cuckold was destined to exert the strongest influence of any of Meyerhold's work, for here he introduced the two major innovations for which he would become famous-- constructivistic scenery and bio-mechanical acting. The play was a comedy which poked fun at a jealous miller's attempts to locate his wife's lover. How could such a trivial plot interest a man dedicated to proletarian spokespersonship? Beyond the obvious reduction of the passion of jealousy to such a point of ridicule as to make it an absurdly unworthy emotion for a good Party member, where was Meyerhold to look for his translatable theme? It is here that the depth of Meyerhold's political conviction evidences itself most strongly. For he chose to portray neither an obvious open thrust at pre-Revolutionary decadence nor a paean of praise for the new Soviet regime. His was a more deeply subtle attack on all that was old, all that had existed before the Revolution, with the firm implication that the past must be eradicated completely.

He wanted to link the theater arts with the age of the proletarian dictatorship, and so he struck out sharply and mercilessly against the acting 'priesthood.' A stage is not a temple, he asserted. Its brick walls and 'machines for acting' do not distinguish it in any way from a factory. An actor on the stage is a member of the actors' guild and wears the same proletarian 'street clothes' as any worker. His work contains no bourgeois obscurantism of any sort. It is based on materialist science and is subordinated to methodology principles known to every Soviet worker. . . . He considered that the theater of 'experiences,' of 'psychologizing,' and of the philistine drama was obsolete. He thought that, in a nation with a proletarian dictatorship, the task of the theater would be to

present the ideal person of the new period on the stage. The new person would be a fine model of a human being, whose motions and labor processes were clean-cut and skilled. This would be the human being at work. The theater would have to infect the audiences with a craving to imitate this dextrous and well-organized hero of the age.<sup>14</sup>

The stage was stripped of all curtains, including masking ✓ teasers and tormentors, and backdrops and wing pieces were removed--nothing was left but the great bare empty stage with its outer brick walls. Lighting equipment was left exposed. Not one piece of machinery for creating a scenic illusion was left. Meyerhold had struck a telling blow at all illusory or representational theater. Even the actors performed without make-up, wigs, or colored costumes or finery. In place of illusion he substituted the skeleton of technical construction. ✓ Two very large stands were connected by a board which also ran down to the stage floor, in addition to two staircases and a ramp. One of the stands had a turnstile which rotated an enormous disc that turned faster as the angry miller's jealousy mounted. The letters of the playwright's name were printed on the disc so that as the shaft turned they could be read by the audience. Windmill sails, a trapeze, and various rolling discs and wheels completed the scenery. The only property used was one large flower. This construction offered an endless variety of planes and levels upon which the actors could run, leap, sit and stand, creating an almost limitless

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<sup>14</sup>Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 203.

feeling of space on the stage. It was truly a "machine for acting."

### Constructivism

Meyerhold was not the first to use constructional staging. The movement began in architecture and in the plastic arts where the aims were the same as in the theater. In speaking of the architecture of the period in which steel and glass buildings in the shape of cubes, pyramids, and cylinders appeared, Miliukov writes:

In Soviet Russia all disputes about modern architectural style have as their chief theme the question whether it is admissible to retain any connection with the past and use ornamental elements. The radical trend of pure constructivism absolutely denies this possibility, and deems that the success or failure of a building depends on the degree to which aestheticism is eliminated from its construction.<sup>15</sup>

So it was to Meyerhold. Constructional staging "brought him closer to life itself, to its essence, its will, its social sources."<sup>16</sup> He wanted to free the theater from representational staging, from psychological naturalism, from "the profusion of decoration and scenery that linked it with the petty-bourgeois theatres."<sup>17</sup>

Meyerhold developed a technique which was not merely an imitative "response to industrial architecture and modern machinery, but a fairly self-sufficient program for arriving

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<sup>15</sup>Paul Miliukov, Outlines of Russian Culture, Part III Architecture, Painting and Music (New York, 1942), p. 99.

<sup>16</sup>Markov, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

at esthetic ends."<sup>18</sup> Not only was the style a revolt against the past, but offered a means of stimulating physical action on the stage. Movement was always paramount to Meyerhold, and his collection of platforms, gangways and staircases provided more space on the stage than did conventional scenery. The use of naked iron and wood not only reflected a stern, unembellished political era, but furnished strong, servicable pieces on which actors could perform at a variety of heights and levels.)

✓ The actors in The Magnificent Cuckold performed like athletes. Instead of sincere emotion, they executed intricate series of physical movements and exercises. To Meyerhold the truth of human relationship was expressed in gestures, glances, steps---not in words. Movement highlighted the production. The pure art of acting, unburdened by psychology or subjectivity was, to Meyerhold, the true greatness of the theater. This was the philosophic foundation on which he built his new system of acting, bio-mechanics.

#### Bio-Mechanics

The supremacy of gesture and motion over verbal language as a means of human communication is not a new concept, either in the area of psychology nor in the theater. The earliest forms of theater were ritualistic dances which aroused intense emotion in the spectator. And any traveler to a foreign land

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<sup>18</sup>John Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre, op. cit., p. 193.

can testify to the effectiveness of visual communication when language proves a barrier. To some extent it might be said that Meyerhold based his system on the dances of antiquity, the Oriental theater, the Commedia dell'Arte, and the international language of gesture.

But to this he added such modern concepts as Taylorism, a system of controlled movement designed to increase the efficiency of workmen in mass industries, and the Pavlov theories on conditioned reflex action. And "he considered his new theory of acting a stylistic mixture of the 'Regulations for the Military Disciple' and a textbook for algebra."<sup>19</sup> He stripped emotional motivation from movement entirely--only a rational and physiological basis could be accepted. Man functions by instinct and reason, not by spiritual or psychological guidance. This was a further rejection of the Stanislavsky system and placed the actor's body as the supreme source of expression. Here the Marxist influence shows itself again in Meyerhold's thinking--"the substitution of rational, functional, utilitarian creation for emotional, intuitive processes."<sup>20</sup>

Under bio-mechanics the actor was viewed almost as an engine, with the parts of the body as the various works of the machine. All parts must be kept functioning smoothly or the

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<sup>19</sup>Gorchakov, ibid., p. 202.

<sup>20</sup>Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals, op. cit., p. 94. Mr. Houghton suggests that Meyerhold stumbled upon the ideological connection as an accidental result of his search for an aesthetic convention. The point is debatable and unsupported by evidence.

operation of the whole would break down. The actors exercised as extensively as any dancer, and had to have complete suppleness and sufficient muscular control to execute the most complex movement patterns. Of his new system Meyerhold wrote:

A necessary and special trait in actors is their ability to respond to stimuli applied to their reflexes. . . . The stimulus is the ability to fulfill an assignment received from the outside through feelings, motion, and language. To coordinate the reactions to stimuli is what constitutes acting. The separate parts of this are the elements of acting, each of which has three stages: (1) Intention; (2) Accomplishment; (3) Reaction.

Intention is the intellectual perception of the assignment received from the outside (from the author, the dramatist, the director, or on the initiative of the performer himself).

Accomplishment is the series of volitional, mimetic, and vocal reflexes.

Reaction is the lowering of the volitional reflex in accordance with the realization of the mimetic and vocal reflexes. The volitional reflex is prepared to receive a new intention and proceeds to a new element of acting.<sup>21</sup>

All extraneous movement and rhythm that did not stem from the body's center of gravity was eliminated. Meyerhold wrote:

The motions constructed on these bases are distinguished by a "dansant" quality. The labor process used by experienced workers always resembles the dance. Here, work verges on art. The sight of a person who is working correctly produces a certain satisfaction.

This applies completely to the work of the actor in the theater of the future. We are always dealing in art with the organization of material. Constructivism demands that the artist become an engineer as well. Art must be based on scientific

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<sup>21</sup>Meyerhold, Lebatov, and Aksenov, Amplius Aktera, pp. 3-4, cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 282.

principles; all the work done by the artist must be conscious.<sup>22</sup>

The result, as it appeared in The Magnificent Cuckold was a group of actors who romped and leaped across the huge construction pieces on the stage with the agility of cats, yet with the mischievous gaiety of circus clowns. With not one step or gesture left to chance, the movement had a defined, choreographic pattern and was only a step removed from a dance. The resemblance to the jugglers and mimes of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte was clear. The actors gave themselves over completely and joyously to the exciting new technique and to their inspiring director.

Meyerhold expected the utmost from each actor and usually received it. He dedicated every waking hour and thought to their training, and gave of himself as completely and with the same intensity that he demanded of the actors.

Every Meyerhold rehearsal is a full production as well as a fascinating performance . . . where Meyerhold is the chief and ever-central participant. Meyerhold cannot help playing every role, and thus composing every gesture of the production in his own unmistakable style. In the process he establishes valuable laws of stage expression, feeling them himself, then communicating them (together with his basic principles) to his actors. But his chief strength at rehearsals lies in the moment of demonstration. At the first performance following a Meyerhold premiere, you can distinguish, in every role, Meyerhold's own gestures and thoughts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Meyerhold, "Akter bubushchego," Ermitazh, No. 1 (1922), pp. 9-10, cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 202.

<sup>23</sup>Yuri Zavadsky, "Conversation with a Young Regisseur," Theatre Arts Monthly, XX (Sept., 1936), p. 728.



In summary, the following is an official definition of bio-mechanics, formulated by Korenyev, one of Meyerhold's associate directors, and approved by Meyerhold himself:

Bio-Mechanics is the name given by Meyerhold to a method of training actors elaborated by Meyerhold himself. The actor must acquire the necessary skill for his profession through a study of movement of people and animals.

The Subject of Bio-Mechanics is an attempt to find active laws for the actor's movements within the frame of the stage. With this purpose in mind, Meyerhold made experiments in drawing schemes for the movement and style of acting, its exact definition and regulation, taking into consideration all possible needs of the actor.

The trained body, the well-functioning nervous system, correct reflexes, vivacity and exactness of reaction, the control of one's body--in other words, the general feeling for space and time, and co-ordination of movements with each other--such are the results of the application of Bio-Mechanics. Such is, at the same time, the basic approach, which, together with a certain talent for music and a certain amount of intelligence, Meyerhold asks from his actors.<sup>24</sup>

The critics greeted The Magnificent Cuckold with more kindness than they had shown Les Aubes, for they recognized the relationship that Meyerhold had established between the actors as proletarian workers and the masses in the factories. There was some feeling that in using such a cold and clinical approach he had robbed the theater of its inherent right of audience enchantment, yet the propaganda values seemed to justify the means.

Later in the same year, 1922, Meyerhold produced Alexander Sukhevo-Roblin's The Death of Tarelkin. The production was

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<sup>24</sup>Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals, pp. 38-39.

given the quality of a circus, with the actors performing much like jesters or clowns. They worked with and on a series of geometric construction forms, ropes, and circus-type stage properties and devices. Sukhovo-Kobylin's depressing play about an unimportant, insignificant nobody was turned into a buffoonery in which the hero makes a mockery of a pre-Revolutionary police force. Though the production was not considered a particularly important one, it afforded the members of the acting company the opportunity to perfect their skills to the precision level of circus acrobats.

Meyerhold held a strong position in spite of Lenin's opposition to his avant-garde techniques. He had many friends in high offices in the Party and was himself a dedicated Party member, though he no longer held any official position. Moreover, he was highly popular with the young people of Russia who came to Moscow from the surrounding small towns to see his productions. Everything he did stirred controversy, but at this time controversy was healthy for the Soviet theater, which was floundering somewhat as the national problems mounted.

The Civil War had ended in the Spring of 1921, but the internal turmoil in Russia was by no means quieted. Lenin still hoped for an international socialist revolution and watched the minor uprisings in Germany with great interest. But as it became increasingly obvious in 1922 that the rest of Europe was not following in Russia's footsteps, Lenin realized

that "only an agreement with the peasantry can save the socialist revolution in Russia until the revolution has occurred in other countries."<sup>25</sup> He instituted the New Economic Policy, or NEP as it came to be known, in which concessions of a capitalistic nature were made. It centered around a tax being leveled on the peasants rather than the forced requisition of their surpluses which had been in effect. The peasant was freed to dispose of his surplus as he saw fit, and food goods on an open market again became available. Small industries were allowed to function as private enterprises in order to increase the supply of consumer goods. Private buying and selling was restored and tradesmen again became an important national influence.

The era of NEP had decided recuperative effects on the national economy and upon the disquietude of the peasants. But as if in retaliation to the concessions he had been forced to make, Lenin tightened the political and military hold on the nation. All non-Communist, non-Bolshevik activity was ruthlessly weeded out and the dictatorial powers of the Soviet party increased.

In the Russian theater the advent of the NEP was greeted enthusiastically, for it seemed to promise a more liberal atmosphere toward the arts and to offer the source of more revenue to those who adhered to the Party line. Indeed,

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<sup>25</sup> Lenin, "Doklad o Narodn'nom Valoge 15 Marta," *Sochineniya*, XXVI (March, 1921), p. 238 as cited in Merle Fainsod, How Russia is Ruled (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 96.

government subsidy was made available on a broader scale than had been possible the five preceding years. Large funds were put at Meyerhold's disposal, and during 1923 he traveled Europe to familiarize himself with the contemporary trends in theater. The years of 1922 to 1928 under the NEP were the high point years of Meyerhold's career and of the Soviet theater generally. Lenin's death, the rise of Stalin, and the First Five Year Plan of 1928 were to halt artistic progress almost completely. But before that time Meyerhold mounted a series of productions that brought him international recognition.

In January of 1924 Meyerhold opened his production of Alexander Ostrovsky's The Forest. 1923 had been the centennial of the birth of the famous Russian playwright. Anatoli Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, had called for a "Back to Ostrovsky" movement. He wanted the theaters to stage Ostrovsky plays as a festival to honor the anniversary celebration. But he wanted much more than that, for his slogan was an appeal to return to the style of the Russian classical period. It was a direct attack against avant garde theater, the Proletcult movement, and Meyerhold particularly.

Despite their long-time friendship, Meyerhold denounced Lunacharsky as anti-Soviet, bourgeois, and reactionary. He then mounted a production of The Forest that was more radical than anything he had done to date. He altered the manuscript so completely that the flavor of the original period and the

playwright's theme were lost. A gentle comedy was made into a vicious satire on the pre-Revolutionary Russian landowners. The Soviet hatred of the landed gentry, in fact, the upper class in general, became the new theme.

In The Forest Meyerhold experimented in greater depth with the use of music. A leitmotif and a coordinating body rhythm were established for each character upon his initial entrance. The rhythm prevailed throughout the play in all the gestures and movements of that character, and the music accompanied his various entrances and climactic scenes. This served a dual function: the theme served as a symbol of the character to the audience, and, as further explanation will show, intensified the feeling that the characters were controlled from forces outside of themselves.

The setting was basically constructivist, making use of ladders, ramps, platforms, and a trapeze. But he included many more bright colored stage properties, many of them real rather than his usual symbolic abstractions. He returned to the use of costumes and make-up on the actors. The make-up was highly exaggerated and the performers wore brightly colored wigs. The effect was clown-like and grotesque. The brightness and profuseness of the effects and devices was in part a reflection of the NEP era and the loosening of the economic stringency, and in part merely continued experimentation. He still sought to find the best way to say that actors on the stage reflect real life only as technicians skilled in their trade, not by

subjective emotionalizing. The psychological theater was alien to the new way of life in Russia and must be cast off.

And finally, the production of The Forest revealed Meyerhold's continued preoccupation with puppet people, for the grotesquely costumed clowns moved about the stage as if they were on strings guided from above them. To Meyerhold people in real life were much like marionettes, with a whimsical "Fate" operating the strings. Meyerhold himself bore much the same relationship to his actors--they gave their full obedience to his guiding impulses. ✓

The more Leftist of the Soviet critics were receptive to Meyerhold's revision of Ostrovsky, for they had disagreed with Lunarcharsky and had felt genuine concern for the more traditional and reactionary members of the Party. But the traditionalists were stormy in their protests and attacked Meyerhold as a desecrator of their literary heritage.

Lenin was among the more conservative of the Party members in his attitude toward the arts and would doubtlessly have brought pressure to bear on Meyerhold had he not died shortly after The Forest opened. The concern for Lenin's successor did not seem great, for in reality the major policy questions had been settled not by Lenin personally, but by a governing body of five men. This Politburo (Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Party) had been composed of five men: Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Kamenev, and Bukharin. It seemed agreed that the four would carry on after Lenin's death. But in reality,

the four more theory-oriented members had allowed Stalin to carry out most of the more practical tasks, and in so doing he had gained far more power than they realized. Only Lenin seemed aware of the possible outcome. He had been ill for several months and knew that he could not live much longer, and had dictated a will dealing with the affairs of the Party. The danger that concerned him more than the conflict between the peasantry and the working class was the struggle between Trotsky and Stalin. Of Stalin he wrote:

[He] has concentrated an enormous power in his hands, and I am not sure that he always knows how to use that power with sufficient caution. . . . [He] is too rude, and this fault becomes unbearable in the office of General Secretary. Therefore I propose to the comrades to find a way to remove Stalin from that position and appoint to it another man . . . more patient, more loyal, more polite and more attentive to comrades, less capricious, etc.<sup>26</sup>

A brutal power struggle followed Lenin's death, but it was to be another four years before its outcome was settled and before its influence began to make itself felt in the Russian way of life and in the theater in particular.

The summer following The Forest Meyerhold produced The Give-Us-Europe-Trust. This was an attack against capitalism in which a large American trust tried to take over Europe. It was outright and deliberate propaganda in which the decadent bourgeois were contrasted to the healthy, sun-tanned Soviets. The production did not arouse much interest--any attack on capitalism was acceptable subject matter, and there were no

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<sup>26</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., pp. 206, 207.

shocking new scenic innovations. Of most interest in the stage design was a series of wooden panels on rollers on which different locales were painted. These could be moved so rapidly that an almost motion-picture-like effect resulted.

In writing about Meyerhold, his contemporary Eugene Vakhtangov said, ". . . What a brilliant director--the greatest of any who have existed or exist (now). Every production of his is a new theater. Every production of his could begin a new trend."<sup>27</sup> Norris Houghton, in speaking of a particular Meyerhold production he had seen said, ". . . it was hardly typical, but then no production of his ever is."<sup>28</sup> Some innovation appeared in almost every one of his major productions, particularly during these high-point years. He was constantly starting new trends, most of which were immediately imitated in several smaller theaters.

In Bubus The Teacher, given the following January, 1925, music became all important. On several occasions Meyerhold had tied music and particularly rhythmic motifs into the dramatic expression. But in Bubus The Teacher he set about to stage a dramatic symphony to the music of Chopin and Liszt as played from a piano on a high platform on the stage. All movement and dialogue was set to this music, each performer maintaining his own melodic and rhythmic line. In this way, Meyerhold

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<sup>27</sup> Evgenii Vakhtangov, Dnevnik, March 26, 1921, as cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 430.

<sup>28</sup> Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals, op. cit., p. 99.



developed "rhythmic masks" for his characters much as he had developed facial masks from make-up in The Forest.

This was the first modern Soviet drama that he had produced since Mystery Bouffe. The story dealt with a weak intellectual whose attempts to reconcile the bourgeois and proletarian viewpoints as a substitute for his inability to accept Revolutionary principles led to his downfall. But somehow the contrast shown between the resplendence of the declined, "decadent" society and the harsh barrenness of the new life left some doubt about the thematic intent.

Some indication exists that in Subus The Teacher the beginnings of Meyerhold's disillusion with Communism could be seen. Certainly he was beginning to question and doubt, as were many writers, for they disapproved of the middle-class social strata which had built up as a result of the NEP era. Not enough information is available on the production of Subus The Teacher to be sure whether or not such implications were presented.

But there is no doubt that by the time his next production opened some four months later he was ready to attack the anti-Bolshevik social changes which were taking place. The play was The Warrant, a political satire by Nikolai Erdman, and it premiered on April 20, 1925. Erdman, a young Soviet playwright, had created a satire in which he ridiculed the social classes of the old regime, the bourgeois in particular. A forged set of credentials supposedly proving him to be a Soviet official

gives unbelievable power to a young man who is in reality of the middle-class himself. He takes full advantage of the power, but is finally exposed. The fake warrant which has enabled him to make arrests freely falls into the hands of the secret police. The implication is clear that these gentlemen will make even worse use of the document. The people duped by the young poser are the "former people" or "ex-people," those who still dream of a return to the old regime, those who have never really accepted the change. It was these dreamers, living in the past, whom Meyerhold presented as wax figures in a museum. Their faces were painted into expressionless masks, and they were frozen in position, making entrances and exits on turntables. The Bolshevik critics at first were satisfied with this portrayal, and seemed to fail to see the deeper meaning of the play. An attack on "the pettiness, philistinism, and bureaucracy" of the Soviet government which Meyerhold foresaw "would degenerate into a terrible bureaucratic state that threatened to stifle everything living"<sup>29</sup> was the theme with which Meyerhold was most concerned. But the audience saw it, and cries of "Down with bureaucracy" and "Down with Stalin"<sup>30</sup> were heard in the theater. In a later attempt to tie Meyerhold with the Trotsky right-wing element, this was one of the productions cited. When Meyerhold tried to follow this play with The Suicide, another work of Erdman's, he was stopped by the

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<sup>29</sup>Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 212.

<sup>30</sup>Slonim, op. cit., p. 251.

authorities. Shortly afterwards Braun was arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

In early 1926 Meyerhold staged the last of his truly constructivist productions. From that time on he began to reject many of the techniques with which he had been experimenting, and returned more and more to conventional staging methods. Three factors influenced his move away from abstract staging: the pressures brought to bear by the critics, his own disillusion with the Soviet failure to live up to the principles of Communism, and his failure to find genuine artistic satisfaction with any one style with which he had experimented. He never really accepted any of his own techniques and no two productions were ever staged in identical styles.

The play was Roar China, by the young futurist writer, Serchei Tretyakov, a propagananda piece dealing with the current revolt in China. The locale was a battleship, which was represented by bare scaffolding and laths, with the customary planks connecting platforms. There is some indication that the production was directed by Meyerhold's assistant, Fyodorov, which seems plausible as it was little more than an imitation of former productions. Meyerhold never imitated himself.

He was busy through most of 1926 with mounting his greatest masterpiece, Nicolai Gogol's The Inspector-General. After a two year period of concentration on revolutionary plays, Meyerhold again returned to the classics and performed his usual complete revision. For the opening of the play the name of

the theater was changed to the Vsevolod Meyerhold State Theater, at last giving titular credit as it belonged.

Gogol was one of Russia's most respected writers and his The Inspector-General had been a beloved masterpiece since it first appeared in 1836. The play was a rollicking satire, a kind of comedy of errors that dealt with the avarice and stupidity of the petty contemporary bureaucratic officials of Gogol's day, the reign of Czar Nicholas I. With Meyerhold's growing concern for the bureaucracy which had been steadily creeping into the Soviet government, the play was an excellent choice for his particular talent at adaptation. The parallel between the officials of the Czarist regime and the modern day Soviets was obvious. The story concerned the local officials of a small town who mistook a young traveler for an expected government inspector. Their attempts at bribery to cover up their misconduct in office and the lengths to which Khlestakov, the mistaken traveler, took advantage of the situation, provided the plot foundation for a series of delightfully satiric scenes.

In the revision Meyerhold attempted to show not only this one play, but all the writings of Gogol. He rearranged the order of the scenes and inserted material from Gogol's novel, Dead Souls, and from his original notes for the play. He changed the setting from a small provincial town to a large Russian city, the minor police official to a general, and his wife to a fashionable society lady of doubtful virtue. His aim was to broaden the scope of the play to include a larger

view of Russian life than the small village afforded. Khlestakov was no longer a somewhat bumbling, useless opportunist, but a more vicious, underhanded adventurer. A new character was introduced in the form of a traveling companion for Khlestakov, a silent companion whose pantomime seemed to place him as an evil "Fate" figure controlling the strings and manipulating the events.

In reviewing the opening, one Bolshevik critic wrote:

Meyerhold's dramatic concept of The Inspector-General is an interpretation not of Nikolai Gogol's five-act comedy as it was understood by the academic theater of the nineteenth century, but rather of Gogol's work in general. Gogol's 'truth and malice' is firmly preserved, but his wish 'to collect everything bad in Russia into one heap' was expanded very greatly and revealed through the rich resources of contemporary directing.<sup>31</sup>

Meyerhold set out to show "everything bad in Russia" not only in the time of Nicholas I, but through implication in the Russia of his own day. Not only did this production tie together all of the writings of Gogol and attempt to show all the evils of Russia, but it also brought together the most important elements of Meyerhold's own contributions.

The costumes and scenery were resplendent as in the days with the Imperial Theaters when Golovin was designing. Meyerhold's early period of stylization was evident, for he established the atmosphere of the nineteenth century by giving the stage the quality seen in the old masterpiece paintings of the

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<sup>31</sup>R. Pel'she, in Novyi zritel' (December 21, 1926) as cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 429.

era. His experiments with rhythm and music climaxed in this production, for he was able to establish a musical pattern into which all language and movement blended, "a grandiose suite on Gogolian themes."<sup>32</sup> A chorus sang and spoke antiphonally with the principal characters. The famous bribery scene in which a succession of officials called on Khlestakov in individual interviews was restaged by the use of a large circular wall with fifteen doors. As Khlestakov remained in an armchair, the ratlike faces appeared and disappeared through these doorways, creating a startling effect that is said to be one of the outstanding moments in all Russian theater. (The marionette theater or wax museum style which had intrigued Meyerhold evidenced itself in the "frozen" figures who opened and closed the scenes. The actors were brought motionless onto the stage on turntables and remained in these frozen positions for a minute or more before the action began. At the end of the play, when the real inspector-general finally arrived, the people froze in their positions, the lights blacked out momentarily, and when they were turned on again nude mannequins in the same poses had replaced the actors. The shocked audience was made aware again that Meyerhold believed we are all only puppets in the hands of Fate.)

The critical reaction to The Inspector-General was mixed, with the majority of the sentiment against it. He was accused of corrupting a great classic drama, of expressing

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<sup>32</sup>Slonin, op. cit., p. 252.

anti-Revolutionary, reactionary thinking, and of being openly formalistic. The charge of formalism, which was to be aimed at Meyerhold and many of his contemporaries in the next few years referred to "any convention which tends to obscure or destroy the social significance of a production."<sup>33</sup> But there were those who had high praise for the production. Among them, Markov wrote:

With exquisite taste Meyerhold builds up mise-en-scenes which recall the great traditions of painting, but his art remains subordinated to his philosophic concept.

It may not always be possible to accept Meyerhold's interpretation of a play, but it is never possible to remain unmoved by his profound comprehension of the great Russian writers. Never before has Gogol's gloomy mystical duality . . . been presented in such an unforgettable way, to attain a generalization of great modern phenomena.<sup>34</sup>

In early May of 1928 Meyerhold staged another satire of decadent Russian society of the 1820's. The play was Alexander Griboyedav's Woe From Wit, though Meyerhold changed the title to Woe To Wit. He revised the text from the original rather mild treatise on Moscow society of the early nineteenth century into an attack on the type of stupidity that opposes free-thinking or anything new. The staging techniques were similar to those used in The Inspector-General.

The charge of formalism would probably have been pressed upon Meyerhold legally as well as by the newspapers at this time had not the Soviet officials been so absorbed with

<sup>33</sup>Gorelik, op. cit., p. 481.

<sup>34</sup>Markov, op. cit., p. 83.

political problems. For within the Party elite, Stalin and Trotsky had engaged in a bitter struggle for power. The major theoretical difference between them hinged on Trotsky's belief that the Soviet Union must focus its attention on fomenting world revolution. Stalin realized the West was not Communistic and that socialism could be strengthened in Russia only by use of the peasantry. By the end of 1927 Stalin had gained the upper hand and Trotsky was exiled.

The following October of the year 1928 Stalin introduced the first Five-Year Plan. In a radical attempt to boost Soviet economy, Stalin instigated measures which were almost a return to the Civil War era before the NEP. He believed that the most necessary step was a program of rapid industrialization. Revenue had to be found to finance this program, and he looked to agriculture as the primary source. Surplus agricultural products were again expropriated and the peasant population was herded together into state and collective farms for easier control and operation. In order to establish Russia as a leading industrial power, Stalin effected the complete collectivization of agriculture.

One portion of the first Five-Year Plan dealt with the arts. All resources were to be mobilized in support of the new policy. Any dissident voice was considered destructive, and conformity and orthodoxy were enforced for the first time since the Revolution. The tractor became the new hero and the factory the new hero. The stifling result brought an end



to the theatrical heyday of 1922-1929 and a clear foreboding of Meyerhold's now inevitable fate.

## CHAPTER V

### DECLINE AND DOWNFALL,

#### THE STALINIST ERA

The two plays that brought Meyerhold under strong and open fire from the Party were The Bedbug and The Bath. Both were written by the leading futurist poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who shared Meyerhold's disgust with the path that Communism had taken under the NEP and the Stalinist regime. This time Meyerhold did not have to revise a script, for the playwright not only shared the director's beliefs, but they worked together in perfecting and in mounting the plays.

The Bedbug premiered on Feb. 13, 1929. The story concerns Prisyppkin, a contemporary Soviet and Party member who really yearns for a return to the more refined pre-Revolutionary life. He marries a manicurist's daughter, to take advantage of the petty-bourgeois life her family leads. They, in turn, are glad of the prestige his Party membership card brings to the family. At the wedding there is a fire, and all are killed except Prisyppkin who is frozen by the streams of water used to extinguish the fire. The scene shifts to fifty years later when his body is discovered by a future Communist society and by a miracle of Soviet science he is brought to life, along with a bedbug which had been on his clothing. The "specimens" arouse curiosity and fear among the people, so Prisyppkin and

the bug are placed in cages at the zoo and surrounded with signs that read: "Careful --It Spits"; "Entry upon Advance Notice Only"; "Protect Your Ears--It Expresses Itself."<sup>1</sup> In a final speech directed to the audience whom Prisyarkin addresses as if they were fellow unfrozen brothers, he warns them that his fate will be theirs in the Russian Communist future.

The opening scenes of the play took place in the contemporary Russia of 1929. To depict the atmosphere that Meyerhold felt existed, he chose a nineteenth century décor and filled the stage with useless trifles that almost submerged the characters. It was his attack on the bourgeois society which had sprung up after the instigation of the NEP--to him they were no different than the nineteenth century middle-class society. For the scenes in the future, he created glass and metal rooms, painted silvery white. The effect was a sterilized hospital atmosphere and the critics were indignant with both Meyerhold and Mayakovsky for this portrayal of a barren, impotent Communist future. Meyerhold had launched many attacks against the old pre-Revolutionary Russia during his career. He was now using the same techniques to say that the "new" had become the "old," that the society in which he was living was no less bourgeois than it had formerly been. In addition, he projected such efforts as were being made by the dedicated Bolsheviks into an eventual complete sterility of

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<sup>1</sup>Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 218.

thought. "By giving a quasi-realistic treatment to the episodes of the NEP and a purely constructivistic one to the vision of the future, Meyerhold ably stressed the difference between the old and new, not only in mentality but also in art."<sup>2</sup> Both the poet and the director were harshly rebuked by the Soviet critics, though the public seemed to enjoy the production.

Both in The Bedbug and The Bath, which followed as the next production, Meyerhold evidenced a declining interest in constructivism and bio-mechanical acting. He made use of all his former experiments, symbolism in particular, but added nothing radical or new. To him the political message was foremost and he did not want any stage trickery to detract from the propaganda. He seemed more concerned with characterization than he had ever been before, for he wanted to show the very worst of the petty Soviet officials who, to him, were stifling the growth of Communism.

Party bureaucracy was the primary target of the satire in The Bath, which followed The Bedbug on March 16, 1930. Small-minded Soviet officials who possessed a great deal of power in their appointed positions were revealed as basically ignorant, boastful, and full of a blown-up sense of their own importance. The story centers around one of these officials, the "Chief Agreement Administrator" and his surrounding sycophants, who are pitted against a young inventor who fights their political

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<sup>2</sup>Simonin, op. cit., p. 255.

rigidity and stupidity. He perfects a time machine that can carry people backward and forward. After rejecting a trip to the past on the basis of questionable value to be gained from a look at moldy history, the Administrator and his staff are in turn rejected by the future society. A Phosphorescent Lady from the year 2030 comes to take them on the trip, but the time machine is able to throw back all those who would not survive the Communist purges yet to come. The point is driven home--these petty officials, who in reality deter the advance toward Communism, do not belong to the Communistic future.

Meyerhold subtitled the play a "drama of circus and fireworks" and again used symbolism as his primary means of conveying the message. The bureaucrats sat in heavy, overstuffed, antique furniture, while the young inventor and his friends romped about gaily in bright overalls among geometrically definitive machinery. The Phosphorescent Lady wore a well-fitted costume that bespoke the purity of constructivism. (The role was played by Meyerhold's wife, Zinaida Raikh, who had performed many of his leads through the years.)

This time the public added its hostility to that of the press, and feeling was strong toward both Meyerhold and Mayakovsky. Both were reprimanded and openly threatened by the Party officials. Less than a month later Mayakovsky committed suicide and his plays were banned from production and would not be seen again in Russia until 1955. Meyerhold continued to present political satires, but with a much gentler, softer

touch than he had used in The Bedbug and The Bath. His concern for the course of Russian Communism under Stalin had in no way lessened. But he had realized that in order to be allowed to speak at all, he would have to soften the blow. Pure constructivism seemed no longer to interest him. Symbolism became all important, as it had in his early days, as he continued his search for the best means of expressing his political philosophy on the stage.

But the search would now have to be carried on with no room for freedom for experimentation. Industrialization had progressed under the First Five-Year Plan, but the casualties had been high, primarily in the loss of liberty. State control, or more aptly Stalinist control, had stifled freedom in every aspect of life--economic, social, and political. The arts suffered equally, for the "literary front" that Stalin had called for in his efforts to fulfill the aims of the Five-Year Plan had become a literary dictatorship. As the supposed head of this literary front movement, Mayakovsky had been unable to rationalize the differences between life as he saw it being lived and as it was to be reflected under the grim new order called "socialist realism." He declared that he had "stepped on the throat of his own song" and, just before he shot himself, wrote a poem that concluded, "No need itemizing mutual griefs, woes, offenses. Good luck and goodbye."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., p. 341.

One of the primary problems that existed for all artists under the era of socialist realism was a question of definition. The term "realism" had come to indicate an artistic or literary treatment that reflected real life faithfully, not in the naturalistic sense of literal expression, but rather as psychologically true to life. Human relationships were to be represented without idealization. But the artist under the Stalinist era was to show only a glorified, romanticized past and present. In this way he was to lead the people into the realization of a perfect communal future.

Socialist realism means not only knowing reality as it is, but knowing whither it is moving. . . . Authentic 'realism' was suspect because its test was truthfulness. What was demanded of the Soviet artists was didacticism, the portrayal less of what was than of what ought to be. They had to become, as Stalin put it, 'engineers of human minds.'<sup>4</sup>

This approach demanded the avoidance of any art that depicted existing evils or the need for social reform in the contemporary way of life. "Socialist Realism was the method of the artist who was no longer content with merely censuring society but went on to point the way to the glorious classless society of the future."<sup>5</sup>

In the simplest terms, the demand was to depict life not as it was, but as it should be. No character in a play would question the methods of the Soviet Party or reveal any unhappiness with his present way of life. "Plays of Socialist

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<sup>4</sup>IBIA., p. 343.

<sup>5</sup>Ossie Trilling, "Russia's Changing Theater World," New York Times (Sun., Jan. 26, 1958), Section 2, p. 3.

realism were supposed to present a 'definite program,' to depict the characters' 'cheerful readiness to struggle,' and to convey a 'courageous tone.'<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these dictates toward artistic content, policy was also established to control artistic form. This called for the elimination of the element of formalism, that is, any art in which form or method of presentation became more important than the message or lesson of the content. "All creative work was expected to contribute to the Soviet socialist society by stressing its values, and art for art's sake and pre-occupation with esoteric problems of form and technique"<sup>7</sup> were not permitted. And, the art must not only teach and glorify, but must be in such a simple form that the most uninformed, uneducated spectator could grasp the message.

The only remnant of the new outlook (that of Meyerhold and the Proletcult) that remained in the reformed Soviet theater was the didactic or propagandist slant. This political purpose of theater grafted on to the naturalistic technique of the Stanislavsky system became the basis of what is called Socialist Realism, a term which implies that all art must be conformist in political outlook as well as understandable to majority audiences.<sup>8</sup>

The factor most responsible for the new policy of Socialist realism was Stalin's realization that Communism in Russia must be built on a nationalistic basis rather than a continuance of the ideal of World Communism which Lenin and Trotsky had

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<sup>6</sup>Morgan Y. Himmelstein, Drama was A Weapon (New Brunswick, N. J., 1963), p. 59-60.

<sup>7</sup>Harcave, op. cit., p. 634.

<sup>8</sup>Hunt, op. cit., p. 162.



advanced. Stalin knew that the Soviet citizen must have something lasting and tangible to which he could affix his loyalty. Soviet Russia was tangible, as were the homes, cities, and families within it. This required a new attitude toward the heritage of the old Russia, which had, since 1917, been presented as decadent and evil. A new approach was needed toward the permissible content of literature and in the teaching of history.

The selective use of Russian nationalist themes was permitted and even demanded, but they had to be themes which served the ends of Stalin and the Soviet state at the moment: defense of the fatherland, ruthlessness against domestic enemies, and the benefits of Moscow's rule for the borderlands.<sup>9</sup>

Only the inoffensive and heroic elements of the past could be portrayed--no blood on the soldier's well-tailored uniform, no sweat on the happy peasant's brow. Only such themes as would carry the viewer from a glorious past heritage to an even more glorious future were to be permitted.

But just what themes served to further the Soviet state and what themes did not became an unanswerable question to Russia's artists. Music suffered particularly from its inexplicable quality, and such gifted composers as Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Khachaturian were destined to receive censure from the Party for no less a failure to serve the Soviet ideology than to have their music become popular in the Western world. The painters could always add a tractor to a pastoral

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<sup>9</sup>Treadgold, op. cit., p. 344.

scene (even though tractors were in great shortage), and tractors, overalls, and banners carrying Party slogans became a part of many stage settings.

The Second Five-Year Plan began in 1933 with its avowed aim to abolish totally the elements of capitalism that had crept in after the Civil War and during the NEP. The problem of controlling the means of production and distribution had been settled by placing all the control into the hands of one small group of men dominated by Stalin. A new interpretation of Communist ideology had replaced Leninism. And any future interpretations or definitions would depend upon the ability of this group to keep its power. The Second Five-Year Plan sought to continue development of the means of production--machinery for both farm and factory. But it sought more--groups of people who could master the techniques of the machinery, who, through intimidation, fear, or for reward would become a reliable instrument for getting a job done. These groups, or "cadres" as they were called, of farmers and workers became the new heroes and heroines of the theater.

Meyerhold's position in the Party was steadily weakening as his influential friends such as Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky, were removed from high office. Meyerhold tried to reconcile his own theories with those of socialist realism, but seemed unable to say on the stage what he professed in public statements. Productions of Introduction in 1932 and Krechinsky's

Wedding in 1933 were artistically unsuccessful and were attacked by the Party critics.

The only remaining production that was popular with the theater-going public was his 1934 mounting of La Dame aux Camélias. One of Meyerhold's outstanding directorial feats, it was also a complete reversal of every experimental technique he had ever employed. It was a return to the naturalism of his early days with the Moscow Art Theater and to the French impressionism which had held interest for him during his association with The Dramatic Theater of Vera Komisarzhenskaya. He set the stage with all the beauty and luxury of Dumas' nineteenth century France, and designed rich and tasteful costumes and scenery. Zinaida Raika, Meyerhold's wife, played Marguerite Gautier with a depth of subjectivity and a naturalistic acting style that brought a life-like quality to the role. Meyerhold's last experiment was a rejection of all experimentation and in its stead he presented a refined, polished, perfected work of art. It was his way of rejecting socialist realism with its insipid blindness to the realities of life. With no trace of the Formalism for which he had been so violently attacked, he brought to the audience the theater that old Russia had loved, that even Lenin had preferred, the theater of reality, of representationism.

Meyerhold was not capitalizing on the Party line nor to Stanislavsky, as a few of the reviewers indicated. The majority of the critics sensed at once that this production which was

given without a trace of the usual Meyerholdian satire was in reality the strongest satire of all. The emotionalism was bourgeois, in their estimation, and was in disparity with Soviet ideology. The great innovator who had given the best of his talents as a spokesman for the Revolution stood forth to say that the revolutionary dream had failed. The only hope now lay in a return to the past heritage, not as it was molded to fit the contemporary doctrine, but as it had actually existed.

By this same time, 1934, Stalin had succeeded in completely subjugating the peasant population through fear and starvation. Thousands who had dared to voice opposition had been killed. Stalin had little left to concern himself with in the now-submissive peasantry, so he turned his attention to the Party elite and the intellectuals. The "Great Purge" had begun and was destined to last nearly four years before Stalin felt his position irrevocably secure. The first to go were the Bolshevik old guard, those who had supported Lenin or Trotsky, and it was not until 1936 that the attack turned toward the artists. Musicians, painters, and theater people were censured, arrested, and made to offer public apologies. Those who refused were exiled to Siberia, or more often executed. To soften the public image, these murders were frequently coupled with public eulogy and grief. In 1936 the leading playwright of the Revolution, Maxim Gorky, was put to death, then given a hero's funeral.

The details of Meyerhold's life between 1936 and 1938 are not completely clear. His theater was officially closed in 1937, but he had already been removed from the directorship prior to the closing. His removal took place despite the fact that in 1936 he spoke at a meeting of penitent theater artists. He offered his own public apology, declaring that "Comrade Stalin" had pointed the only true pathway toward theatrical expression. His speech was a token gesture, delivered in fear, and for him it came too late. The attack on him was led by Party officials through the Party-controlled newspapers. His theater was branded as "class-alien, distinguished by a systematic departure from Soviet reality, political distortion of that reality, and hostile slander against our life."<sup>10</sup> Meyerhold's productions had "distorted and slandered the representation of Soviet reality, and were filled with double-dealing, and even with open anti-Soviet malice."<sup>11</sup>

Meyerhold was left without a source of income, with no place to go, and virtually friendless, for no theater dared open its door to a publically disgraced figure. The one man who was not afraid to shelter Meyerhold was his old teacher, his old friend, and his most persistent rival, Stanislavsky. No longer in real control of the Moscow Art Theater, Stanislavsky headed his own private school and workshop. He gave Meyerhold a place as teacher and director in this studio,

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<sup>10</sup>Pravda, Dec. 17, 1937, as cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 361.

<sup>11</sup>Teatr, No. 1 (1938), p. 5, as cited in Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 362.

where he remained until August of 1938. Stanislavsky's death at that time left Meyerhold without a refuge.

Just how he spent the next ten months is not known, but he appeared as a delegate to the First All-Union Congress of directors which convened in June, 1939, in Moscow. It was at this conference that he pronounced his own death sentence by a speech which he delivered. As he rose to address the assembly, he was greeted with an enthusiastic ovation. He began in the nature of an apology, admitting that he had made mistakes. He seemed weak and old, and his voice faltered as he spoke.

. . . I have been accused of many mistakes which are innate in the work of a theatrical director, and in all sincerity I admit most of them. I want to dwell in greater detail on these mistakes and I will begin by enumerating them.

Harsh things have been said about the harmful influence I have exercised on many young Soviet theatrical directors. . . . I am sorry as a matter of principle that I have not attacked more vehemently the many uninspired and illiterate directors who half-heartedly imitated my style, invariably distorting and cheapening it. They never made any attempt to grasp my creative principles and they perverted my ideas without ever understanding my artistic aims. . . .

Harsh things have also been said about the way I have desecrated our classic heritage. . . . There is truth in this accusation. In producing many of the classic plays I went too far in my experimentation and I gave my imagination too much freedom, occasionally forgetting that the artistic value of the material on which I was working was always infinitely greater than anything I could add. . . .

Third and last, I have been accused of being a formalist in my creative work, of obscuring the content in my search for new and original forms and of forgetting the purpose in the search for means. This is a grave accusation, and I accept it only in part.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Juri Jelagin, Taming of the Arts (New York, 1951), pp. 171-172.

As Meyerhold moved into his defense of this third accusation, he seemed to begin to gain strength and vigor. The great spirit that led him to totally embrace a social revolution and to steer the course of an artistic revolution could not remain silent any longer.

. . . a master . . . must have the right to experiment. He must have the moral right to test his creative ideas no matter how they turn out in the end. He must have the right to make mistakes, because all mortals have that right, and he is a mortal like any others.

I very seldom indulged in tests and experiments which can be called formalistic. Most of my creative work has no trace of formalism. On the contrary, all my efforts were directed toward finding an organic style that suited a given content,<sup>13</sup> and I believe that I frequently succeeded . . .

By now there was a genuine power of conviction in the speaker's voice. As he moved toward his conclusion, his open attack against the state of Soviet theater was forceful and fearless, with all the vitality that had characterized his life's work.

Why should this be called formalism, and what is your definition of formalism? I also would like to ask the question in reverse: what is antiformalism? What is socialistic realism? Apparently socialistic realism is orthodox antiformalism. I would like to consider this question in practical, rather than theoretical terms. How would you describe the present trend in the Soviet theatre? Here I have to be frank: if what has happened in the Soviet theatre recently is antiformalism, if what is happening today on the stages of the best Moscow theatres is an achievement of the Soviet drama, I prefer to be considered a formalist. I, for one, find the work in our theatres at present is pitiful and terrifying. I don't know whether it is antiformalism, or realism, or naturalism, or some other 'ism,' but I do know that it is uninspired and bad.

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<sup>13</sup>ibid., p. 172.

This pitiful and sterile something that aspires to the title of socialistic realism has nothing in common with art. Yet the theatre is art, and without art there can be no theatre. . . . Was this your aim? If so you have committed a horrible deed. You have washed the child down the drain along with the dirty water. In your effort to eradicate formalism, you have destroyed art!<sup>14</sup>

Meyerhold was arrested the next day and was exiled and imprisoned. A few weeks later his wife was found brutally murdered in her apartment. But Meyerhold lived until 1942 or 1943. According to one story he was tortured to death by the NKVD, the Russian secret police. According to another, he was set free after the years of imprisonment, but, shattered and broken, he committed suicide. It was not his fate to die the death of a beloved personality, mourned and eulogized. Such were the times in the Russia he loved so well that fame and obscurity, even life and death, lost meaning under the autocrat's power.

And as with many men of the theater as well as with historical figures and men of government, Stalin ordered Meyerhold's name and all trace of his work eradicated from the Soviet theater. The published report of the 1939 First All-Union Congress of directors gave a complete transcription of all the speeches given with the exception of Meyerhold's. His name was not even mentioned in the report. Nor would any newspaper or periodical mention it again until 1953. With the death of Stalin, however, and the subsequent "thaw," men of the Soviet

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 173.



theater began to look to Meyerhold's teachings as an aid in liberating them from the era of socialist realism which had all but stifled creativity. In July of 1956, Khrushchev officially "reinstated" Meyerhold, permitting his name to be included in theater history books and full recognition to be given to his accomplishments.

In the past ten years much information has been brought to light that will further aid in evaluating Meyerhold's career. Many of his former students, afraid to say anything about their old teacher while Stalin was alive, are now writing about Meyerhold. Their experiences with him, together with the classroom and rehearsal notes that many kept, are now being collected and published. As yet they are not available to English speaking students of theater history, but soon will be. The great popularity of Stanislavsky and his so-called "method" of teaching acting has long been evident in America. His system has been tried in schools of theater and some of his ideas embraced, others rejected. The probability of Meyerhold having a similar theatrical influence is strong, but it will take more time for his name and his work to become better known internationally. As one of the foremost exponents of the didactic purpose of theater, he will rank high as a successful producer of the political propaganda play.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Russia that Vsevolod Meyerhold knew during his lifetime was characterized primarily as a country of constantly shifting and changing governmental policy. Throughout the forty years that he worked, this policy was a major influence in molding his directorial talents. The theater never existed independently, but was always subject to censorship and was obligated to adhere to a doctrine set down by the governing body. Any Russian director who lived and worked from 1917 to 1940 would of necessity be dealing with didactic theater, for theater was considered a strong force in reshaping the social pattern of the nation.

But to Meyerhold the propaganca values of drama were considerably more important than to the majority of his contemporaries. From the outset he was a rebel, casting off old molds of theatrical production which he did not believe served to further the basic purpose of theater. To him this purpose was twofold. First, theater owed an obligation to instruct the audience in some area of life at every performance, not merely to offer shallow, meaningless entertainment. Secondly, the true essence of production on the stage was to present life in a form that was recognizably theatrical in nature. Rather than attempting to convince the audience that the events on

stage were really taking place, he encouraged the spectator to be aware that this was only a theater in which he sat, and that on the stage were actors who were merely men like himself, not living incarnations of real people. This philosophy placed him in the ranks of those who were labeled "presentationalists," as opposed to those who viewed production naturalistically, or the "representationalists." With these two principles to guide him--didacticism and presentationalism--Meyerhold undertook to instruct the audience in one primary area, that of government and politics. A didactic approach in the theater can be used to instruct in many areas of life, but he chose to focus upon this one area, therefore his work may be called specifically propagandistic.

Propaganda plays have been produced in many theaters and in many nations. But Meyerhold again went much further. He sought not only the content of propaganda, but believed that new theatrical techniques needed to be developed to tie form and content into a new style, a style that would become both the means and the end result of political expression on the stage.

Do the times mold the man, or is the man a determinant in molding the time? This long-standing academic question is of significance in any evaluation of Meyerhold's career. Had he been born in another generation or another nation his artistic development might have reached a higher peak, for there is no questioning the fact that he was a genius as an innovator of

staging techniques. But on the other hand, his ability to clothe propaganda in an exciting, stimulating fashion would perhaps have gone unmourished. For it was his fate to live during a time when his nation underwent a political and social upheaval unparalleled in the world's history. The Russian theater was remarkable in its ability to keep abreast of the changes as they occurred and to adapt itself to the shifting ideologies. Meyerhold was the unquestioned leader of theatrical thought, particularly from 1920 to 1930. The artistic revolt in the theater which he had staged from 1900 to the Revolution of 1917 had nurtured a talent and spirit that quickly embraced the practical and social revolt of the nation at large. As Lenin attempted to shape a new way of life after 1917, and Stalin, following him in 1925, so Meyerhold attempted to reinforce the new ideas by shaping a new way of theater, a theater dedicated to expressing Communist ideals.

Meyerhold was foremost a satirist in the theater. He wanted to use plays to say what he thought ought to be said about the influences of the Soviet government on Russian society. His many years of research and experimentation led him to believe that the theatrical conventions at his disposal were not sufficient for his message. His thorough knowledge of theatrical crafts, coupled with his inventive genius, enabled him to make selective choices of certain elements of the old conventions and to add to them from his own creativity in order to formulate his new style. The technical changes he demanded

were radical in nature and he experimented repeatedly in an attempt to crystalize the perfect style.

But radical change cannot take place without conflict, casualties, and time for experimentation to discover the weaknesses of a new system. Mistakes must be made and rectified and the ensuing problems of working and living with and in the new system must be solved. The Soviet Union has been solving these problems for fifty years and is still absorbed with re-adjusting social patterns to adhere to ideological principles. The life of a man is transient and relatively insignificant when compared with the life of a nation. Meyerhold was to be allowed no such lengthy period of time to find the answers he sought. He and his nation fell into a deep misunderstanding of each other, both unable to recognize the fluctuating character of change and both too quick to criticize and condemn each other.

The periods of his career are direct reflections of the political changes. The pre-revolutionary years were times of planning, learning, working toward a goal. From 1917 to 1921 were years of chaos, the Revolution itself, the end of World War I, and the Russian Civil War. To Meyerhold they were the years of wholehearted embracement of Communism, and the reflection of its ideals in blatant, circus-like productions, replete with banners, uniformed soldiers, patriotic music, and a near mass hysteria instilled in the audience. There followed, from 1921 to 1928, the era of the New Economic Policy,

a time when the Soviet Union attempted to meet its mounting problems face-to-face. Meyerhold also was settling down from the high-pitch of revolutionary excitement and attempting to solve the technical problems of his form of theatrical production. His two major innovations, constructivist staging and bio-mechanical acting, grew from his early experiments into fruition during this time. It was his heyday, and the high-point of the early twentieth century Russian theater.

But it was not destined to last. After Lenin's death, Stalin looked to other methods of problem solving. The instigation of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 and the enforcement of the artistic and literary policy of socialist realism which followed shortly after brought an era of suffocating autocracy far worse than any Czarist regime had ever imposed. No area of Russian life was left untouched by the policy changes of the 1930's and the blow dealt the theater was staggering. No longer were Meyerhold and his contemporaries free to experiment, for experimentation was formalism, and this was labeled anti-Soviet. No longer could the theater speak out against a social evil, for socialist realism demanded only an idealized look at life.

Many Russian artists capitulated and tried to serve the Party as it dictated. Such subservience was not possible for a man of Meyerhold's rebelliousness and depth of conviction. To him, Stalin and his bureaucrats had submerged and enslaved the ideals of Communism, though they gave lip-service to the

cause. His great talent as a satirist had served him well as he upheld the revolutionary ideals, and his mastery of the art of satire now enabled him to attack the destruction of these ideals as he saw it taking place around him. He mounted productions which first openly attacked Party bureaucracy, and ultimately, with his 1934 production of Canille, made a deliberate return to nineteenth century naturalism. With all the artistry he could command he rejected experimentation and the blind unreality of socialist realism. The subtlety of the propaganda method Meyerhold employed escaped many of the critics and they felt that Meyerhold was joining the throngs of the "penitents." But others realized the significance of his staging and his public image was irreparably damaged by their criticism. For, though Meyerhold had been extremely popular with his audiences, the fear of stating any opinion that contradicted that of a Party spokesman was too strong, and his popularity was at an end.

Meyerhold still had a few old friends among Party officials and their efforts in his behalf in 1934 led to the beginning of construction of a new theater building for him. The building was never finished, for by this time Stalin's purges were underway, and the old Lenin-Trotsky supporters who had been Meyerhold's friends were removed from office. And finally Meyerhold himself became a victim of Stalin's dictatorial interpretation of the establishment of a classless society.

Meyerhold made many contributions to Russian theater and bore a decided influence on the stylistic changes which took place in Europe and America, primarily in the area of stagecraft, during the 1920's and 1930's. His staging techniques brought him to the attention of designers and directors around the world, though he never gained a name with the public at large outside of the Soviet Union. Within Russia he was considered the leader of the revolt against naturalism and in the establishment of the new proletarian theater. He served as a model for taking old playscripts and revising them to reveal new thought. He was among the first to produce newly-written Soviet dramas. His experiments with constructivism led the way to a whole new approach toward the use of forms, shapes, and acceptable materials such as raw woods and metals as a part of stage scenery. His work with bio-mechanics caused the Russian actor to realize the importance of the body as a tool of expression. And Meyerhold made a clear relationship between the staging and acting methods he advocated and the ideology of a society in which a proletarian working mass replaced a ruling capitalistic society.

This relationship may be observed most closely in his two major innovations, bio-mechanics and constructivism, and in his philosophic approach to the portrayal of human life on stage. First, by bio-mechanical acting techniques, he sought to glorify the revolutionary hero, the working man. The symbol of the proletarian was a skilled laborer, clean-cut, ideolized,



beautiful of body and motion. Bodily activity was disciplined and infinitely controlled. This was the ideal man who was to establish a classless, leaderless proletarian rule in the new scheme of life, and to Meyerhold, his actors trained in bio-mechanical skills were incarnations of the ideal. Secondly, in order to establish the Marxian society, a stern, ascetic bleakness was required in the mode of living. Ornamentation or elaborateness in architecture or decoration was out of place. Only that which was functional was necessary and justifiable. In Meyerhold's theater, this concept took shape in the clean-lined, utilitarian design of constructivism. And finally, the true Communist society called for members who functioned rationally and intellectually. There was no room for intuitive or emotional behavior. Meyerhold brought this element to his theater by the complete denial of the psychological approach to acting and staging. He left no room for subjectivity that stemmed from emotional introspection, but rather demanded a completely objective and rational technique.

Meyerhold cannot be held at fault for the pattern of development that followed the establishment of the Soviet regime. He was no more guilty than Karl Marx or Lenin or perhaps even Stalin, for the ideals which had spurred them on had not prepared them for the resistance their ideals would meet. A further proof of Meyerhold's genius in mounting propaganda theater came in his ability to attack the new government with the same force that he had earlier used to uphold it. As he

saw Lenin moving back toward capitalism and bureaucracy, and Stalin moving toward autocracy, he again used his talents to speak to the audience. He no longer offered official propaganda, but instead, an intelligent insight into the real state of political affairs in an attempt to enlighten the spectators. He had used his theater to show his audience the best of Communism, he would continue to use it to instruct them of the evils.

In its broadest sense, the area of politics describes people's efforts at living together in peace and harmony. Such efforts cannot reach fulfillment unless the people are informed on the structure of their society. The artist can help spread this information as successfully as the politician or the philosopher, in many cases more successfully. This is particularly true of the theater artist, for he can instruct in ways that are more apt to leave deep impressions. He offers a medium of identification to the spectator, and an opportunity to receive emotional as well as intellectual stimulus.

One of the qualities that sets the artist, and particularly the artistic genius, aside from the rest of the world is his insight into individual man and into society as a whole. If he finds himself in a time and place where a defense is required or a cause needs championing, he owes an obligation to use his insight and talent to speak out. But at the same time, he holds a similar obligation to be faithful to the craft of his art without spoiling it, to remain artful. If his spokespersonship becomes strained and obvious preachment, it seldom

retains high artist quality. Meyerhold was deeply aware of this problem, and fought constantly to uphold artistic integrity. So sure was he that the aesthetic aspects of the theater were compatible with its use as a propaganda tool that he was willing to devote his whole career toward establishing this compatibility.

If the message he wanted to reveal had been based upon an old established verity or had been stable in nature, Meyerhold's career would doubtless have had a different ending. The instability of the politics of his day made genuine artistry in propaganda almost impossible. Any propagandistic expression must of necessity take sides in an issue. When sides are taken, enemies and admirers form their ranks, and the artist is immediately limited. He is judged by what he expresses, not by his artfulness. Or, if theatrical production and direction were not so ephemeral in nature and could be viewed retrospectively as can works of literature or painting, Meyerhold's productions might be ranked with Rembrandt's painting, "The Syndics" or Kipling's poem, "Recessional," recognized works of fine artistry that bespoke a cause.

To objectively view the life of this one great, gifted theatrical artist, it is not essential to answer the question of the real purpose and best use of all art. It is more fitting to conclude that art can inform, inspire, and entertain at the same time. Art and propaganda can be presented together in one evening upon one stage. No further proof is

needed than the record of the reactions of the audience in Meyerhold's theater. He swept them up in a delightful, satiric romp through old Russia and into a clean-lined, smooth-functioning new society. He engaged their enthusiasm with a wide variety of well-conceived, skillfully executed mechanical devices and artful directorial and acting techniques that bespoke the new world of Communist life. He never found the form and technique that thoroughly satisfied him. In part this was a result of his disillusion with the progress of Communism. But no less, it was the restless drive for perfection that characterizes artistic genius.

Despite the disheartening progress of Russian life from 1920 to 1940 and despite the tragic fate that ended Meyerhold's career, developments of the past twenty years are softening the intensity of international concern for Soviet Russia, its people, and its artists. The passage of time is clarifying the relationships and placing the people and their times in proper perspective. Meyerhold, from his exhortative platform, had offered a firm hand to the infant, Russian Communism, and they walked awhile together. But when the infant turned its steps aside, he could neither go with it, nor go on alone without it. Yet, as he moved toward political expression in the theater, his help provided the foundation for the Russian proletarian theater and earned him a place as one of the foremost practitioners of successful propagandistic theater.

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