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ANATOLII LUNACHARSKII AND THE SOVIET THEATER

By

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B.A. Russian, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2011

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
History

The University of Montana
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Abstract

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History

Anatolii Lunacharskii and the Soviet Theater

Committee Members: Robert H. Greene, Richard Drake, Clint Walker

My thesis is primarily concerned with tracing the Soviet theater's trajectory from a relatively polyphonic, even kaleidoscopic, fearless art form to a narrower, formulaic one under Stalin at the end of the 1920s. I examine this evolution through the lens of the career of Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875-1933), who was the head of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) from 1917 to 1929. In the twelve years that encompass Lunacharskii's tenure at Narkompros, I use four plays as focal points to explore how their form and content, the controversies surrounding their productions, and the public's reaction to them explain and reflect the larger political and cultural disputes of the moment. In scrutinizing Lunacharskii's personal reflections, the bureaucratic machinations and cultural polemics within Narkompros, as well as the public and critical reaction to a few specific plays, I hope to contribute to an understanding of the causes and outcomes of the transformation of the Soviet theater.

Significantly, as with education, literature, and the plastic arts, there was no consensus on what revolutionary theater should be after 1917. While bureaucratic disorganization and impotence were early allies of artistic freedom, many members of the Russian avant-garde saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a partner in cultural and political struggle. Was this hopelessly idealistic, or, moving beyond questions about the anarchy within Narkompros and Lunacharskii's own protean temperament, was Bolshevik ideology during the revolution's first decade similarly malleable? Did the condemnation in 1927 of so-called "formalism" – art for art's sake, and not socialism's sake – reflect merely Stalin's consolidation of power or did it announce an ideological and generational shift?

Lunacharskii, a mild Bolshevik as Bolshevik's went, was thus immersed in the contest to create and sustain financially a new Soviet theater that was both artistically appealing and politically palatable to its practitioners, the state, and the audience. He struggled to strike a balance between preservation of traditional theaters, and to delineate – censor – the limits of artistic experimentations explored by avant-garde directors, whose creative momentum originated from the turn of the twentieth century. On a personal level, Lunacharskii's celebrated official moderation concealed a tragic – insofar as he did not acknowledge it – intellectual and moral muddle.

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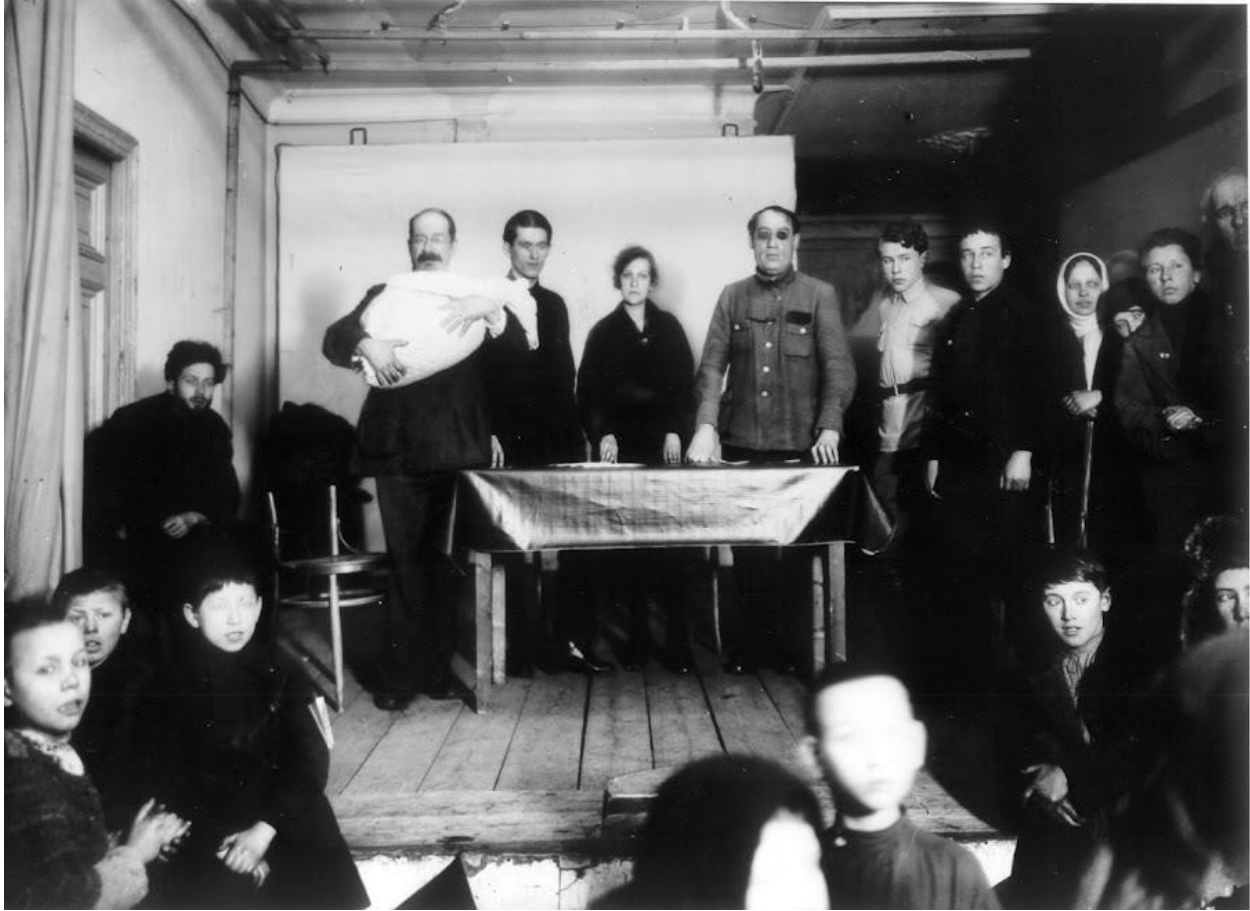
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Lunacharskii (holding child) taking part in an "Octobering" ceremony, where children were given the names of classical, French, and Soviet revolutionary heroes, images, or concepts, such as "Spartak," "Ateist," or "Elektrifikatsiia"

Introduction: *The Revolution said to the theater, "I need you!"*

The Russian writer Kornei Chukovskii's (1882-1969) book *Contemporaries: Portraits and Studies* includes a sketch of the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii. The following scene took place in the fall of 1918:

Anatolii Vasil'evich was patient and modest when he was the center of attention and these aspects of his personality would manifest themselves in the form of 'friendly jests.' Thus, people wouldn't hold back from responding with their own pithy, poetic jabs. He was the first to laugh, if he found these things humorous.

He wasn't even offended by Aleksandr Blok, when the latter told him in the presence of several people (the artist and critic Aleksandr Benois, president of Proletkult Lebedev-Polianskii, and others) that he didn't care for Lunacharskii's verses and didn't consider him to be a poet.

He wasn't offended by the painter [Ivan] Brodskii who accused him, according to eyewitnesses, of "not having prevented the leftists from destroying the artists of the Academy, and of being unable to suppress the formalists' demagoguery. You are guilty of much," Brodskii said to Lunacharskii. "It was you who encouraged the leftists. It was you who nurtured them underneath Narkompros' roof, you who did not hold in check the innovators whose experiments have cost the arts so dearly."

This sort of vehement, polemical tone never troubled Anatolii Lunacharskii. Yet one would be seriously mistaken if because of his genial, tactful, and erudite manner they forgot that the fundamental feature of Lunacharskii's spiritual constitution was his combativeness, his willingness to fight.

I recall how at some gathering (perhaps on the occasion of Turgenev's centenary) in an overflowing dressing room, the elderly novelist Ekaterina Letkova (Sultanova), a guardian of the populism of the 1870s, turned toward Lunacharskii with a short salutation in which there was an unambiguous subtext: "Although you are a Bolshevik, you are one of us!"

This occurred around a coffee table. The compliment was caught up by others, who began vying with one another to persuade Anatolii Vasil'evich that while everyone considered him their own commissar, they were all very pleased that there was nothing of the commissar in him. These words of praise seemed to jar Anatolii Vasil'evich, but he

restrained himself and responded with gallant irony, murmuring that, quite frankly, he didn't deserve such an honor.

The praise did not subside but continued in kind. Anatolii Vasil'evich began to frown, stood up, and without his customary smile declared: "No, I am not with you. Your words describe me incorrectly and hypocritically."

After this it was obvious to everybody surrounding him what an abyss lay between him and those who only yesterday had served the thoroughly rotten old order (*sluzhili prognivshemu stroiu*). People around him stared with astonishment. No one had anticipated that Anatolii Vasil'evich's voice could utter such sharp notes.¹

The first decade after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia is often regarded as a period of relative liberalism and experimentation, a time when commissars might still sit with former populists around a coffee table. The New Economic Policy (NEP), instituted by Lenin and promulgated by decree in 1921, allowed for the co-existence of private enterprise alongside the public sector, and represented a retreat from the most radical confiscatory economic policies of war communism. While this mixed economy was a strategic compromise in the face of near economic collapse during the Civil War (1917-21), the Bolsheviks rationalized it in ideological terms as a maneuver that provided for the creation of a moribund form of capitalism, a necessary condition for the inevitable triumph and consolidation of socialism.² In the realm of arts and education, cultural mandarins calculated a similar policy of conciliation whereby traditional and avant-garde forms would be temporarily preserved until suitably proletarian ones could be invented, established and ultimately come to prevail. The toleration for, and the proliferation of a

¹ Kornei Chukovskii, "Sovremenniki: Portrety i etiudy", *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol.5 (Moscow: Terra-Knizhnyi Klub, 2001), under "Kornei Chukovskii o Lunacharskom, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/kornej-cukovskij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed June 16, 2014].

² There is a vast English-language literature on the Soviet Union and NEP, including: Roger Pethybridge, *The Social Prelude to Stalinism* (London: MacMillan, 1974); Alan M. Ball, *Russia's Last Capitalists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, Richard Stites, eds., *Russia in the Era of NEP* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); James Hughes, *Stalin, Siberia, and the Crisis of the New Economic Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Lewis Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

plurality of, forms of expression in the cultural sphere was a mixed blessing for both the state and artists.

The temporary retreat of NEP had odious implications even for the politically indifferent factions of the avant-garde. For these denizens of the pure realm of the spirit, it was the commercialization of the arts in a newly resurgent bourgeois society that was the greatest affront to their ideal of culture – particularly the theater – as a sacred, transformational, and transcendental sphere.³ For much of the intelligentsia the promise of cultural purification was undermined during NEP when market-supported vaudeville, burlesque, café-chantants, and other popular entertainments flourished as the Bolsheviks cut state subsidies for the arts. The state apparatus was simply not equipped to absorb and control every theater, and the party's schemes for ideological inculcation by means of popular amusements were diluted and postponed.⁴

This ambiguously golden age is said to have come to an abrupt end when Stalin abolished NEP in 1928 and with it the toleration of art forms devoid of socialist content. Whereas many of the arbiters of culture had argued since 1917 that old artistic form could convey the revolutionary message, Stalin implemented a mass culture that was “nationalist in form, socialist in content.” In fact it was the cultural forms that were socialist, and “the content of the new ersatz culture was

³ Boris Groys, in *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic, Dictatorship, and Beyond* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), argues that the disembodied but thoroughly politicized quality of the Stalinist/Socialist Realist aesthetic has its roots in the avant-garde's notion of artistic purity and purification, whose antecedents can be traced to Richard Wagner's doctrine of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art,” where society, art, and politics dissolve into a quasi-religious singularity.

⁴ Sergei Orlovsky, who worked in Moscow's Maly Theater in the early 1920s, writes that during the first years of NEP historical – meaning pre-revolutionary – plays enjoyed the greatest box-office success, while so-called contemporary plays, with their “invariable evildoers and steely Bolsheviks” appeared mostly in the form of posters that Agitprop required adorn the theaters' walls. The theaters put little money into Soviet drama, and “As a remedy, Agitprop introduced political interludes at the beginning of every performance; one such interlude was devoted to a new process then emerging in the mining industry, which the entire theater troupe recited in miserable verses.” Sergei Orlovsky, “Moscow Theaters”, in *Soviet Theaters, 1917-1941: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Martha Bradshaw (New York: Research Program on the USSR, 1954), 62.

retrogressively nationalistic.”⁵ In light of the Stalinist terror, the intellectual and spiritual aridity of socialist realism, and the eventual economic implosion of the Soviet Empire, a thematic summary of the history of the 1920s in Russia might be one of hopes dashed and abandoned.⁶

The temptation to idealize the 1920s, characterized by war, famine, disease, and political repression, should be resisted. It was nonetheless, as scholars such as Richard Stites have argued, a decade of intense cultural ferment, extravagant utopian schemes, and artistic experimentation.⁷ Other historians have a less sanguine view of the Soviet Union’s formative years. Donald Raleigh in *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, argues that the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution were almost immediately lost during the civil war, when a repressive, intolerant party-state came into being. According to Raleigh, the unitary, unified practices and policies of Stalinism were already in place in the early 1920s.⁸ In my thesis I will argue that during the first decade of Soviet power, political decisions – in a state where everything was politicized – were neither inevitable nor irrevocable. Furthermore, until the end of the 1920s, in the realm of cultural affairs these same decisions were undermined where the party promulgated contradictory or confusing policies, and absolute regulatory power was more aspirational than actual. During NEP, the

⁵ James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative history of Russian Culture*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 540.

⁶ “Intellectual and spiritual aridity” of socialist realism perhaps describes the state for whom it was the official – and fruitful – artistic method. The realist tradition in Russian literature had its roots in Lev Tolstoi, and was popular in pre-revolutionary intellectual circles. Sergei Orlovskii, in his essay “The Moscow Theaters,” writes that the semi-official formulation of socialist realism was: “Nationalism is what really happened in life, formalism is what never happened and could never happen, realism is what could happen, and socialist realism is that which could not only happen in life but that which must without fail be useful in socialist construction.”, 58. In a long essay on the subject of socialist realism published in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, No. 10 (Feb. 28, 1933), Lunacharskii wrote that, “Marx says that we are summoned to the world not merely to understand it, but to change it...the socialist realist cannot be static, he cannot be fatalistic, he must be full of passion – a warrior.” A.V. Lunacharskii, “Sotsialisticheskii realizm (doklad)” in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos’mi tomakh, tom vos’moi* [Collected Works in eight volumes, volume eight], ed. I.I. Anisimov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967), under “Biblioteka”, <http://newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-8/socialisticheskij-realizm> [accessed October 15, 2014].

⁷ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

existence of artistic experimentation and political contestation was less the product of institutional relaxation than of a precarious – but persistent – balance of ideological forces in and around the cultural bureaucracy.

Presiding over the cultural ferment was Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875-1933). The son of a civil servant and nearly life-long revolutionary, Lunacharskii was appointed as the first Commissar of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1917. The Soviet acronym for this broad-reaching body was Narkompros, or *Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia*, where the last word is literally “enlightenment,” yet is alternately and often translated as “education.” Narkompros was a vast bureaucracy in charge of the state funding and control of public education and cultural matters, including the theater. A man of many enthusiasms, Lunacharskii combined his lifelong passions for socialism and the theater in the form of innumerable aesthetic and political manifestos, as well an outpouring of his own mostly plodding, pedantic dramatic works.

The creation of a distinct and viable revolutionary theatrical repertoire was central to both Narkompros’ mission of building culture and the Bolshevik program for the propagation of Marxist-Leninist ideology. In the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, the Soviet regime’s task of spreading the Bolshevik message and instilling the necessary class consciousness into its citizens was hindered by wartime shortages and illiteracy. When the Bolsheviks came to power an estimated forty percent of the male population and only thirteen percent of the female population were literate within the far-flung and frayed empire.⁹ The scarcity of paper during the Civil War

⁹ Literature in English about illiteracy – and efforts to “liquidate illiteracy”, or LIKBEZ – during late Tsarist and early Bolshevik regimes includes Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilizations, 1917-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting*

years (1918-1921) further complicated the process of ideological transmission through the written word.¹⁰ The expense of film and cinematographic equipment made indoctrination by means of agitational movies during the first years of the Soviet regime virtually impossible.¹¹ Into the technological and pedagogical breach leapt the theater, which was readily digestible to the undereducated and had minimal material requirements beyond the enthusiasm and imagination of its participants.

In one of his last essays, a heavily redacted article titled “Stanislavskii, Theater and Revolution,” published in the January 18, 1933 edition of *Izvestiia* on the occasion of Stanislavskii’s seventieth birthday, Lunacharskii reflects on his own colorful conception of the theater’s role in the early 1920s:

The revolution came and said to the theater: ‘Theater, I need you, so that after my labors and battles I, the revolution, can relax in a comfortable chair in a beautiful hall and be entertained by the spectacle. I need you so that I may laugh simply and heartily and unburden my soul. I need you as a helper, a projector, a companion. On the stage I want to see my friends and enemies...I want you to show before me my exploits and my sacrifices. I want you to expose my mistakes, my defects and my scars and to do it rigorously, because I’m not afraid of that. I want you, with all your magical resources that no school or leader has, to fulfill this task. Photograph, concertize, stylize, fantasize, use every color in your palette, all the instruments of your large orchestra and help me recognize and feel the world and myself above all (*pochuvstvovat` mir i menia samoe*). For I am thirsty for knowledge, I am thirsty for an understanding of my own

Otherness: The Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000); Lenore Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003).

¹⁰ On paper shortages see Jeffrey Brooks, “The Breakdown in Production and Distribution of Printed Materials, 1917-1927,” in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, eds. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, & Richard Stites (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹¹ In an article titled “Vodka, Church, and Cinema” from *Pravda*, July 12, 1923, Trotskii wrote that: “in making amusement of collective education...the most important weapon...is at present cinema...The fact that we have so far, i.e. in nearly six years, not taken possession of the cinema shows how slow and uneducated we are, not to say, frankly, stupid.” From *Bolshevik Visions, Part 2*, ed. William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 107.

tastes. So that my work on earth and my battle for happiness will have been fruitful, I need a most intense inner life.’¹²

This passage, in which the revolution addresses the theater with the familiar *ty*, illustrates not only Lunacharskii’s tendency toward rhetorical excess but also his vision of the theater’s versatility as a weapon of class struggle, a means of personal perfection and mass enlightenment, and as simple, welcome diversion. Theater, “the queen of the arts,” was now employed as a jack of all trades. In order to feel the world and itself, to perpetuate consciousness in the political sense, the socialist revolution forged an alliance with the relentlessly innovative Russian theatrical avant-garde. Many playwrights, poets, and directors, for whom the revolution was less a political vocation than an artistic opportunity, found employment in one of the many sections and subsections within the byzantine and sprawling Narkompros. The tension between the purely political and aesthetic, between education and entertainment, was a feature of the cultural debates within the party and society in the 1920s. By the end of the decade such discussion and debate was abruptly discontinued, and wholesome entertainment was distinguished from pernicious “alienation.” Beginning in 1927-28, the latter term was deployed to attack as purely self-indulgent and insipidly “formalistic” much of the theatrical experimentation that Narkompros had sanctioned during the revolution’s first decade. Lunacharskii’s evocation of an unmasking of “mistakes, defects and scars” suggests the logistics of public self-criticism that foreshadows the ritualistic denunciations of the 1930s. In contrast, the notion that “friends and enemies” could appear together on stage and mingle as other than mortal foes was alien to the socialist realist aesthetic dictums of the same period, when “every color in your palette” was shunned in favor of black and white, and enemies were everywhere, especially within.

¹² A.V. Lunacharskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh, tom tretii* [Collected Works in eight volumes, volume three], ed. I.I. Anisimov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1964), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/stanislavskij-teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed October 12, 2014].

My thesis is primarily concerned with tracing the Soviet theater's trajectory from a relatively polyphonic, even kaleidoscopic, fearless art form to a narrower, formulaic one under Stalin at the end of the 1920s. In scrutinizing the bureaucratic machinations and cultural polemics within Narkompros, as well as the public and critical reaction surrounding the production of a few specific plays, I hope to contribute to an understanding of the causes and outcomes of this transformation. In so doing I will address questions about not merely the early Soviet Union's merging of the theatrical and pedagogical spheres, but about the wider political and cultural realms in which they were embedded. Just as with the 1920s as a whole, so the temptation to idealize the artistic liberalism within Narkompros should be resisted. Censorship as well as the persecution, prosecution and arrest of artists began almost immediately after the 1917 revolution. Gabriel Ramensky, who performed in Leningrad theaters before he was incarcerated in the Solovetskii prison camp in the early 1920s, writes that there was never a shortage of playwrights, directors, or actors for the prison's theatrical productions: "trainload after trainload was sent to the concentration camps, containing many intellectuals, writers, directors, etc. They were given a chance to see for themselves and experience at first hand 'authentic socialist realism'."¹³

Significantly, as with education, literature, and the plastic arts, there was no consensus on what the revolutionary theater should be. While bureaucratic disorganization and impotence were early allies of artistic freedom, many members of the avant-garde saw the revolution as a partner

¹³ Gabriel Ramensky, "The Theater in Soviet Concentration Camps", in *Soviet Theaters, 1917-1941: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Martha Bradshaw (New York: Research Program on the USSR, 1954), 235. Ramensky also noted that "criminals eagerly attended and participated in the plays by 'counterrevolutionaries' where they played themselves, the parts of robbers and convicts.", 201. Natalia Kuziakina in *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, trans. Boris M. Meerovich (Newark, NJ: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), writes that at Solovetskii, in addition to signs that said "Work redeems guilt", in the theater they stated, "Work without art is barbarity". Quoted in Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 59.

in cultural and political struggle. Was this “absurdly idealistic,” in Robert Leach’s words?¹⁴ Or, moving beyond questions about the anarchy within Narkompros and Lunacharskii’s own protean temperament, was Bolshevik ideology during the revolution’s first decade similarly malleable? Did the condemnation in 1927 of so-called “formalism” – art for art’s, and not socialism’s, sake – reflect merely Stalin’s consolidation of political power or did it announce an ideological and generational shift? Conversely, to what extent could the roots of this repudiation of experimentation be traced to the very beginning of the Bolshevik regime?

Lunacharskii, a mild Bolshevik as Bolsheviks went, was thus immersed in the contest to create and sustain financially a new Soviet theater that was both artistically appealing and politically palatable to its practitioners, the state, and the audience. He struggled to strike a balance between preservation of traditional theaters, and to delineate – censor – the limits of artistic experimentation explored by avant-garde directors, whose creative momentum originated from the turn of the twentieth century.

The anecdote related by Chukovskii at the beginning of this chapter offers an insight into two aspects of Lunacharskii’s personality. On the one hand he was genial, self-deprecating, and more open to criticism and the exchange of ideas than were commissars to come. On the other hand, Lunacharskii bristled at suggestions that he was soft, and too closely identified with the pre-revolutionary, bourgeois or cosmopolitan Russian intelligentsia, the so-called “former people” (*byvshie liudi*) and that he was not a Bolshevik. He could speak in “sharp notes” and in his combativeness there was quite a bit of the commissar in him after all, as Sultanova discovered. Lunacharskii’s ambiguous position, in which he seemed to compensate for temperamental soft-heartedness with ideological assertiveness, was perhaps the product of the fact that he, like many others – Alexandra Kollontai, Lev Trotskii – came to the Bolsheviks late,

¹⁴ Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1994), xiii.

only after he returned to Russia following the February 1917 revolution. This internal duality was reflected in his position within the bureaucratic hierarchy.¹⁵ From his appointment in 1917 until his resignation on 1929 Lunacharskii, without any prior administrative experience, had to navigate between twin ideological perils: preserving certain potentially subversive cultural traditions left from the old regime on one side, and the tendency toward cultural nihilism expressed by advocates of purely proletarian culture on the other.¹⁶

As the state sought to direct the new Soviet theater from above, thousands of amateur theaters were forming in factories and shops across the embattled Soviet Union, the creation of workers inspired by the promise of creative liberation in political and artistic spheres. This was not an altogether spontaneous activity, however, as the quasi-official group *Proletarskaia Kul`tura*, or Proletkult, itself a pre-revolutionary phenomenon, organized workers' cultural activities according to the principle that the fledgling socialist state should have purely proletarian art forms, uncontaminated by traditional Western or Russian ones modulated by bourgeois tastes. Lunacharskii had been one of the founders of the Proletkult movement before the revolution, and remained sympathetic to the ideas he had helped formulate, yet in his new, official capacity, he found himself in public and bureaucratic battle with the iconoclastic agenda put forward by Proletkult and other champions of the avant-garde. The delicate and doomed (in Lunacharskii's case) balance between freedom and censorship has relevance for the issue of

¹⁵ Victor Serge, living in Moscow in the summer of 1920 while doing administrative work in the Communist International (Comintern) wrote: "Lenin, Trotsky, Karl Radek, and Bukharin had, beyond any doubt, become the brains of the Revolution...Compared with them, Lunacharskii seemed a dilettante: he was a poet, a playwright, and a first-rate speaker, with a touch of vanity, who had translated Hölderlin and acted as the protector of Futurist painters." Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. Adam Hochschild (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), 158. Ironically, Friedrich Hölderlin, writing a century before the Bolshevik Revolution wrote, "What has always made the state a hell on earth has been precisely that man has tried to make it his heaven." Quoted in F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 76.

¹⁶ The word the Bolsheviks themselves used to describe pre-revolutionary cultural and political phenomena was *perezhitki*, "vestiges" or "leftovers."

artistic freedom in Putin's Russian today, as does the question of the state's involvement or interference in the arts in this country.

Inside the Soviet Union, the subject of the life and tenure of the former Commissar of Enlightenment was from the time his death in 1933 until the mid-1950s mostly either suppressed or ignored. From 1956 to 1967, however, approximately sixty articles about Lunacharskii appeared in various Soviet publications. According to Vasilii Ivanov, a scholar of Soviet culture, this re-examination of the 1920s reflected "the ideological battles spawned by the Twentieth Party Congress (in 1956)...when an attempt was made to lead a furious attack on Marxist-Leninist aesthetics in the hope of loosening them up."¹⁷ Lunacharskii's enthusiasm for the theatrical innovations of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, Aleksandr Tairov, and others and his patience with the slow process of forming an authentically proletarian culture were perceived as ideologically flaccid and deviant during Stalin's long reign (1927-53). The Khrushchev Thaw (*Ottepel'*), the politics of de-Stalinization during which much of the previous regime's censorship and repression was reversed and millions of political prisoners were released, was nonetheless a slow and incomplete process.¹⁸ In 1961 – the year before Alexander Solzhenitsyn's dissenting *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published – twenty-four of Lunacharskii's books still appeared on the government's list of titles excluded from libraries and bookstores in

¹⁷ Vasilii Ivanov, "O literaturnykh guppirovkakh i techniiakh 20-kh godov" (On the Literary Groupings and Techniques of the 1920s), *Znamia*, 1958, No.6, 190. Cited in Howard R. Holter, "The Legacy of Lunacharsky and Artistic Freedom in the USSR", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (June, 1970), 262.

¹⁸ Miriam Dobson, in her study of the return of prisoners from the Gulag in the Soviet Union during the first decade after the death of Stalin, writes: "Khrushchev himself did not embrace the word *ottepel'* (thaw), even though he believed he was doing something different from his predecessor. Official texts show no appetite for this metaphor taken from nature, with its implications that the seasons might impose their own cyclical patterns on the Soviet project; in the revolutionary ethos humans transform the natural world, not the other way around." Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 15.

the USSR.¹⁹ Not until late in the Khrushchev regime did the state lift the quarantine on the ideological contagion of the 1920s and on some of its political practitioners like Lunacharskii. Beginning in 1963 with the publication in Moscow of the first volume of Lunacharskii's collected works, books and articles by and about the former commissar began to appear. In 1970 a collection of Lunacharskii's unpublished works were compiled and issued in volume 82 of *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Literary Inheritance).²⁰ By mid-century, perhaps, the 1920s were considered to be sufficiently remote, and the erudite extravagances of Lunacharskii's pronouncements could be safely appropriated and exploited by a more reticent Brezhnev cohort seeking to enhance the curriculum vitae of an ossified Soviet Union. A functional but uncharacteristically reticent version of the former Commissar was promulgated in 1975 when a four-kopeck stamp was issued bearing Lunacharskii's image. Since the early 1960s, in addition to the published collection of his voluminous literary output in eight volumes, a number of biographies of Lunacharskii as well as several histories of Narkompros have appeared in Russian.²¹ These latter have tended to focus on the general organization and specifically

¹⁹ "Knigi Lunacharskogo iz'iatye iz bibliotek v 1961 godu" (Lunacharskii's books Removed from Libraries in 1961), under "Issledovaniia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovaniia/knigi-lunacharskogo-izatyie-iz-bibliotek-v-1961-godu> [accessed October 2, 2014] Among those books was an essay from 1922 entitled "Byvshie liudi. Ocherk istorii partii eserov" (Former people. An Essay on the History of the SR (Socialist-Revolutionary) party), as well as his book *Revolutionary Silhouettes* (1923), which omitted Stalin. In the *Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn writes that he had participated in amateur theatricals in the prison camps. Cited in Steven M. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 85.

²⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Neizdannye materialy: Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, vol. 82, ed. V.R. Sherbina (Unpublished Materials: Literary Inheritance) (Moscow: Nauka, 1970) This volume begins with a quote by Lenin: "To preserve one's inheritance – above all does not mean to be restricted by one's inheritance," a maxim that articulates the aesthetic parameters of Narkompros' first decade.

²¹ These include: P. Lebedev-Poliansky, *A.V. Lunacharskii: K 50-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (A.V. Lunacharskii: On his 50th Birthday) (Moscow, 1926); A. Khalatova, ed. *Pamiati Anatoliiia Vasil'evicha Lunacharskogo: Sbornik statei* (Memories of Anatolii Vasil'evich Lunacharskii: A Collection of Essays) (Moscow, 1935); A. Krivosheeva, *Esteticheskie vzgliady A.V. Lunacharskogo* (The Aesthetic Views of A.V. Lunacharskii) (Moscow and Leningrad, 1939); P. Bugaenko, *A.V. Lunacharskii kak literaturnyi kritik* (A.V. Lunacharskii as Literary Critic) (Saratov, 1960); N. Bychkova and A. Lebedev, *Lunacharskii: Pervyi narkom prosveshcheniia* (Lunacharskii: The First People's Commissar of Enlightenment) (Moscow, 1960); N.A. Semoilova, *Lunacharskii: Borets za sovetskoe iskusstvo* (Lunacharskii: The Struggle for Soviet Art) (Moscow, 1961); I.A. Kairov, *A.V. Lunacharskii – vydaishchiisiiia deiatel' sotsialisticheskogo prosveshcheniia* (A.V. Lunacharskii – Distinguished Statesman of Socialist Enlightenment)

educational activities of Narkompros, leaving mostly unexamined the cultural aspects of the bureaucracy's functions, including the control and financial support of the theater, a central feature of its social and revolutionary ambitions in the first two decades following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Aleksei Shul'pin's *Teatr i revoliutsiia* [Theater and Revolution] from 1975 is an exception, in that he focuses on Lunacharskii's role in shepherding an embryonic proletarian theater.²²

In English, a similar pattern prevails, where Sheila Fitzpatrick's dense and detailed 1970 book, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, describes the formation and subsequent structural and financial challenges Narkompros faced during a time of civil war and deprivation.²³ While she addresses the theatrical concerns of Lunacharskii and his deputies, the emphasis of her book is on organization and education, and its scope is limited to the years 1917-21. Timothy O'Connor's more recent book, itself some twenty years old, is primarily a biography of Lunacharskii. O'Connor's scrutiny of the Commissariat of Enlightenment itself emphasizes the bureaucracy's educational rather than cultural concerns.²⁴ Several articles in English address Lunacharskii's involvement in the theoretical and practical aspects of theater policies during the years in question, but most are either somewhat dated (from the 1960s and 70s) or imbalanced, consisting of either of sweeping historical judgments in miniature (20-30 pages) or collections of

(Moscow, 1966); P.A. Bugaenko, *A.V. Lunacharskii i sovetskaia literaturnaia kritika* (A.V. Lunacharskii and Soviet Literary Criticism) (Saratov, 1972); I.P.Kokhno, *Cherty portreta: stranitsy zhizni i deiatel'nosti A.V. Lunacharskogo* (Features of a Portrait: Pages from the Life and Activities of A.V. Lunacharskii) (Minsk, 1972); Nikoai Piiashev, *Propagandisty leninskoi shkoly* (Propagandists of the Leninist School) (Moscow: Politizdat, 1975); Aleksandr Ovarchenko, *Nash Lunacharskii* (Our Lunacharskii) (Moscow: Pravda, 1976); O. Pavlosvkii, *A. Lunacharskii* (Moscow, 1980); Kn. S.M. Volkonskii, *Moi vospominaniia* (My Remembrances) (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1982); A. Lebedev, *Krasota i iarost' mira* (The Beauty and Fury of the World)(Moscow, 1989); Yurii Borev, *Lunacharskii* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2010);

²² Aleksei Shul'pin, *Teatr i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1975)

²³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970)

²⁴ Timothy Edward O'Connor, *The Politics of Soviet Culture: Anatolii Lunacharskii* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

minutiae without definitive conclusions. Though the secondary source material on Lunacharskii proper in English is sparse, studies of the cultural mutations, dreams, and politics of the Soviet Union during the 1920s are abundant. Yet even books that are devoted to the history of the Soviet theater present Lunacharskii as a sort of disembodied, loquacious presence, pulling the bureaucratic strings, but frustratingly remote.²⁵

An erudite man, Lunacharskii himself was practically graphomaniacal, a disposition reflected in the existence of the aforementioned eight (thick) volumes of his collected works. Much of his writing on the arts and revolution pre-dates 1917. He was also a playwright, whose creative exploits, as he describes them, were primarily a means of relaxation after a hard day's work at Narkompros.²⁶ For all his literary and quasi-literary output, or perhaps because of it, it is difficult to get a grasp on and elucidate the essence of his political and aesthetic ideals, which were evolving and rigid at the same time; perhaps what is elusive is less the quality of his beliefs and intentions, than their efficacy in application. As a devoted and outspoken Marxist and Bolshevik, Lunacharskii's political persuasions and devotions are unambiguous and forthright, yet there is a certain opacity to his many pronouncements, a reflection perhaps of communist-cum-bureaucratic bombast, or the chaos of the early 1920s as the Bolsheviks sought to consolidate power.²⁷ His plays, including Bolshevik renditions of Oliver Cromwell and the Faust

²⁵ These include: Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater: Tradition and the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988); Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russia's Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, trans. from Swedish Charles Rougle (London: The MacMillan Press, 1993); Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

²⁶ In the introduction to his 1919 play *Magi*, Lunacharskii writes that, "The entire play was written at night upon completion of my duties and the labors of the day...it took only eleven such nights to complete the work, which required no further redactions...in spite of the fact that during this time I slept only 3 to 5 hours a night, after this work I would feel unusually rested, as if I had spent time at some sort of health resort." A.V. Lunacharskii, *Magi (Dramaticheskaiia fantaziia)*, in *Dramaticheskii proizvedeniia v 2-x tomakh* [Dramatic Works in 2 volumes] (Moscow: Glavlit, 1923), under "Biblioteka", <http://newgod.su/lib/dramaticheskii-proizvedeniia/magi> [accessed October 15, 2014].

²⁷ An obvious and sustained example of opacity is Lunacharskii's *Remembrances and Impressions* written after he was dispatched from Narkompros in 1929. While some of the descriptions of his childhood and pre-revolutionary

legend, were not widely produced, yet his artistic output offers some insight into his persistently utopian hopes for the revolution and relatively liberal views on the arts, including his so-called *Bogostroitel'stvo* (God-building) schemes (Marxist content in religious form, expressed first in his book "Religion and Socialism" from 1908), something Lenin strenuously disapproved of, and which thus really never took root in mainstream Soviet culture.

In short, there is an abundance of primary and secondary sources in Russian and English, a small part of which documents Lunacharskii's attempts at the bureaucratic and ideological guidance of the theater during the 1920s in the Soviet Union. Although he was the Commissar of Enlightenment from 1917 until 1929, most works either cast him in a supporting role, or he lurks in the background of books and essays that deal primarily with the cultural or intellectual history of the first decade after the Bolshevik Revolution. By reading and reorganizing this same secondary literature, in combination with the writings of Lunacharskii and other primary sources, I aim to bring to the fore Lunacharskii's ability or impotence to control the Soviet theater. My thesis examines the Soviet theater through the lens of Lunacharskii and his intellectual brethren, in combination with the creative and revolutionary ferment from below, from the perspective of his Proletkult antagonists; many scholars view this as a top-down, bottom-up battle. A strict dichotomy of "above and below" is misshapen, however, for Proletkult and various popular theaters were as much on the margins, both geographically and politically, as they were subservient to Narkompros. It is also too exact, insofar as a binary analysis does not encompass the entire political and cultural hierarchy, where Lunacharskii is perhaps more precisely located

imprisonments are revealing, he is much more circumspect about events and actors after 1917. A good example of Lunacharskii's bombast is an article "Teatr i revoliutsiia" (there are seemingly hundreds of books and articles in Russian with this same title, *Theater and Revolution*) written for a German magazine in 1920 and collected in volume 3 of his *Complete Works*. "We have completely banished the lascivious farce and mish-mash, the narrow-minded, philistine waste of time. We have banished plays that are patriotic fanfare, and have almost completely banished plays for more or less vulgar appetites. Our repertoire will be Russian and foreign – classical. There are as yet few new plays, but they are noble plays."

in the middle, between Bolshevik leaders for whom cultural battles were a diversion and distraction, and the mostly invisible – in terms of the sources – masses.

My thesis consists of three distinct but interconnected parts, in which I will try to demonstrate the following: 1) The best (in creative terms) part of the Theatrical Department (TEO) of Narkompros' work was accomplished in spite of the Soviet regime. The notion of "the best" is of course subjective and therefore problematic, but I define and use it in terms of individual theaters' independence and artistic freedom, and their continuation of pre-revolutionary avant-garde forms, in contrast to the officially contrived and enforced socialist realist aesthetics instituted at the beginning of the 1930s; 2) While Lunacharskii was in charge of Narkompros, and thus exerted control over theatrical output, he was an agent of moderation and relative toleration. Personally devoted to Lenin and the revolutionary cause, he nonetheless incurred the Communist establishment's dissatisfaction over the course of his tenure at Narkompros through his protection and encouragement of "Leftist" artists, especially the irrepressible Meierkhol'd. The notion of Lunacharskii as a relatively benevolent and beneficent commissar is not original, but by challenging and unravelling this assumption, I will argue that Lunacharskii's celebrated official moderation concealed a tragic – insofar as he did not acknowledge it – intellectual and moral muddle. Lunacharskii combined sincerity and duplicity, gullibility and cynicism, where he could be obliging in some areas and militant in others. In Richard Stites' words, Lunacharskii stood "bestride the duality", but the dichotomy was not simply between conciliatory commissar and confrontational official policy. Instead, the unconscious and unreconciled conflict inside Lunacharskii – manifest as the "combativeness" that Chukovskii noted – was exacerbated by his desire to satisfy multiple, often irreconcilable

interests. I will show that his reputation for toleration, the corollary of this equivocal moderation, was diluted by personal powerlessness, inattention, or self-regard. 3) The number of theaters and studios multiplied at an incredible rate after the revolution, in spite of civil war, starvation and typhus, a devastating counterexample to the Marxist notion that “being determines consciousness”. I hope to answer the question of how the national mania for theater prevailed during these devastated years. Within the wider context of Soviet history, my thesis will make a contribution to solving the “intellectual puzzle” of how the polyphonic, culturally exuberant period of the 1920s in Russia became by the end of the decade Stalinist senescence and uniformity.²⁸

My thesis then looks at both the theater from the top down, from the perspective of Lunacharskii and other members of the intelligentsia, as well – to the extent possible – from the level of the inscrutable masses. I maintain that for both groups, the theater was in part simple escapism: for the intellectuals it had the appeal of a vision of an artificial, ideal life, while for the idealized proletariat, revolutionary theater offered the prospect of the theater and its enchantments as the “people’s property.” The theater was also propagandistic pedagogy, revolutionary agitation, and aesthetic fulfillment. The overall arc of my thesis reflects the rise and fall of revolutionary theater, the tragedy of ruined hopes. I will take a chronological approach through all five chapters.

The first chapter will include a brief biographical sketch of Lunacharskii, in which I will outline his influences, interests, and activities before the revolution in 1917, including the cultural context and ferment during the twilight of the Russian autocracy. Chapter one will also describe Lunacharskii’s promotion to Commissar of Enlightenment, and give an overview of the

²⁸ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 8. The full quote from his introduction reads: “How the Bolshevik Revolution, premised as it was on the destruction of class enemies...was transformed into a ravenous god who devoured his own children has been one of the most compelling intellectual puzzles of the twentieth century.”

cultural debates and organizational struggles within a fledgling Narkompros. In chapters two through five, which encompass the 12 years of Lunacharskii's tenure at Narkompros, I will use four plays as focal points to explore how their form and content, the controversies surrounding their production, and the public's reaction to them, explain and reflect the larger political and cultural disputes of the moment.

In the second chapter I will use Meierkhol'd's 1920 production of the Belgian Symbolist playwright Emile Verhaeren's *Dawn* to examine Lunacharskii's early tenure as Commissar of Enlightenment and the dilemma he faced trying to accommodate the "leftist" impulses of Proletkult and others with the relatively conservative ideology of less abrupt cultural transformation promulgated by both him and Vladimir Lenin. This chapter looks at the theater in the first few years – until 1920 – after the Bolshevik Revolution both from above, through the lens of Lunacharskii and other intellectuals of his ilk, as well as from below, from the perspective of his Proletkult antagonists. While Meierkhol'd was not a member of the Proletkult, he was briefly in charge of the Theater Section of Narkompros, where he advocated for a revolutionary theater through the radical program of "Theatrical October."

Meierkhold's production of Verhaeren's *Dawn* took place on the eve of great changes. The New Economic Policy was still a few months away, and two years later the 12th Congress of the Communist Party in 1923 would attempt to further subjugate the Soviet theater in an effort to make it a means of communist and anti-religious propaganda. Following the Congress, Lunacharskii developed Lenin's slogan of "new content in old form." According to Lunacharskii, "classic artistic realism is the most suitable form for new theater, but into this

suitable form one must pour new content.”²⁹ The content of *Dawn* was suitably socialist, though subject to the contortions of Meierkhold’s politically dubious forms.

In chapter three I will examine the acceptable themes and subjects for the theater during the heyday of NEP using Alexander Tairov’s 1925 staging of G.B. Shaw’s *St. Joan* as a lens. Lunacharskii’s preference for “old forms” in the theater was less a matter of ideology than necessity as there was almost a complete absence of Soviet playwrights and subjects for plays during the first decade after the Revolution. The Symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok, in charge of the repertoire subsection of TEO, advocated for exploiting the classics alone for the purpose of building the new Soviet State. Narkompros sanctioned a number of Soviet historical plays, early examples of the manipulation of history, many based on the presumably proto-proletarian uprisings of Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev in the 17th and 18th centuries. Around this same time, Lunacharskii had one of his own plays, *Oliver Cromwell*, produced. The play was attacked by Marxist critics who claimed that Lunacharskii had glorified the individual leader. In addition to Tairov’s Kamernyi Theater, other professional theaters – including the Maly, and the several studios of the Moscow Arts Theater – a huge number of new theaters, countless amateur groups, theaters in farms and factories (and labor camps) formed, the advent of a seemingly new age of Russian drama. Witnessing this theatrical efflorescence, Lunacharskii wrote that the regime had to be patient until new playwrights came forth with Soviet plays.

Chapter four explores the Soviet regime’s increasing intolerance for both so-called “formalism” and insufficiently socialist content in the theater through the controversy and resolution of Stanislavskii’s Moscow Arts Theater 1926 staging of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Days of the Turbins*. The play, which Walter Benjamin found dreadful, was based on Bulgakov’s novel

²⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, *O teatre i dramaturgii.*, Vol I. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1958).

The White Guard about the “White” (anti-Bolshevik) Turbin family during the Civil War.³⁰ Like Lunacharskii’s *Cromwell*, the characters were individuals with psychological depth. Yet Marxist critics attacked *Days of the Turbins* and Bulgakov as “right-wing,” “bourgeois,” and “anti-revolutionary” and the play was banned after the first performance. Perhaps because Stanislavskii’s and Bulgakov’s aversion to radical avant-garde experimentation aligned with his own conservative aesthetic tastes Stalin intervened on Bulgakov’s behalf; afterwards the play was staged continuously until 1941. Until the end of the 1920s, Soviet audiences and theaters were able to resist the official dissemination of plays, where audiences effectively boycotted the officially propagated theatrical repertoire. While in the 1930s, 40s and 50s the Moscow Arts Theater was presented as the apotheosis of socialist realism, during the 1920s critics attacked it as well for perpetuating “bourgeois ideology” or being “overladen with Bulgakovism.” Lunacharskii joined in the chorus, writing that the studios of the Moscow Arts Theater “lack not only any kind of social or philosophical ideology, but even an ideology of the theater.”³¹

In chapter five I return to Meierkhol’d and his 1928 production of Alexander Griboedov’s 19th-century classic *Woe to Wit* to examine the demise of experimentation. Throughout the first decade of the Soviet theater, Meierkhol’d, Tairov, and others were brilliantly experimental, and were mostly free to be so, but their accomplishments were always attacked by Soviet dramatic critics and the Communist Party as “decadent” and “bourgeois.” In this chapter I will sketch Meierkhol’d’s theatrical experiments in constructivism and biomechanics. Meierkhol’d staged many of the classics, including Gogol’s *The Government*

³⁰ Benjamin writes: “Bulgakov’s play itself was an absolutely revolting provocation...The communist opposition to the production is justified and significant...(The audience was noticeably different from the ones I had seen in the two other theaters. It was if there were not a single communist present, not a black or blue tunic in sight.)” Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 25.

³¹ Nikolai Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 283.

Inspector, which Marxist critics faulted as being “anti-social” and “formalistic”. His productions of Vladimir Maiakovskii’s *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* satirized the Soviet bureaucracy, and while the Soviet regime didn’t murder Meierkhol’d until 1940, these ideological transgressions began the process of his ostracization.

What had changed between Meierkhold’s 1920 and 1928 productions? The Bolsheviks ultimately decided they didn’t need theater as “pure art,” and creative freedom and artistic independence were now considered dangerous. In contrast to Lunacharskii’s Revolution-theater dialogue cited earlier in this chapter, the Revolution no longer required that the theater be omnipotent. Furthermore, the Revolution could no longer just sit back “in a comfortable chair” and enjoy the theater, but sought to direct and guide it. The leaders of the Soviet Union determined that a primitive, simplified art form was understood and needed by the masses. The 1927 CPSU conference on theater was a turning point in the trajectory of the Soviet theater and Lunacharskii’s career as Commissar. Here it was decided that *every theater* must serve the proletarian revolution, and the basic criterion of a theater’s value was the political importance of the works performed. Several delegates expressed anti-Lunacharskian sentiment, saying that the theater was to be used for propaganda alone. The conference proposed that the propagandistic theater was to be executed with “Soviet artistry.”³²

By the end of the 1920s, according to the official Bolshevik line, theater, like all art, was merely an ideological superstructure built upon and dependent on the economic base. And , in turn, maintaining the base. The theater therefore necessarily reflected and was a weapon of class ideology for the purpose of revolutionary action. After 1927 the party enforced a new compulsory repertoire of Soviet plays, and Marxist criticism was consolidated in the pages of the periodical *Sovetskii Teatr*. Upon Lunacharskii’s departure in 1929, the control of the theater

³² Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, 271.

moved from diverse bureaus within Narkompros to centralized control under the Agitprop bureaucracy until after World War II when Narkompros became the Ministry of Education. In the late 1920s, industrialization took precedence over culture and education and Narkompros was financially constrained relative to other agencies. A cartoon from the period shows a bent-over and emaciated old woman asking for alms: the beggar bears the label Narkompros.³³

³³ Michael David-Fox, "The Assault on the Universities and the Dynamics of Stalin's 'Great Break', 1928-1932", in *Academia in Upheaval*, eds. Michael David-Fox and Gyorgy Peteri (London: Information Age Publishing, 2008), 81.



ПЛАКАТ — ОБЪЯВЛЕНИЕ О ЛЕКЦИИ ЛУНАЧАРСКОГО «В ЦАРСТВЕ СОЦИАЛИЗМА»
Выступление состоялось 11/24 ноября 1917 г. в цирке «Модерн» в Петрограде



Lunacharskii & Lenin



Lunacharskii & Gorkii

Chapter 1: *Marxism in Special Attire: The Early Life and Times of Lunacharskii*

“A very good time in my life, perhaps its spiritual climax”

Anatolii Vasil’evich Lunacharskii was born November 23, 1875 in the city of Poltava in what is now central Ukraine. His father was Aleksandr Ivanovich Antonov, a state councilor in the tsarist civil service, yet Lunacharskii bore the surname of his mother’s first husband from whom she was not divorced, a reflection of contemporary family law, in which the husband had practically absolute authority, a patriarchal order that was only beginning to unravel at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁴ From 1926, in material provided by Lunacharskii to a request from the Lenin Institute for clarification about several details of his biography, the future Commissar wrote: “From my father, who in spite of his important post was inclined to radicalism, I received my first push toward atheism and radical-democratic politics.”³⁵ Lunacharskii grew up and attended schools in Kiev, where a youth movement of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) was beginning to form. He joined this illegal organization at the age of 15, setting in motion a lifetime of revolutionary agitation and subsequent series of arrests. In an *Autobiographical Sketch* that Lunacharskii wrote in Florence in 1907, he recalled that, “At the age of 7-8, under the influence of my elders, I proudly called myself a ‘liberal’, hated Katkov³⁶. With reverence I uttered the word ‘revolution’...By 1891, I was already a ‘Marxist’ and with caution I read the then illegal works of Engels, Kautskii, and the first volume of *Capital* by Marx.”³⁷

³⁴ Barbara Alpern Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2011), 3.

³⁵ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Avtobiografiia Lunacharskogo v institut Lenina*, under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/lenin-i-lunacharskij/avtobiografiia-lunacharskogo-v-institut-lenina> [accessed November 3, 2014]. Lunacharskii submitted his *Sketch* for inclusion in a proposed, but unrealized *Dictionary of Writers*.

³⁶ Mikhail Katkov (1818-1887) was a conservative journalist, editor of the *Moscow News* (1863-87), and opponent of what he viewed as the socialistic and nihilistic excesses of Liberalism during the reforms of Tsar Alexander III.

³⁷ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Avtobiograficheskaia zametka*, under “Avtobiograficheskie materialy”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/avtobiograficheskie-materialy#TOC—2> [accessed November 4,

An indifferent student, and thus prevented from entering Russia's prestigious universities, Lunacharskii persuaded his mother to allow him to study in Zurich. In his *Autobiographical Sketch*, Lunacharskii writes that, "In Zurich after high school, I got to know Pavel Borisovich Akesel'rod, who strengthened my sympathy for Marxism, deepened my knowledge, and opened my mind to questions of political tactics."³⁸ In Zurich, Lunacharskii also met the Marxist theoretician Georgii Plekhanov (1856-1918), one of the founders of the RSDLP. Lunacharskii later recalled that Plekhanov introduced him to the writings of Johann Fichte and Friedrich Schelling, which began a "lifelong love and admiration for German idealism; these great Idealists changed not just my philosophy, but entire personality."³⁹ Plekhanov bestowed on Lunacharskii one of his more enduring nicknames: "*blazhennyi* (blissful) Anatolii." Lunacharskii writes that as a student in Switzerland, "Art and religion were at the center of my attention, not as an aesthete, but as a Marxist."⁴⁰ Describing Lunacharskii's intellectual disposition and influences, Lev Trotskii (1879-1940) wrote in 1934 that, "Lunacharskii was about five years younger than Lenin, and about that much older than me. The unacknowledged difference in age was not of great significance to me, however it did reflect two distinct revolutionary generations. Entering into political life while in high school in Kiev, Lunacharskii was very much under the

2014]. Karl Johann Kautskii (1854-1938) was a Czech-German philosopher, journalist, and Marxist theoretician, sometimes called the "Pope of Marxism." After the 1917 Revolution, Kautskii criticized Bolshevik excesses.

³⁸ Ibid. Pavel Akseľ'rod (1850-1928) was a Menshevik and co-founder in Zurich with Georgii Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich of the group Emancipation of Labor. Lunacharskii goes on to describe in more detail this early intellectual and spiritual epiphany that foreshadowed his 'heretical' philosophy of God-building: "A higher perspective began to open up before me, and I divined a synthesis...could there be some conception of a totality: roughly sensual, utilitarian, aesthetic, ethical – all from the same root? And approaching this from the point of view of my 'faith' in scientific socialism, I already anticipated that this idea was inseparably connected with the entire religious development of mankind, that this synthesis was the ripest fruit from this tree, growing from the same root of elementary suffering and delight."

³⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sovetskaia Rossiia", 1968), 22. For a discussion of German Idealism and its influence in pre-revolutionary Russia see: Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the 19th Century Intelligentsia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011)

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

influence of the earlier terrorist exploits of the ‘People’s Will’ against tsarism. For me and my close contemporaries, the struggles of the ‘People’s Will’ were already in the past.”⁴¹

Lunacharskii returned to Russia in 1898 and, while living in Moscow in 1899, he and his circle of Social Democrats were betrayed. He was arrested and accused of “conducting criminal propaganda.”⁴² Lunacharskii was sentenced to eight months of solitary confinement in a prison in Tagan, western Siberia, where, assisted by a stipend from his mother, he was allowed to read and write poetry, essays, and plays. He described that confinement as “a very good time in my life, perhaps its spiritual climax.”⁴³ After his release from prison, Lunacharskii went to live with his mother in Kiev, but, as he writes: “In Kiev I gave lectures on a series of philosophical themes, and during the course of one of these, dedicated to Ibsen, I was arrested along with the audience.”⁴⁴ Following a brief period of confinement, Lunacharskii was assigned to live in the specifically non-university city of Kaluga just south of Moscow. Although there was no university there, Kaluga was a hotbed of Marxist activity.⁴⁵ In Kaluga, which he described as a “small Athens,” Lunacharskii participated in the production and staging of plays in factories, where he remarked on a certain curious incongruity: ostensibly proletarian theater was being

⁴¹ Lev Trotskii, *Portrety Revoliutsionerov: Sbornik*, ed. Yu. G. Fel’shtinskii (Moscow: Mosk. rabochii, 1991), under “Trotskii o Lunacharskom”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/trockij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed September 24, 2014] The People’s Will, or *Narodnaia Volia*, was a Russian terrorist organization notorious for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

⁴² A. Ermakov, *A. Lunacharskii*, (Moscow: Novosti Press, 1975), 15.

⁴³ Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia*, 25. There exists a whole literary genre of prison experiences in Russia. The Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles published the journal “Hard labor and Exile” in the 1920s; the Society ceased to exist in 1935.

⁴⁴ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Avtobiograficheskaia zametka*, under “Avtobiograficheskie materialy”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/avtobiograficheskie-materialy#TOC—2> [accessed November 4, 2014]

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

performed for the wealthy owners and their guests, though admission prices excluded the actual proletariat.⁴⁶

Lunacharskii was arrested again in 1902, and this time was sentenced to internal exile. He was given a choice of several provincial cities in which to serve his sentence, and his friend Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873-1928) invited him to the northern city of Vologda where a large colony of political exiles were living, including a number of people Lunacharskii had known in Kiev. Bogdanov (born Aleksandr Malinovskii), was a founder of the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP, and was educated as a physician and psychiatrist; Bogdanov died in 1928 as the result of a blood transfusion during the course of one of his own experiments in human rejuvenation. In Vologda they lived together in a large house attached to a psychiatric hospital where Bogdanov worked. Writing in the journal *Segodnia* (Today) in January, 1934 after Lunacharskii's death the previous fall, the Russian writer Aleksandr Vasil'evich Amfiteatrov (1862-1938), who emigrated from the USSR in 1920, observed that, "The tsarist government with great stupidity decided that exile to barren Vologda and Tot'ma would take Lunacharskii away from his natural elements. Instead, this exile introduced him to revolutionary activists and thus gave him the ability to imagine himself as such an activist and as a horribly dangerous revolutionary."⁴⁷ It was perhaps more canny than "stupid" to round up and concentrate political dissidents in a single location, the better for the state security and surveillance apparatus to monitor them.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27. Trotsky writes in his memoirs how he was able to escape from prison in Siberia thanks to a play put on by guards of the prison – the drama had utterly absorbed them. Cited in Nina Gourfinkel, *Theatre Russe Contemporain* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1931), 114.

⁴⁷ A.V. Amfiteatrov, "Blazhen Muzh Anatolii", *Segodnia*, No. 19 (Jan., 1934), under "Amfiteatrov o Lunacharskom", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/amfiteatrov-o-lunacharskom> [accessed September 24, 2014]

In Vologda, Lunacharskii married Bogdanov's sister Anna Malinovskaia (1883-1959), and while living there they acquired their first revolutionary pseudonyms: Aniutin and Aniuta.⁴⁸ He also began a long, close friendship and professional association with Bogdanov, who with Lunacharskii formulated the early principles of proletarian culture, later embodied in Proletkult. This close collaboration between the two young revolutionaries continued up to 1917, and was marked by a definite division of labor, where theory was Bogdanov's strength while Lunacharskii excelled at rhetoric and creative expression. In works published together, Bogdanov wrote articles on philosophy, Lunacharskii on art and literature. In the opinion of I.A. Lapina, "There was a slight creative envy on Lunacharskii's part, and the family relationship prevented him from accurately evaluating the scale of his friend's personality. Toward his sister, Bogdanov related with condescending irony, he assumed the role of protector, yet often interfered with his wife's family affairs."⁴⁹ In his 1934 article in *Segodnia*, Amfiteatrov writes that, "In the pre-revolutionary period, when we crossed paths, Lunacharskii reminded me of an idealistic student: living modestly, more satisfied with books than food, and married to such a sweet student, Anna Aleksandrovna Malinovskaia, the sister of the well-known Marxist Bogdanov...there wasn't the least whiff of the Bolshevik about him."⁵⁰ Trotskii, whose pre-

⁴⁸ I.A. Lapina, "Emigratsiia i provinstiia: 1909-1916", under "Issledovaniia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/issledovaniia/emigratsiia-i-provincia> [accessed November 7, 2014] Some of Lunacharskii's other Party nicknames included: "Voinov" (warrior), "Minosets" (destroyer), "Legkomyslennyi" (frivolous), "Budda" (Buddha), "Galërka" (gallery). His real surname was itself a something of a riddle, where his mother's first husband's grandfather, the Poltava merchant Fedor Charnoluskii, followed the common Russian practice of giving illegitimate offspring the father's last name – with the letters transposed. According to Lapina, "Aniuta" was a dreamer and emotional, a lover of romantic novels, and delighted with the "new philosophy of life" she discovered in Vologda. Writing to her sister about the presumably still benighted majority of Russians she said: "It is true of course, that these days the majority of people are weak, and live that way physically and spiritually."

⁴⁹ Ibid. Lapina writes that "it is difficult to assess the source of Lunacharskii's philosophical attitudes...but it is well known that he liked the French materialists of the 18th century, especially Diderot, enjoyed the German idealists, Kant, Fichte, Schilling, and Hegel, and supported popular ideas both foreign – Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, Marx – and domestic – Bogdanov, Plekhanov, Lenin."

⁵⁰ Amfiteatrov, "Blazhen Muzh Anatloii," under "Amfiteatrov o Lunacharskom", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/bio/amfiteatrov-o-lunacharskom> [accessed July 3, 2014].

revolutionary paths did not intersect with Lunacharskii's as early or often, offers a slightly different view: "[Lunacharskii] endured prisons, emigration, yet remained an unwavering Marxist. From those long years thousands of his compatriots from noble or bourgeois circles defected to the camp of Ukrainian nationalism, bourgeois liberalism, or monarchical reaction. For Lunacharskii the idea of revolution was not a youthful enthusiasm: it entered into his nervous and circulatory systems."⁵¹

Lunacharskii was 26 when he arrived in Vologda, and his sojourn there marked the beginning of his career as journalist and pamphleteer.⁵² The newspaper *Severnyi Krai* (Northern Region) hired Lunacharskii as a correspondent to report on the cultural life of Vologda, including the theatrical season of 1902-03. The Vologda repertoire was, in Lunacharskii's words: "Like two drops of water resembling the usual, not especially elevated repertoire of provincial theaters."⁵³ Lunacharskii did not confine his reviews to information about the staging and actors' performances, but mused about general questions of philosophy and literature. Like Maxim Gorkii (1868-1936), with whom he had become close, Lunacharskii saw the path for the revival of the dramatic arts through melodrama. Although he felt that this genre had been vulgarized by the bourgeoisie, Lunacharskii asserted that this "elevated and enthralling romantic art was above all required by the contemporary spectator," and he was ready to forgive its shortcomings.⁵⁴ In February of 1903 Lunacharskii's job at *Severnyi Krai* came to an abrupt end as a result of a public dispute with the officials of the *guberniia* (governorate, or principal political subdivision

⁵¹ Trotskii, *Portrety revoliutsionerov: Sbornik*, ed. Yu. G. Fel'shtinskii (Moscow: Mosk. Rabochii, 1991), under "Trotskii o Lunacharskom", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/trockij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed September 24, 2014]

⁵² I.P. Kokhno, "Vologodskaia ssylka Lunacharskogo", under "Biografiia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/vologodskaia-ssylka-lunacharskogo> [accessed November 6, 2014]

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

of the Russian Empire), who had grown nervous about Lunacharskii's outspokenness. Writing anonymously in the paper's January 20, 1903 edition, Lunacharskii observed that: "Although the [unnamed] play was for the workers, the majority of the audience consisted of either functionaries or their friends, and the workers sat only in the back rows, or stood in the corners."⁵⁵ In a letter to the same newspaper, the local government responded that, "Appreciation of the theater isn't affected by whether the spectator is in the first or the tenth row. Of course the workers occupied the last rows, because to force them to sit in front would be unreasonable, pointless, and naïve."⁵⁶ Reluctantly, Lunacharskii had the last word: "[The government's] efforts to portray this as a private matter is very typical, and society should be very concerned with the fact that at great expense the excise department uses these spectacles as an example of the fight against drunkenness, the so-called development of a new types of art, as well as the satisfaction of already existing cultural requirements."⁵⁷ Lunacharskii signed his final column using his full name.

Soon thereafter, in March of 1903, Lunacharskii's period of exile in Tot'ma began. Tot'ma was a small town of almost 5,000 souls located in Vologda *guberniia*. In contrast with Vologda, where Lunacharskii had enjoyed the youthful atmosphere of debates and new friendships, Tot'ma was, for a man of his gregariously revolutionary temperament, a fairly godforsaken place: surrounded by forests and swamps, on the banks of the Sukhona River and far from the railway line. As A. Dudina, a former typist for the local zemstvo, recalled in the 1930s: "I got to know Anatolii Vasil'evich and his wife Anna Aleksandrovna when they lived on Sovetskaia (then Stretenskaia) Street. They occupied two small rooms and a kitchen. It was simple but tidy. The wife was always well-dressed...and she participated with success in amateur

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

plays at the club, where we both performed in works by Ostrovskii and others. Anatolii Vasil'evich was the house director.”⁵⁸

“Subjectively, it seemed I was doing the Party a service”

In May of the following year, Lunacharskii was freed from police supervision, and he and his wife were allowed to leave Tot'ma, taking a steamer up the Sukhona River to Vologda, and then by rail to Kiev. Lunacharskii soon left for Paris, where he first met Lenin, and later lived in Geneva where together they worked together on the newspapers *Vpered (Forward)* and *Proletarii*. He and Lenin grew close, and after Lunacharskii returned to Russia, Lenin wrote to him in August of 1905, saying that “It’s difficult for us to work without your steady and close cooperation. It’s true, the newspaper still goes on, but it’s nothing remarkable.”⁵⁹

Following the Revolution of 1905, which led to the creation of a constitution, the legal framework of a compromise whereby the Russian autocrat would in principle share power with a legislative body, the State Duma, the tsarist government arrested and imprisoned Lunacharskii once again, after which he left Russia for France and Italy, and remained abroad until 1917. In 1907, Lunacharskii’s essay on aesthetic theory, “The Tasks of Social Democratic Artistic Creation” was printed in *Vestnik zhizni (Messenger of Life)*, a legal publication of the Bolshevik Party in St. Petersburg. Lunacharskii’s manifesto was directed against the notion that art could or should be purely apolitical; a stance he backed away from somewhat as Commissar, but one that manifested itself in proto-Stalinist attacks – in which he was collateral damage – against so-called “formalism” – art devoid of socialist content – at the end of the 1920s. He argued that in the future, artists would ally themselves with the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ V.R. Shcherbina, ed., *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo: Neizdannye Materialy*, vol. 82 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Nauka”, 1971) under “Obshchie Voprosy Kul'tury i Isskustva”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/obsie-voprosy-kul'tury-i-isskustva>. [accessed April 10, 2014].

Lunacharskii wrote, “Turn your back on the world if you like – the bourgeoisie have nothing against that. Only don’t smash it, they will congratulate you for that... Without the proletariat, the artist’s only choice is between open acceptance of shameful reality and a life of futile protest.”⁶⁰

While living in Paris, Lunacharskii attended a Social-Democrat conference in Stuttgart in 1907. Writing to his wife on August 18, he said that, “I saw everybody yesterday, Lenin, Bazarov... Trotskii is frighteningly conservative and a Germanophile to his bones. Vladimir Il’ich and I get along extremely well, while he scolds Bebel’ and the others.” In a letter sent the next day, Lunacharskii wrote: “Rosa Luxembourg invited me to collaborate on the *Neue Zeit*, contributing the occasional article on philosophy, but she can’t pay me.” A letter from August 21st provides a glimpse of Lunacharskii’s irrepressible urge to debate anyone anywhere, anytime: “I have just returned from a party that the Germans invited us to, hoping to come home to a letter from you. Why don’t you write? I write and write. At the party Lenin was merry, or at least made it appear that he was, and while everybody drank and danced, I was bored. I went about trying to engage people in theoretical debates, but in the end there was only this: wine, toasts, and the noise of black coffee being sipped. What would you have thought?”⁶¹

In 1909, the Bolshevik Party was split when Bogdanov denounced Lenin’s strategy of combining illegal and legal means – including cooperating with the Duma – as insufficiently radical and therefore ineffective. The pro-Bogdanov group left and formed the Vpered Party, with which Lunacharskii allied himself.⁶² Trotskii observed that, “All his life Lunacharskii submitted to the influence of people, often less knowledgeable and talented than he, but of

⁶⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, *A.V. Lunacharskii Sobranie sochinenii v vos’mi tomakh*, vol. 7, ed. I.I Anisimov (Moscow, 1967), under “Kul’turnye Zadachi Rabocheho Klassa”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-7/kulturnye-zadaci-rabochego-klassy> [accessed April 10, 2014].

⁶¹ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Iz pisem Lunacharskogo k zhene*, under “Biblioteka” <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/lenin-i-lunacharskij/iz-pisem-lunacharskogo-k-zhene> [accessed October 16, 2014]

⁶² Ermakov, A. *Lunacharskii* (Moscow: Novosti Press, 1975), 33.

stronger constitution. He came to Bolshevism through his old friend Bogdanov...this same Bogdanov, who after the havoc of the 1905 revolution, pulled Lunacharskii away from the Bolsheviks toward a small, ultra-uncompromising group which combined sectarian ‘non-recognition’ of triumphant counterrevolution with abstract preaching of ‘proletarian culture’, prepared in a laboratory.”⁶³ Bogdanov and Lenin also had very different ideas on both the significance and development of culture within socialism, in relation to the economic and political spheres. Lenin emphasized political action, and followed Marx in thinking of culture as part of the superstructure that reflected the economic base. Bogdanov’s philosophy was a revision of Marx, in that he thought cultural change was supreme, and would precede economic and political transformations. To him, socialism *was* proletarian culture, and believed that the latter would lead to the real revolution.⁶⁴ Writing in 1918 in *On Proletarian Culture*, Bogdanov declared that, “Art is not only more far-reaching than science, it has always been more powerful than science as a weapon for the organization of the masses, because the language of living symbols is nearer and more comprehensible to the masses.”⁶⁵

This ideological and tactical disagreement reflected a difference in aesthetic tastes, in that Lenin was quite conservative, telling Clara Zetkin in 1920 that, “I cannot value the works of expressionism, cubism, futurism, and other isms as the highest expressions of artistic genius. I don’t understand them. They give me no pleasure...Why turn away from real beauty and discard it for good as the starting point for further development just because it is ‘old’? Why worship the

⁶³ Trotsky, *Portrety revoliutsionerov: Sbornik*, ed. Yu. G. Fel’shtinskii (Moscow: Mosk. Rabochii, 1991), <http://luncharsky.newgod.su/bio/trockij-o-luncharskom> [accessed September 24, 2014]

⁶⁴ Timothy Edward O’Connor, *The Politics of Soviet Culture*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 9.

⁶⁵ Aleksandr Bogdanov, *O proletarskoi kul’ture: 1904-1924* (On Proletarian Culture: 1904-1924), (Leningrad & Moscow: Kniga, 1924), under “Rossiskaia Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka”, <http://dlib.rsl.ru/viewer/01003385705#?page=119> [accessed December 3, 2014].

new as a god to be obeyed, just because it is ‘new’?”⁶⁶ Bogdanov on the other hand, considered the cultural artifacts of Western Civilization, new and old, to be a hindrance to the creation of the new proletarian world.⁶⁷ In *On Proletarian Culture* he declared: “Art is part of the ideology of a class, an element of its class-consciousness, hence an organized form of class life, a means of uniting and welding together class forces.”⁶⁸

Improbably, in 1909, the *Vpered* faction of the RSDLP, which included Bogdanov, Lunacharskii, and Maxim Gorkii, set up a university for workers, or the “Highest Party School on the Isle of Capri.”⁶⁹ According to Bogdanov, the proletarian universities were necessary to reorganize workers’ consciousness, and the working class “must establish the wholeness of thought before it can establish the wholeness of society.”⁷⁰ In remembrances in celebration of the 35th jubilee of Gorkii’s literary career published in the October 30, 1927 edition of the journal *Ogonek*, Lunacharskii evoked the atmosphere of the island retreat while omitting much of the detail of the school’s curriculum or pedagogical ambitions.⁷¹ The school on Capri and another in

⁶⁶ Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (New York, 1934), under “Marxists Internet Archive”, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1924/reminiscences-of-lenin.htm> [accessed April 10, 2014]

⁶⁷ O’Connor, *The Politics of Soviet Culture*, 9.

⁶⁸ Bogdanov, *O Proletarskoi Kulture*, under “Rossiiskaia Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka”, <http://dlib.rsl.ru/viewer/01003386705#?page=124> [accessed December 3, 2014].

⁶⁹ Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia*, 44-45. For a description of the pedagogical pursuits of *Vpered* see Jutta Scherrer, “Les ecoles du Parti de Capri et Bologne: La formation de l’intelligentsia du parti”, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 19 (1978), 259-284.

⁷⁰ Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Padenie velikogo fetizizma* (The Downfall of the Great Fetish). Cited in John Eric Marot, “Politics and Philosophy in Russian Social Democracy: Aleksandr Bogdanov and the Sociotheoretical Foundations of ‘Vpered’” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 33, No. 3 &4 (Sept.-Dec., 1991), 263-284.

⁷¹ Lunacharskii’s prose is fairly impressionistic – not to say expressionistic for its black and white tones – and contains hints of his future vocation in the Commissariat of Enlightenment: “I recall several evenings when on the lamp-lit terrace, from which on every side flew an enormous quantity of moths, Gorkii, either sitting in an easy chair or striding back and forth on his long legs, with his face stern as if he were angry and his eyes disappearing within himself, recounted about his past. About his wanderings in Moldavia, about how he was beaten nearly to death by *muzhiks* (peasants), about how the Black Sea-Caucasus region had moved him to the depths of his soul, about his teachers, from his ABCs to Leninist wisdom...It was something in the nature of *A Thousand and One Nights*, but these were not tales, but true stories from life. And in reality one could sit and listen and listen, and it seemed as if around Gorkii’s ‘lantern’ flew not only moths, but hungry human attention (*vnimanie*). I always had the sensation as if Gorkii’s speech was illuminated, like a flickering but fiery light beneath the vast cupola of the starry southern skies, and beneath the unending sound of the Mediterranean Sea, accompanying him from its gloomy depths.”

Bologna were short-lived, and about their closing in 1911 Lenin wrote: “I suggest that the ‘Vpered’ group blames their failure on a bad god, created by Lunacharskii, and that it has begun to dream of a better one.”⁷² Lenin remark was prescient, and during this time Lunacharskii began work on his book *Religion and Socialism*, in which he articulated his concept of god-building.

Whatever their many and enduring differences, god-building (*bogostroitel'stvo*), essentially the notion of Marxism as a godless religion, united Lenin and Bogdanov in disapproval of this vexing, unorthodox idea. Trotskii puts Lunacharskii's quasi-religious concept in context: “During the dark years of reaction (1908-1912) when the wide circle of the intelligentsia threw themselves into mysticism, Lunacharskii and Gorkii, with whom he had formed a close personal friendship, contributed their own mystical quest. Not breaking with Marxism, they began to imagine the socialist ideal as a new form of religion, and seriously began to search for new rituals.”⁷³ A relentless polemicist, Lunacharskii needed two volumes of *Religion and Socialism* to articulate fully this outwardly simple concept, and wrote, “The new religion, the religion of man, the religion of labor gives no guarantee [of salvation]. But I maintain, that even without god, even without a guarantee – the mask of god – (god-building) is nonetheless a religion.”⁷⁴ It was pointless to search for a non-existent god, Lunacharskii

From A.V. Lunacharskii, “Gorkii na Kapri”, under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-2/gorkij-nakaprij> [accessed October 23, 2014]. The TS *Maksim Gorkii*, the most luxurious ship in the Soviet Fleet, plied the southern waters as part of the Black Sea Shipping Company, and was used to host an international summit at Malta between Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush in 1989.

⁷² V.I.Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 15 March 1908 – August 1909, ed., Bernard Isaacs & Andrew Rothstein (Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1973), 295.

⁷³ Trotskii, *Portrety revoliutsionerov: Sbornik*, ed. Yu. G. Fel'shtinskii (Moscow: Mosk. Rabochii, 1991), under “Trotskii o Lunacharskom”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/trockij-o-lunchraskom> [accessed September 24, 014]. In “The Philosophy of God-building as a variant of Russian Marxism,” Vitaly Pimenov describes god-building as a specifically Russian adaptation of Marxism to a country without developed capitalism. In a summary that recalls Lunacharskii's notion of a cultural, spiritual amalgamation from his student days in Zurich, Pimenov writes: “It occupied an intermediate, compromise position offering not only an alternative political program, but a new religious-philosophical paradigm, representing a synthesis of science, ideology, philosophy, religion, and mysticism.”

maintained, but the proletariat could become god-builders. In Lunacharskii's formulation, the divine is not transcendent, but serves as both means and end to the creation of the future socialist society, and the realization of the perfection of that was Marxism. Lunacharskii even proclaimed that Marxism was the world's fifth Great Religion, and that the works of Karl Marx comprised a Newer Testament: "His synthesis embraces and exalts not only the contradictions of paganism and Christianity, body and soul, but also the contradiction of individual and collective freedom."⁷⁵

At the Paris meeting of the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1909, Lenin and others passed a resolution, "On the God-Building Trend Among Social Democrats," in which they emphatically de-sanctified the secular, declaring that, "The Bolshevik faction wants nothing to do with such a distortion of scientific socialism."⁷⁶ In a letter to Lunacharskii, Lenin reprimanded him, saying that, "Whatever were your good intentions, comrade Lunacharskii, your dabbling with religion does not produce a smile, but revulsion."⁷⁷ Reflecting on his disciple's deviance, Plekhanov expressed his own disapproval but was less blunt, writing that, "If [Lunacharskii] thought of dressing up socialism in religious clothes and even created the additional hybrid of man-god, it was solely because the melancholy 'intelligentsia' had become addicted to religion."⁷⁸

Vitaly Iur'evich Pimenov, "Filosofii bogostroitel'stvo kak invariant russkogo marksizma", under "Isslekovaniia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovania/filosofia-bogostroitelstvo-kak-ivariant-russkogo-marksizma> [accessed September 25, 2014].

⁷⁴ Lunacharskii, *Religiia i sotsializm*, vol. 1, (Moscow, 1908), 45.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁷⁶ Ermakov, A. *Lunacharskii*, 35-36.

⁷⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Vol. 13: June 1907-April 1908* (Moscow: Progress, 1978), 154. Lenin scolded Gorki as well, saying: "God-building, isn't that the vilest form of self-contempt? Anyone who spends his time creating god, or even merely permits such creations, demeans himself in the vilest way, for he devotes his energies not to action but to self-contemplation and self-reflection." Cited in Joseph Freeman, Joseph Kunitz, Louis Lozowicki, eds., *Voices of October: Art and Literature in the Soviet Union* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930), 5.

⁷⁸ From Volume 17 of Plekhanov's *Collected Works*. Cited in A. Tsaritsin, *Lenin v bor'be s bogostroitel'stvom* (Lenin in the Battle with God-Building), under "Isslekovaniia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovania/lenin-v-borbe-s-bogostroitel'stvom> [accessed September 12, 2014].

God-building didn't become part of official Bolshevik ideology or policy, but Lunacharskii never completely disavowed his philosophy of religious atheism, and as Commissar later rationalized: "Subjectively, it seemed to me I was doing the Party a service...I insisted that my concept was still Marxism, but Marxism in special attire...my term 'god-building' did not in the least deprive my concept of the most consistent atheism."⁷⁹ Amfiteatrov writes that, "The greatest foe of 'blissful' Lunacharskii wasn't on earth but in heaven; it was Lord God himself, with all the divinely-inspired writings and all the religious beliefs and sects...He entered the 20th century a neophyte of militant atheism and remained for all his life one of its fanatics."⁸⁰ While Marxists of different varieties admired Lunacharskii's erudition and energy, his eccentric, stubborn enthusiasm for god-building was an aspect of his record – along with his alliance with Bogdanov – that would cement for him a reputation for doctrinal and political unreliability, one that would exclude him from the very pinnacle of Bolshevik power. As head of Narkompros, this reputation evolved into the perception that he was liberal to the point of "soft-heartedness."⁸¹ Trotskii says that while "[Lunacharskii's and my] personal relations weren't intimate, they were of a quite friendly nature...it would be a mistake to imagine that Lunacharskii was a man of stubborn will, fighting single-mindedly with blinders on. No. His determination struck many of us as elastic. Dilettantism was not only a feature of his intellect, but of his character."⁸²

"He dreams of the creation of a magnificent people's theater"

⁷⁹ Ermakov, *Lunacharskii*, 35.

⁸⁰ Amfiteatrov, "Blazhen muzh Anatolii", *Segodnia*, No.19 (Jan., 1934), under "Amfiteatrov o Lunacharskom", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/amfiteatrov-o-lunacharskom> [accessed September 24, 2014].

⁸¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 1970), xvi.

⁸² Trotskii, *Portrety revoliutsionerov: Sbornik*, ed. Yu. G. Fel'shtinskii (Moscow: Mosk. rabochii: 1991), under "Trotskii o Lunacharskom", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/trockij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed September 24, 2014].

The voraciousness and eclecticism of Lunacharskii's intellectual appetites are reflected in some of the other – not explicitly Marxist – sources that inspired his pre-revolutionary thought and writing. Lunacharskii read Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who considered the theater of Ancient Greece to be the prototype of an art form that was capable of transcending class barriers in order to create a vibrant, engaged democratic collectivity.⁸³ Furthermore, Lunacharskii took Rousseau to be a sort of prototype in his own right, as an earlier incarnation of an aesthetically sensitive, incipient socialist man, unshackled from commercial constraints nurtured by philistine appetites. This attitude was a manifestation of Lunacharskii's own early peripatetic predispositions – both psychically and physically – as well as of his more earnest, pre-Commissar Proletkult sympathies. As if describing himself, in the June 25, 1913 edition of the newspaper *Kievskaiia Mysl'* (Kievan Thought), he wrote that, "Rousseau is the epitome of a type of person without roots about whom people speak, and who sets the tone for the fermentation of society, and is himself one of the most significant products of this fermentation."⁸⁴

Richard Wagner's writings on dramatic theory and revolutionary politics were of particular importance to Lunacharskii, and the first book published by Narkompros in 1917 was a Russian translation of Wagner's manifesto, *Art and Revolution*, from 1849. The book included an introduction by Lunacharskii. While not referencing Rousseau, Wagner echoed many of the same themes, exalting the theater of antiquity as the sublime fusion of the sacred and profane, a secular religion – albeit with gods – that resonated with Lunacharskii and his own politically

⁸³ Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 46. In 1857 Marx contrasted the relationship of art with modern and Greek societies: "Is the view of Nature and social relations which shaped Greek imagination and Greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery, railways, locomotives and electric telegraphs?...Is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the *Iliad* compatible with the printing press?" Cited in Freeman, Kunitz, Lozowicki, eds., *Voices of October*, 15.

⁸⁴ A. I. Ovcharenko, ed., *A.V. Lunacharskii sobranie sochinenii v Vos'mi Tomakh*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia Literatura", 1965), under "Otets Romantizma", <http://lunacharky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-5/otec-romatizma> [accessed April 11, 2014]

suspect god-building scheme. To Wagner, the history of the theater since its Greek apotheosis was one of long, steady decline into decrepitude and commercialization.⁸⁵

Romain Rolland, the French essayist and playwright, played a significant role in Lunacharskii's life beginning in 1912, when the two met in Paris; they remained friends and maintained a correspondence until Lunacharskii's death in 1933. Lunacharskii wrote several essays about Rolland, as well a review of his play, *The Game of Love and Death*, in 1926. Kornei Chukovskii observed that while Lunacharskii did enjoy – or suffer from – a reputation for “compliant meekness,” in one of his essays on Rolland Lunacharskii was in fact quite harsh, and he “exposed and persecuted that liberal softheartedness as a great vice.”⁸⁶ According to Chukovskii, Lunacharskii's occasional shrillness and stridency in these fledgling years was necessary in order to be heard above the many “hot heads in those days...whose ravings were made dangerous with the help of demagogical slogans, and were able to seduce the youthful vanguard.”⁸⁷ Lunacharskii's method, in Chukovskii's view, was deliberate, and reflected not ambivalence or duplicity but complexity, “not muddled consciousness but a narrowly elaborated dialectic.”⁸⁸

In *Theatre du Peuple* (1913), Rolland referred to Rousseau directly, arguing for the necessity of a people's theater in the “Wagnerian Spirit”, a dramatic enterprise at the heart of aesthetic and political revitalization. He also wrote approvingly of the innumerable *fêtes* that proliferated in the wake of the French Revolution, and urged that these mass festivals be

⁸⁵ Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 46.

⁸⁶ Kornei Chukovskii, *Portrety i Etiudy*, under “Chukovskii o Lunacharskom,” <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/kornej-cukoskij-o-lunacarskom> [accessed July 18, 2014] Chukovskii goes on: “How many rapturous pages, for example, were written by him in order to glorify Romain Rolland! All the same, when this writer so close to his own soul came out with the tragedy *The Game of Love and Death*, where the humble love for humanity is what motivates revolution, Lunacharskii in a heated article accused his beloved author of being a liberal do-gooder, with cowardly, petty-bourgeois tendencies, an enemy of the emancipation of the masses.”

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

resurrected and redeployed.⁸⁹ In the December 25, 1912, edition of the newspaper *Den'* (*The Day*), Lunacharskii wrote: "My favorite, and the most precious of Rolland's ideas, was to genuinely give to the people an authentic art of the people...for this reason he turns to the theater, and following Wagner, he dreams of the creation of a magnificent people's theater...What the bourgeoisie have had to offer in this realm...is altogether unsatisfactory."⁹⁰

Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the total work of art, was most fully expounded in *Art and Revolution*, and dramatically realized in his massive four opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The notion of the total work of art, rooted in the idealized religious and political harmony of Greek theater, served as a theoretical model for much of the avant-garde, Symbolist drama and art in Russia around the turn of the twentieth century.⁹¹ After the Russian Revolution in 1917, and lasting through the period of "war communism" that encompassed the civil war, the Soviet regime promoted and produced mass festivals, modeled on the French revolutionary ones, grounded in the theories of Rousseau and Wagner. A mixture of popular and programmed exuberance, the pageants themselves recreated events from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The most grandiose was the "Storming of the Winter Palace" in 1920, while other "mass events" reenacted insurrections from Russia's more distant past. Lunacharskii looked askance at these festivals as an expensive distraction from the more focused work of the theater proper, which he understood to be the tip of the cultural spear.⁹² In March of 1919, in a letter to N.G. Vinogradov, director of the Red Army's theater workshop, Lunacharskii wrote: "I

⁸⁹ Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 46.

⁹⁰ A.I. Ovarchenko, *A.V. Lunacharskii*, vol.5, (Moscow; Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvanai literatura", 1965), under "Den'", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-5/den> [accessed April 11, 2014]

⁹¹ See Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁹² A. Lunacharskii, *O massovykh prazdnestvakh, estrade, tsirke* (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1981), under "O Nardonykh prazdnestvakh", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/o-massovykh-prazdnestvakh/o-nardonkh-prazdnestvakh> [accessed April 12, 2014]. For a discussion of Soviet mass spectacles, see James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1993); Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals: 1917-1991*, trans. Cynthia Klohr (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013). For a similar examination of their French forbearers, see Mona Ozouf's *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge UP, 1991).

am writing you not concerning general questions about monumental theater, on which you and others have begun to work, but rather about practical matters that no one has considered: we are not equipped to construct it, instead, the approach should be to use public squares, specially designed for this purpose...Right now we can take only preliminary steps toward the future, and as the theater has been given a taste of several too expensive experiments, the masses of people, in whom there slumbers a grandiose creative force, will construct every theatrical possibility.”⁹³

The first mention of people’s theaters in Russia occurs in the 1890s, when semi-professional and amateur theaters were permitted by the tsarist regime under a policy of temperance, coinciding with the “People’s Houses” movement. Designed to make the appreciation of art and culture available to the working class, the first people’s theater was founded in Tomsk in 1882, eventually spreading across Europe.⁹⁴ The imperial government subsidized the people’s theaters in the hope that participation would limit alcohol abuse, and more importantly inhibit participation in politics, unions and other potentially subversive activities. According to Nina Gourfinkel, who was born in Odessa in 1900 but emigrated to France in 1925, the appetite for theater in Russia was deeply rooted, but not as it was in the West. In Russia it came from the top down – not from the tradition of *skomorokhi* (itinerant performers) and puppet theaters – and theatrical initiatives came from intellectuals, “idealistic dreamers in pursuit of purely moral goals: elementary cultural development of an illiterate people, and a distraction from the ‘green serpent’ of vodka.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Lunacharskii, “Monumental’nyi teatr (Iz pis’ma k N.G. Vinogradovu)”, under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/o-massovyh-prazdnestvah/monumentalnij-teatr-iz-pisma-k-n-g-vinogradovu> [accessed December 9, 2014] On May 1, 1919, on a square in Petrograd, actors of a travelling troupe staged the agit-comedy version of Lunacharskii’s *Petrushka*, written in the spirit of the Russian popular theater.

⁹⁴ Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 55-56.

⁹⁵ Gourfinkel, *Theatre Russe Contemporain*, 99. On Russian temperance efforts see: Stephen White, *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State, and Society* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Patricia Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire: Vodka and Politics in Late Imperial Russia* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Soviet State* (Oxford & New

Approximately 5,000 workers' theatrical clubs were in existence in 1905, whose repertoire consisted of the plays in the critical realistic tradition associated with the democratic revolutionary movement in Russia from the 1860s to the early 20th century.⁹⁶ The aesthetic of this tradition, which foreshadows the officially-mandated strictures of socialist realism in the 1930s, could be summed in a passage from the foundational text of liberal revolutionary movements in Russia, Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *Chto delat*? (What is to be Done?): "The content of art is the social aspect of life...The beautiful is that in which we see life as it ought, in our understanding, to be."⁹⁷ In reality, during the pre-revolutionary period the repertoire of the people's and commercialized theaters were nearly identical, and it would take a social cataclysm to begin to achieve the dream of Rolland and the future leaders of the Soviet Union of drama by and for the masses.

What the tsarist government gave with one hand, it censored with the other, justifying censorship as way of protecting the masses from dangerous ideas. Just as they encouraged popular engagement in the arts, so the censors made their principal target publications whose main audience was the working class, with the strange result that it was easier to print and transmit subversive ideas in long books and journals than in inexpensive pamphlets.⁹⁸ The revolution of 1905, while circumscribing the power – and ability to censor – of the autocracy, also resulted in harsh recriminations against revolutionaries, as well as a diminution of explicitly political themes in the theater. Plays by Moliere, Gogol, Pushkin, and Ostrovskii became the mainstays of most repertoires. Although state-sponsored attempts at social control by means of

York: Oxford University Press, 2014). On the history of the *skomorokhi*, see: Russell Zguta, *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978).

⁹⁶ Kathleen McCreery and Richard Stourel, *Theatre as Weapon: Workers' Theatres in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain, 1917-1934* (London & New York: Routledge, 1986), 5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁸ Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State* (London: Cambridge UP, 1985), 23.

dramatic presentations mostly disappeared between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the question of what would constitute the theater of the future became the preoccupation of many Russian intellectuals. As the critic Viktor Shklovski wrote, “All Russia is acting, some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into something theatrical.”⁹⁹ From 1910 through the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, theatrical innovators like Vsevolod Meierkhol’d, who had studied and worked under Konstantin Stanislavskii at the Moscow Arts Theater (MKhAT), turned away from the classics and began experiments in futurism, and later constructivism.

“We need to make the theater a weapon of those tastes”

The revolution of February of 1917, forced the tsar of Russia to abdicate, and a provisional government replaced him. In May of that year, Lunacharskii returned to Russia, and began work at Gorkii’s Social Democratic, non-Bolshevik newspaper, *Novaia zhizn’* (*New Life*). He also did work for the Bolshevik Defense Committee, for which he – along with Trotskii and Lev Kamenev – was arrested and imprisoned briefly, and for the last time. Lunacharskii described this experience in his 1926 autobiography: “After an evening delivering speeches at a meeting of the Soviet and at the *Cirque Moderne*, I was arrested at home. The conditions of the prison were fairly nasty. We heard rumors that the Provisional Government wanted to kill us as common criminals, but just then a wave of workers’ movements was mobilized, and we were liberated from prison.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater: Tradition and the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 41.

¹⁰⁰ Lunacharskii, *Avtobiografiia Lunacharskogo v insitut Lenina*, under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/lenin-i-lunacharskij/avtobiografia-lunacharskogo-v-institut-lenina> [accessed November 3, 2014] As Nikolai Sukhanov recalled; “After the gathering, I went to the Petersburg side to the *Cirque Moderne* where Lunacharskii was delivering a lecture on Greek art. A huge working-class audience was listening with great interest to the popular speaker and his unfamiliar stories.” Nikolai Nikolaevich Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record*, trans. Joel Carmichael (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 500.

Following the overthrow of the provisional government in October 1917 and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, Lenin appointed Lunacharskii as head of Narkompros; Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya was made his deputy.¹⁰¹ Lunacharskii recalls in his memoirs that Lenin told him that the parameters of a cultural policy, for both the arts and education, had not been precisely determined, but that he was to proceed with caution, guided only by the interests of the masses. In what was both the strength and ultimate weakness of Bolshevik rhetoric and policy, they both concurred that the "truth of our ideas and victory will work for us." Lenin warned Lunacharskii, "If you permit a process of disintegration of our communist principles to occur, if you dissolve and lose yourself in non-Party activities – that will be a serious offense."¹⁰² While not blatant transgressions of communist fundamentals, some of Lunacharskii's earliest decisions reflect his non-confrontational temperament, obscured by a virtual torrent of Bolshevik bombast.¹⁰³

Narkompros assimilated the former Ministry of Public Education, the State Education Committee, the former Palace Ministry – which governed imperial theaters – and the Academy of Arts. When one of the former deputies of the Minister of Education was briefly imprisoned, Lunacharskii's "first and characteristic action was to secure his release."¹⁰⁴ His hiring policies

¹⁰¹ In the November 7, 1927 edition of *Krasnaia Panorama*, Krupskaya wrote: "I remember how we 'seized power' in the Ministry of Education. Anatolii Vasil'evich and I, a small-fry in the Party, went to the Ministry building, located by the Chernyshev Bridge. Near the Ministry was a group of saboteurs, who tried to engage us in conversation. Within the Ministry there were no functionaries, and the only people were a few cleaning ladies. We walked around the empty rooms scattered with papers, and then we went into some office, where the first meeting of Narkompros colleagues took place." Nadezhda Krupskaya, "Narkom Lunacharskii", under "Issledovaniia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovaniia/narkom-lunacharskij> [accessed July 6, 2014].

¹⁰² Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia*, 115.

¹⁰³ The Hungarian journalist Rene Fülöp-Miller reports that in manifesto written by Lunacharskii just before the Bolshevik Revolution, but signed with the initials "N.N.", he "forgot himself," and wrote: "We, who are fighting for a social ideal, are in the long run striving for human individuality, fighting for individuality by championing social and universally human interests." According to Fülöp-Miller, this constituted "a grievous offence against mechanico-collectivist dogma, and thereafter, in spite of his attempts at anonymity, Lunacharskii was viewed with suspicion." Rene Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (London: The Chiswick Press, 1926), 11.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 11.

were generous to a fault, and “he had a habit of recruiting on a personal basis: a man of good will, the wife of comrade, the daughter of a distinguished writer.”¹⁰⁵ By May of 1919, the staff of Narkompros was almost ten times as large as that of the old Ministry.¹⁰⁶

Writing in 1976, Aleksandr Vil’iamvich Fevral’skii (1901-1984), who later worked in the Theater Department of Narkompros (TEO), remembered Lunacharskii fondly: “Many of the old Bolshevik-intelligentsia in various areas of politics and economics took a lively interest in questions about literature and art, and took part in it. For instance, the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, G.V. Chichikov was an amateur musician, and the Commissar of Public Health N.A. Semashko often expounded on questions about the theater...But amidst all these outstanding people, Lunacharskii stood out as an exceptional personality...His creative exuberance was especially evident in his public utterances, and what didn’t Lunacharskii talk about!”¹⁰⁷

Riurik Ivnev (1891-1981), whose given name was Mikhail A. Kovalev and who became Lunacharskii’s secretary right after the revolution, recalled that one of Lunacharskii’s immediate concerns was the rapprochement between Soviet power and the intelligentsia. Like Fevral’skii, he paints a fairly flattering portrait of the Commissar of Enlightenment: “I saw him in the most varied circumstances, saw his equanimity, his calm, saw his inspirational talks from stages, saw his intelligence, saw him laugh, saw him somewhat melancholy, but I never saw him irritated or

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 19

¹⁰⁶ According To Fitzpatrick, in 1919 Narkompros had a staff of just over 3,000. Its largest departments were supply and museums, each with 345 employees. There were almost 600 people staffing the music, cinema, and theater departments combined, while the various education departments had only just over 400 employees. Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁷ A.V. Fevral’skii, *Zapiski rovesnika veka* (Notes on Contemporaries of [this] Century), under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/fevralskij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed June 3, 2014]. Fevral’skii goes on to say that Lunacharskii had “a rather high and loud voice, rich in inflection, lively, without intrusive inflections. His humor, underscored by his smile and squinting eyes behind his pince-nez, served as his greatest polemical weapon.”

angry. I saw him ferocious, but that was only when he pounced on enemies of the revolution at meetings.”¹⁰⁸

A dissenting view comes from one of Lev Tolstoi’s thirteen children, Aleksandra L’vovna Tolstaia (1884-1979), who remained in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. She was arrested in 1920, and sentenced to three years confinement in Novospaskii monastery on the outskirts of Moscow. She gained early release in 1921, thanks to intervention of Aleksandra Kollontai, a lecturer at the defunct Vpered school in Bologna, Commissar of Social Welfare, and best known for the creation of the Zhenotdel (Women’s Department) in 1919. Tolstaia left the USSR for good in 1929. In her book *Doch’* (Daughter), Tolstaia recalls her first encounter with Lunacharskii in 1919: “His office seemed to be in a chaotic state: writing tables, desks, papers strewn about, typewriters, typists, stenographers, a tedious young man, easels, two artists, a sculptor...Lunacharskii was posing, the painter was working feverishly. The Narkom stood to greet me, then sat down in the same pose as before...He listened to me [concerning requests about the Tolstoi Museum at Iasnaia Poliana] silently, then stood up suddenly, pacing about the room and dictating to the stenographer, who looked at him dumbfounded. An actor playing the role of Commissar, his impetuosity, his loud, rich voice, the golden pince-nez on his nose – everything was intentional. Acting, Lunacharskii reveled in his position, his power, in love with himself.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Riurik Ivnev, “Vmeste s Lunacharskim” (Together with Lunacharskii), under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/riurik-ivnev-vmeste-s-lunacharskim> [accessed June 6, 2014].

¹⁰⁹ Aleksandra L’vovna Tolstaia, *Doch’* (Canada: Zaria, 1979), under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/a-i-tolstaya-o-lunacharskom> [accessed July 1, 2014]. Tolstaia goes on to describe the scene at the opening of the museum: “I can only view the communists as villains, miscreants, in which there is nothing human...You cannot imagine what a remarkable speech Lunacharskii gave when we opened the museum. After this there was a meal that included several other representatives of the government, and Lunacharskii was already saying completely different things, conforming to the loathsome communist rhetoric.”

Another critical voice is that of Vladislav Felitsianovich Khodasevich (1886-1939), who emigrated to Paris in 1922, where he published essays in which he denounced both the Soviet regime and the decadent West. In 1918 he, along with a number of other Moscow writers, was employed in the Theater Department (TEO) of Narkompros. In a chapter from *Belyi koridor* (The White Hall), Khodasevich describes the disarray and bureaucratic futility within the Commissariat of Enlightenment after the Revolution, where writers were asked to produce manuscripts with broken typewriters on non-existent paper: “It was a muddle-headed institution, like all institutions in those days. It was led by Ol’ga Kameneva, the wife of Lev Kamenev and Trotskii’s sister, an impersonal being, not so much like dentist as a midwife.¹¹⁰ ...The writers in TEO were only sprinkled about, and the main body consisted of various communists, workers, artists...In TEO there were endless meetings, but, to tell the truth, there were never the same participants, thus no questions were ever resolved...Indeed, nobody knew what to do. There was endless talk of the ‘order of the day’ and ‘getting organized’, without knowing toward what end. Nonetheless, sections met, schemes were drawn up, mandates issued, and most people bustled about from place to place, and everything changed places, like musical chairs.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ J. Arch Getty writes about the inbred nature of the Bolshevik leadership: “Within their caste, the Old Bolsheviks’ sense of themselves as a group apart was reflected in their inner society. They knew and socialized with each other. They lived together in fortified places, the Kremlin being only one of their guarded castles...Their sons and daughters attended the same schools, and married the sons and daughters of other Old Bolsheviks with whom they had grown up. Kinship even played a role: Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Molotov, and Stalin, to name only a few, married other Bolsheviks and their offspring, and the first three were directly related by marriage as in-laws.” From J. Arch Getty, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2013), 46.

¹¹¹ Vladislav Felitsianovich Khodasevich, *Belyi koridor*, under “Biografiia”, <http://luncharsky.newgod.su/hodasevic-o-lunacharskom> [accessed June 30, 2014]. Khodasevich describes an audience the TEO writers – including Andrei Bely and Boris Pasternak – were able to obtain with Lunacharskii in his luxurious apartment: “We went into Lunacharskii’s spacious rooms, decorated with black-lacquered aristocratic furnishings of the 1880s...to be sure, before the revolution aristocratic servitors lived here...Lunacharskii leaned back, adjusted his pince-nez, looked at us attentively, smacked his lips, and then gave a speech. I knew from his writings that he was not intelligent, self-infatuated, and inclined to pretentiousness. Contrary to expectations, he spoke altogether simply. I don’t remember the details of Lunacharskii’s speech, but in general it was characteristic of a liberal minister of a very illiberal government.”

Describing the disarray outside the confines of Narkompros, Serge Orlovsky detailed the chaotic scene on the streets and within the theaters of Moscow and Petrograd in the winter of 1917-18. After free theater tickets had been distributed in factories and army barracks, crowds of Red Guards, sailors and workers “poured into the gilded, velvet-draped halls of the Imperial theaters, stamping their feet and shelling sunflower seeds.”¹¹² Another witness to the theatrical fervor of those days was Fedor Kaverin, who enrolled in drama courses at the Maly Theater right after the revolution. In his memoirs he is wistful unto sycophancy, but captures an essential truth about the Soviet regime’s attitude about the theater: “The basic facts of about the war (*voennyi*) theater created right after October reflected the serious, attentive, and loving relationship of the new regime to art. The theater was full of Red Army soldiers, sailors, and worker...after the plays discussion and arguments arose, fighting about the path of the new theater and the plays of the socialist revolution.”¹¹³ Some of the actors, angered by what they perceived as the usurpation of power by the Bolsheviks, engaged in acts of sabotage and refused to perform, pointing to the theaters’ lack of heat and the unruly behavior of the neophyte audience.¹¹⁴ In spite of insufficient

¹¹² Serge Orlovsky, “Soviet Theaters” in *Soviet Theaters: 1917-1941, A Collection of Essays*, ed. Martha Bradshaw (New York: Research Program on USSR, 1954), 2. Orlovsky writes how “a group of actors from MKhAT (Moscow Arts Theater) was invited to give a performance for one of the Red Army divisions near Moscow, in return for a special ration...The hall was packed with soldiers and sailors who were awaiting the performance. Steam rose from damp overcoats and galoshes, the blue smoke of cheap tobacco blinded the eyes. V.A. Verditiski came out in evening dress and the silent audience heard with surprise the words of Aleksandr Blok and a selection from the *Brothers Karamazov*. They didn’t listen but exchanged angry comments: ‘What is this bourgeois mumbling all about?’ An officer with ammunition belts and a pistol stepped on stage and cried: “Let’s have an accordion player, and lock up this smart guy – swindlers!’ The MKhAT contingent was marched off and kept under lock and key until the next day.”

¹¹³ Fedor Nikolaevich Kaverin, *Vospominaniia i teatral’nye rasskazi* (Remembrances and Stories about the Theater), ed., L.D. Vendrovskaia (Moscow: Vserossiskoe Teatral’noe Obshchestvo, 1964), 88.

¹¹⁴ Vividly capturing this strange new cultural world, and the clash of the old and new audiences, Riurik Ivnev describes the January 23, 1918 performance of the opera based on Pushkin’s poem *Ruslan and Liudmila* at the Mariinskii Opera Theater in Petrograd: “On that day, the former Imperial theater officially became the people’s...For this premiere, in the front rows (*parter*) were seated neither officers of the guard nor ‘gentlemen’ in topcoats, but workers in Russian blouses, and soldiers in threadbare uniforms. In the balcony together with haughty matrons and coquettish aristocrats sat workers with red kerchiefs. Of course, the remaining representatives of the old world were there quite by chance, not yet successful in getting across the Finnish border, and all these alien people were drowned in a sea of the young, Soviet public. Before the performance,

funds and the lack of sophistication in the new audience, in the first few years after the Bolshevik Revolution a spontaneous zeal for theater flared up.¹¹⁵ According to Orlovsky, the appeal of the theater, for both audience and performers was threefold: the opportunity to escape into the world of fantasy; a place for dissidents to hide and even change their family name; and financial

Lunacharskii came on stage to say a few words, which I remember word for word. He exclaimed, ‘Yes, Pushkin and Glinka were representatives of the landowners’ circles, but everything in them that was landowner let the landowners have, while what was in them that was the people’s, we take for ourselves.’” Ivnev, “Vmeste s Lunacharskim”, under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/riurik-ivnev-vmeste-s-lunacharskim> [accessed June 6, 2014].

¹¹⁵ A list of the 45 theaters active in Petrograd from the 1917/18 through 1920/21 seasons: Agitational Theater; Arena of the Proletkults; ARC; *Assambleia*; Bol’shoi Dramatic Theater; Vasileostrovskii Theater; Free Comedy Theater; State Mobile Dramatic Troupe; State Aleksandrinskii Theater; State Bol’shoi Opera Theater; State Dramatic Theater of the Smolensk Region; State Mariinskii Theater; State Miiikhailovskii Theater; Dramatic Theater of the People’s House; Jewish Chamber Theater-Studio; Comic Opera; Malenkii Theater; Malyi Dramatic Theater of PTO (Petrograd Theater Dept.); *Mozaika*; Musical drama Theater; Musical Comedy Theater; *Our Theater*; The New Theater; Opera Theater of the People’s House; The First Communal Troupe; The First Revolutionary Workers’ Heroes Theater; The Mobile Popular Theater of P. P. Gaidedurov and N.F. Skarskaia; The Petrograd Theater of Lettish Workers; The Workers’ Theater of the Second City; The Free Theater; *Sirena*; Theater of Narkompros; Nezlobina Theater; Saburov’s Theater *Passazh*; The Theater of the Union of Dramatic Actors; Theater-Studio; The Theater of Tragedy under the Directioj of Iu.M. Iurev; *Trokadero*; The Theater of People’s Comedy and Artistic Divertissement; Trotskii Theater; The Communist Ukrainian Theater of T.G. Shevchenko; Vadim’s Theater of Farce; Artistic Drama; The Hermitage Theater of TEO.

A list of the 93 theaters active in Moscow during the same time period: Academic Bol’shoi Theater; Academic Chamber Theater; Academic Malyi Theater; Arena of the Proletkults; *Bekefi*; Bol’shoi Dmitrovskii Theater; *Bon-ju*; Brotherhood of Peoples’ Theater; *Vodevil’*; Military Theater; B.S. Nevolina’s Popular Theater; Popular Arts Theater of the Educational Subsection of Narkompros; Second Studio of MKhAT; Second Soviet Theater of the Sokol’nicheskii Region; Second Theater of the Gorodskii Region; *Habima*; *Zon*; Intimate Theater; Intimate Theater of Miniatures; *Ko vsem chertam*; *Kalibri*; Red Rooster Theater; The Musical Section of Narkompros’ Puppet Theater; Lettish Workers’ Theater; Leontev’skii Theater; The Bat Theater; Malenkii Theater; *Mozaika*; Moscow Dramatic Theater; Moscow Dramatic Arts Theater (MKhAT); Music Hall Theater; People’s Freedom Theater; People’s Stage; People’s Family Theater; The Musical Subsection’s People’s Theater; Our Theater of the Sushchenskii-Mar’inskii Region; Nikitskii Theater of Operetta; I.G. Trabskii’s Nikol’skii Theater; New Theater *Maksim*; New Theater of The Artistic-Education Union of Workers’ Organizations (KhPSRO); *Pallas*; *Parisien*; First Mobile People’s Opera of the Musical Subsection of Narkompros; First Studio of MKhAT; First State Theater for Children; First Soviet Theater of the Sokol’nicheskii Region; First Theater of the Gorodskii Region; First Theater of the Rogozhsko-Simonovskii Region; Petrovskii Theater of Artisans; Podval Cabaret; Demonstrational Theater; Polish Workers’ Theater; *Progress*; Proletkult Theater; *Rod*; Free Theater; Antique Theater; Studio in the name of Shaliapin; Tverskoi Theater; Basmannyi Soviet Workers’ Deputies’ Theater; Theater of the Blagushe-Lefortovskii Region; Theater of the People’s House in the name of Petr Alekseev; Theater of Drama and Comedy; Zamoskvoretskii Soviet Workers’ Deputies’ Theater; Theater in the name of V.F. Komissarzhevskaja; Theater in the name of Kal’iav; Theater of the Guards’ Battalion; *Kommuna*; Ukrainian Communists’ Theater; Korsh Theater; Krasnopresnenskii Soviet Deputies Theater; Moscow Soviet Workers’ Deputies Theater; People’s Theater; People’s House Theater; Nezlobin Theater; October 1917 Military District Theater; First Moscow Departmental Regiment of the Defense of Moscow-Kazan Railroad Theater; Theater of Revolutionary Satire (Terevsat); Romance Theater; RSFSR Theater 1; P.P. Straviskii’s Theater; KhPSRo Studio-Theater; Transport Workers’ Theater; Third Guard Regiment’s Theater; Ia. D. Iuzhin’s Theater; 3rd Soviet Theater; MKhAT 3rd Studio; Working Life Theater; Lukomor’ia (By the Curved Seashore) Theater; Ural Theater; Theater of the Butyrskii Region. From: *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 543-545.

security since “the Bolsheviks at once learned the significance of the theater as a propaganda medium, and actors received better than average rations.”¹¹⁶

Theater historian Nikolai Gorchakov describes the passion for the theater in the difficult years after the revolution as a “general epidemic,” and thus a rebuke to the Bolshevik idea that “being determines consciousness.”¹¹⁷ He recalled that, “There was no plant or factory in the country that did not have its own dramatic circle. At the time...there were about 3,000-odd professional troupes in the R.S.F.S.R. alone...the Red Army and Fleet had over 1,800 clubs to which 1,210 theaters and 911 dramatic circles were attached.”¹¹⁸ Gourfinkel argues that a long-standing, somewhat mysterious connection has always existed between revolutions and the

¹¹⁶ Kaverin, *Vospominaniia i teatral'nye rasskazi*, 8. Evoking those difficult days – and the tension between the material and spiritual – Fevral'skii wrote about the January 2, 1919 premiere of Lunacharskii's play *Korolevskii bradobrei* (The Royal Barber), written while Lunacharskii was imprisoned in St. Petersburg in 1905: “The theater wasn't heated, the spectators sat in their overcoats. But in those days it rarely froze. The inflamed atmosphere of the epoch of war communism weakened the cold's effects, and the romantic monologues of the play in verse by the first Commissar of Narkompros – a drama passionately exposing despotism – infused us with warm energy.” Aleksandr Vil'iamovich Fevral'skii, *Zapiski Rovesnika Veka* (Note on Contemporaries of [this] Century), under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/fevral'skij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed June 3, 2014]. Most critics of Lunacharskii's dramatic output were not so charitable. Emma Goldman was deported from the United States in 1919, and spent the next two years in the Soviet Union, travelling and meeting with Anarchist and Bolshevik leaders. She initially had high hopes for both the Revolution and Lunacharskii: “When I first met Lunacharsky, I thought of him much less the politician than artist...I heard him lecture at Sverdlov University, before a large audience of workingmen and women, popularizing the origin and development of art. It was done splendidly. When I first met him he was so thoroughly in the meshes of Party discipline and so completely shorn of his power that every effort of his was frustrated. Then he began to write plays. That was his undoing. He could not deploy the material of actual reality...but Lunacharsky was in control of the theaters – why not exploit them for his own works?... Vanity and power break the strongest character and Lunacharsky is not strong. It is his lack of will that causes him to submit, against his better judgment, to the galling discipline and espionage placed above him. Perhaps he avenges himself by forcing on the public at large and the actors under his charge his own dramatic works.” Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 230-231.

¹¹⁷ About materialism and cultural revolution, Lenin wrote: “Only one thing remains for us to do to make our population ‘civilized’ enough to understand...If we are to become cultured we must have a certain development of the material means of production and a certain material basis...A cultural revolution is a long drawn-out and difficult period of persistent work in all fields, from the alphabet to astronomy, from bath tubs to air fleets, from trade schools to academies of fine arts...everywhere there must be a seething of uninterrupted toil.” Cited in Freeman, Kunitz, Lozowicki, eds., *Voices of October*, 38.

¹¹⁸ Nikolai A. Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 120-1. Describing the amazing proliferation of theaters during the first few years after the revolution, Lynn Mally writes: “Bewildered Russian intellectuals were at a loss for an explanation, likening the phenomenon to fever, epidemics, or even psychosis.” Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 19.

awakening of the “theatrical instinct.” According to her, whereas the French Revolution had adapted and “republicanized” plays, in post-revolutionary Russia certain factions fought a battle against all the methods traditional theater. She suggests that this instinct was in part a flight from the real world toward an illusory one, “submissive at least to the creative will.”¹¹⁹ Echoing Viktor Shklovsky’s claim ten years earlier, Piotr Kagan in a 1919 edition of *Vestnik Teatra* (Theater Courier) wrote: “Future historians will note that during a time of the most bloody and cruel revolution, all of Russia was acting.”¹²⁰

In November of 1917, the journal *Apollon* reported that during the October uprising, numerous cultural monuments, along with some of the estates of the nobility had been destroyed: “The Winter Palace was desecrated. Such artistic treasures of world-wide importance as the Moscow Kremlin, and the cathedral of Vasilii the Blessed have been despoiled.”¹²¹ In response, Lunacharskii offered to resign from Narkompros, but after speaking with Lenin, changed his mind, having concluded that the articles had been provocative fabrications. Lunacharskii engaged in a public counter-offensive, and wrote a series of articles in which he asserted that it was the government’s – and especially Narkompros’ – responsibility to protect the country’s architectural and artistic treasures.¹²² In this instance, the ransacking of culture artifacts was

¹¹⁹ Gourfinkel, *Theatre Russe Contemporain*, 98. She goes on to evoke the material and spiritual horrors of those early days: “Hunger, cold, lack of bread, water, heat, endless lines in front of food stores, a scramble for a crust of cornbread, typhus, hatred and suspicion all imposed on the people an enormous physical burden. And yet it was these ‘naked souls’ who saw, in the centers of the capitals, in the provincial backwaters, on the Volga where hunger drove them to cannibalism, the procession of revolutionary festivals, and whose enraged hands built the rickety stages.” Robespierre on 18 Floréal, year 2, declared that, “The men of letters in general have dishonored themselves in this revolution, and to the eternal shame of the spirit, it is the reason of the people that alone has made all the fresh innovations.”

¹²⁰ Piotr Kagan, “Sotsialisticheskii teatr v gody revoliutsii”, *Vestnik Teatra* 40 (1919), 3-4. Cited in Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 17.

¹²¹ Ermakov, A. *Lunacharskii*, 45. The “Cathedral of Vasilii the Blessed” is St. Basil’s Cathedral on Red Square.

¹²² Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia*, 117. Fevral’skii writes about Lunacharskii’s balancing act between the preservation of the old and the cultivation of new artistic forms: “In the activities of Narkompros, one could observe a bias on the side of the older theaters. Their preservation was, it goes without saying, its main duty, but

fictional, but Lunacharskii remained dedicated to preserving them in the face of the vivid and sustained onslaughts of the Proletkultists and their anarchist cohort.

The menace of wholesale cultural destruction, however, was quite real and close to home. Top-ranking Bolsheviks Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii in their *ABC of Communism*, written in 1920, declared not only that “all works of art created by the exploitation of the masses...have now been restored to their rightful owners,” but that all “bourgeois” expressions of art needed to be destroyed.¹²³ Lunacharskii responded to Bukharin: “He who says we need to crush the bourgeois theater does not understand anything. This slogan leads to a further slogan: we need to crush ‘bourgeois’ libraries, we need to crush ‘bourgeois’ physics, we need to crush ‘bourgeois’ museums. We have a different opinion: we will preserve the theatrical traditions, theatrical craftsmanship, and be proud of the fact that we have elevated the repertoire of the Moscow theaters to highest possible level...The day will come when in Moscow six Shakespeare plays will be performed simultaneously.”¹²⁴ In a November 1920 letter to the director of Moscow’s Maly Theater A.I. Iuzhin, however, Lunacharskii’s tone was more

the support of the new, young theaters was insufficient. Even such conspicuously innovative, revolutionary theater, like that under the direction of V.E. Meierkhol’d, often found themselves in difficult material circumstances – much worse than the ‘academic’ theaters. And yet the activities of Meierkhol’d more than anything spurred on the old theaters...the relationship between Lunacharskii and Meierkhol’d was inconsistent. This is worth investigating.” A.V. Fevral’skii, *Zapiski Rovesnika Veka*, under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/fevraskij-o-lunacharskom> [accessed June 3, 2014].

¹²³ Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, *The ABC of Communism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), under “Marxist Internet Archive”, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc> [accessed July 21, 2014]. Romain Rolland made a similar claim, saying that, “The justification of social revolutions is not just the redistribution of material wealth, but access to spiritual wealth.” Cited in Gourfinkel, *Theatre Russe Contemporain* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1931), 109. According to Rene Fülöp-Miller, Bukharin was “one of the heralds of the mechanized collective man, [who] asks contemptuously whether it would ever occur to anyone to define the state of mind of a bee as a ‘psychological whole’ or ‘spiritual community’.” From Rene Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 131.

¹²⁴ Lunacharskii, A.V. *Lunacharskii*, vol. 3, ed. Ovarchenko (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura”, 1964), 100-101. Kornei Chukovskii wrote of Lunacharskii’s stance and the establishment of Soviet power that, “Lunacharskii along with Gorkii...stood up against the feeble-minded hypocrites who concealed with high-sounding slogans their efforts to take away from Soviet citizens even their folk songs, *byliny* [Russian epics], proverbs, leaving in exchange nothing except worthless homemade doggerel, disturbing Anatloii Vasil’evich to the bottom of his soul.” Kornei Chukovskii, *Portrety i etudy*, under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/kornej-cukovskij-o-lunacharskom>

combative: “You know very well that I am not only not against violence when it comes to revolution, but am a proponent of the view that only through a path of violence can the revolution be decisive, that the old will never rot once and for all, and breathe its last, unless it is thrown from one’s shoulders with a merciless blow.”¹²⁵ The theater critic Platon Kerzhentsev, Proletkult agitator and a Bolshevik since 1904, used similarly menacing language to frame the struggle over the theatrical repertoire. The notion that bourgeois theater would reform itself was “laughable,” and renewal would only come “under the heavy blows of the socialist revolution.” According to Kerzhentsev, a new social class would produce its own, new dramatic forms.¹²⁶

In 1918, Proletkult launched an attack in the press against the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Petrograd, built for the imperial theater troupe in 1832. The Aleksandrinskii, they wrote, in presenting plays by Shakespeare and Ostrovskii, was guilty of “residual aristocratic formalism.”¹²⁷ Lunacharskii, in an article for Aleksandrinskii’s hundredth anniversary in the

¹²⁵ Lunacharskii, “Pis’ma k A.I. Iuzhinu-Sumbatovu”, under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannie-matreilay/pisma-k-i.a.-iuzina-sumbatova> [accessed December 8, 2014].

Iuzhin played the title role in the Maly’s 1921 production of Lunacharskii’s play *Oliver Cromwell*.

¹²⁶ Platon M. Kerzhentsev, *Revoliutsiia i teatr* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Dennitsa, 1918), 28.

¹²⁷ Lunacharskii, A.V. *Lunacharskii*, vol. 3, ed. Ovarchenko (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura”, 1964), under “K stoletiu Aleksandrinskogo teatra”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/k-stoletiu-aleksandrijskogo-teatra> [accessed April 12, 2014]. Lev Nikulin, who worked in Terevsat (The Theater of Revolutionary Satire) in the 1920s, witnessed an encounter in the winter of 1919 between Lunacharskii and a group of young theater goers following a performance of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. Nikulin writes that it was time of civil war, shortages and runaway inflation, and as the young people boldly approached the Commissar, they asked if the country really needed Shakespeare’s tragicomedy, with its princes, drunkards, swindlers, bullies, courtiers, and aesthetes (*liubiashchikh krasatok*). Was it needed, they wondered, when the factions of Denikin’s White Army were laying siege to cities south of Moscow, there was no fuel for the factories, and people’s rations consisted mostly of a stale crust of bread. Lunacharskii paused, and then began a long and intricate speech on Shakespeare and current events. He explained how it was necessary to defeat the counterrevolutionaries, and the same time, it was equally important and necessary to create the basis for a socialist culture. Shakespeare, Lunacharskii said, was the reference point for Soviet playwrights, for the theatrical arts. Someone asked Lunacharskii if he would also order the staging of works by Vladimir Maiakovskii, the iconoclastic futurist poet and playwright. Somewhat cryptically, yet trying to demonstrate the value of the old and new in art, the Commissar described a character in Shakespeare who in real life was a brave warrior, who died on the executioner’s block, yet was portrayed on stage as a liar, braggart, and idler. Shakespeare had to represent the existing social order, as a concession to the political requirements of his noble patrons. If a poet satisfies the political requirements of the worker-peasant power, Lunacharskii went on, he does so according to his conscience,

September 1932 edition of *Rabochii i Teatr (Worker and Theater)*, recalled that, “The 1918 attack by the Proletkultists was fierce. I had been personally close to Proletkult, and in the final analysis, I was somewhat confused by these efforts to terminate a so-called ‘nest of reactionary art’.”¹²⁸

The former imperial theaters in Petrograd (the name given Saint Petersburg in 1914, changed to Leningrad in 1924, and reverted back to Saint Petersburg in 1991), including the Aleksandrinskii, went on strike in response to the October Revolution. Lunacharskii addressed the theater companies, urging their cooperation, and explained that they would not be required to make any “slogan of obedience and loyalty.”¹²⁹ In March of 1918, representatives of the new government and the theatrical workers met and adopted “The Charter of the Autonomous State Theaters,” which conceded to some of the oldest theaters the right to artistic autonomy, although through the newly formed theatrical council, Narkmpros retained financial control. Addressing the issue of autonomy, Lunacharskii invoked Wagner, writing in 1921 that, “Approaching theater from a purely socialist point of view...we can only repeat what Wagner said in his time: ‘The theater should be transformed into a privileged government institution, like a school, a university’. We need to give the theater not too much or too little autonomy, making neither its successes, nor the tentative tastes of the masses submissive. Instead, we need to make the theater into a weapon of those tastes.”¹³⁰ The Hungarian journalist, Rene Fülöp-Miller, visiting Moscow in the early 1920s, wrote that, “The leaders of the revolution, at the very start of their struggle,

sincerely, and inspired. From Lev V. Nikulin, *Gody nashei zhizni (Years of Our Lives)* (Moscow, 1966), under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/lev-nikulin-o-lunacharskom> [accessed April 9, 2014].

¹²⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, *A.V. Lunacharskii, vol. 3*, ed. Ovarchenko, under “K stoletiu Aleksandriiskogo Teatra”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/k-stoletiu-aleksandriiskogo-teatra> [accessed April 12, 2014].

¹²⁹ Ermakov, A. *Lunacharskii*, 71.

¹³⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, *A.V. Lunacharskii, vol.3*, ed. Ovarchenko (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura”, 1964), under “Teatr i revoliutsiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/teatr-i-revoliutsiia> [accessed April 13, 2014].

recognized the suggestive importance of the stage for propaganda purposes...The idea of treating art not as an end in itself, but as weapon for political purposes underwent many changes, from the destruction of old styles, to the creation of new ones.”¹³¹

The notions of control and autonomy, while officially formulated and promulgated, were more theoretical than actual. In the chaos of the revolution’s aftermath, there was no uniform system of theatrical management, with many municipal and private companies continuing to operate outside the tentative bureaucratic reach of the Commissariat of Enlightenment. The principal obstacles in the way of control, and the ultimate goal of complete nationalization of theaters, were the lack of money, and the challenge of enlisting qualified cultural workers into the revolutionary cause. Whatever their political inclinations, most, although not all of the intelligentsia – including many leading theater directors – were both skeptical and bewildered by Narkompros’ administrative and artistic vacillations. This inconsistency reflected a lack of consensus within the commissariat about what constituted a revolutionary repertoire, and how to implement it. In a September, 1919 issue of *Vestnik Teatra*, Lunacharskii couldn’t conceal some of his own exasperation: “The question is constantly posed: should we refresh the repertoire, make it more proletarian, more responsive to current events, closer to the socialist inquiries of the masses, etc. It’s easier said than done.”¹³²

The disjunction between theory and its implementation characterized not only the impatient messianism of the Bolsheviks, but was symptomatic of Lunacharskii’s tenure as Commissar, where he was fairly bursting with political and aesthetic ideas, but had no experience administering anything, much less a bureaucracy second in size only to the military.

¹³¹ Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 115.

¹³² A.V. Lunacharskii, *A.V. Lunacharskii*, vol. 3, ed. Ovarchenko (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura”, 1964), under “K voprosu o repertuare”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/k-voprosu-o-repertuare> [accessed April 14, 2014].

A resolution on the consolidation of a policy on the arts was still a work in progress as late as 1923. In a report given at the Fourth Conference of Workers in the Arts in the spring of that year Lunacharskii said that, “The questions about governmental policy on the arts is considerably complex, and has resulted in a series of sharp zigzags in response to the new economic policies. Finally, the question about what constitutes ideological art from a Marxist point of view, what Marxist aesthetics are, that question is still fresh and unresolved.”¹³³ Half-joking, half-seriously, Lunacharskii referred to himself as an “intelligent” among Bolsheviks, and a Bolshevik among the intelligentsia. As a Bolshevik, he asserted his authority not just through organizational measures, but through actual participation in art. He joined in theatrical debates, published critiques of plays, argued with audiences on stage, participated as a judge in dramatic competitions, wrote plays himself, and fought back against his critics. As an “intelligent,” he asserted the Leninist position on art.¹³⁴

“I feel like an original disciple of the future of humanity”

Proletkult was one of the few cultural organizations to welcome the October Revolution. At a conference held October 16-19, 1917, all the various proletarian educational and cultural groups active before the revolution – clubs, choral societies, amateur theaters, art studios – were amalgamated into semi-formal, distinctly Bolshevik organizations, and given the name Proletkult. There, Lunacharskii delivered a speech in which he stated that, while a “militant socialist spirit” should guide the efforts to educate and enlighten the proletariat, in the process the workers needed to “master the cultural riches of the past and present, and draw on the help of

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ I.P. Kokhno, “Nachalo bol’shogo puti”, under “Issledovaniia, cherty portreta”, <http://lunacharky.newgod.su/issledovaniia/cherty-portreta/nachalo-bolshogo-puti> [accessed August 22, 2014]

the non-Party intelligentsia.”¹³⁵ Proletkult groups that had proliferated in Moscow and other cities merged into a single, loosely-structured entity at the All-Russia Proletkult conference in 1918. Aleksandr Mgebrov, who later worked in TEO under Meierkhol’d, attended the conference and recalled: “At the time of the first conference, Proletkult was still a patchwork and lived on daydreams. It was an enormous ecumenical organization, Viktor Chekan and I were delegates from the Baltic Factory and we received advice from Anatolii Vasil’evich Lunacharskii, who told us that the most interesting and lively things were happening in Proletkult, and they needed lively people there.”¹³⁶

Lunacharskii gave a speech at the Second Petrograd Conference on Cultural-educational Organizations, organized by the Petrograd Proletkult in June of that year. In especially vivid language, couched in classical and vaguely religious imagery, he said that, “We know that the creation of a culture of the working class will not happen right away. Proletarian culture is just now emerging from beneath the old, thick ice. It is still young, like Hercules in a cradle, slaying one snake after another, all the while growing, and soon, like the tsarevich Gvidon, it will burst through its narrow confines...In this palace of proletarian culture, I feel like an original disciple of the future of humanity.”¹³⁷ More prosaically, the program adopted by the 8th Party Congress in 1919 specified the “offering and making accessible to the workers all the treasures of art produced through exploitation of their work and which have hitherto been kept for the exclusive disposition of the exploiters.”¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Ermakov, A. *Lunacharskii*, 78.

¹³⁶ Aleksandr Avel’evich Mgebrov, *Zhizn’ v teatre, tom. II* (Life in the Theater, vol. II) (Moscow: Akademiia, 1929), 311.

¹³⁷ I.I. Anisimov, ed. *A.V. Lunacharskii*, vol. 7 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura”, 1967), under “O proletarskoi kul’ture”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-7/o-proletarskoj-kulture> [accessed April 14, 2014]. Tsarevich Gvidon is a character from the opera “Tale of Tsar Saltan” by Rimskii-Korsakov, based on a poem by Aleksandr Pushkin.

¹³⁸ Nicholas Rzhevsky, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 264.

In contrast to the celebratory, priestly tone of Lunacharskii's public declarations, discussions between Proletkult leaders and the Commissar and his deputies revealed a growing tension between two visions of how, and into what, proletarian culture would develop. Lunacharskii and Krupskaja pointed to a tendency on the part of Proletkult to mistrust both the intelligentsia and the peasantry. Furthermore, they maintained, Proletkultists overemphasized the mutual exclusivity between old and new cultural forms. Lunacharskii defended the heritage of the past, saying that, "[t]he independence of proletarian art does not consist in artificial originality, but presupposes a familiarity with all the fruits of the preceding culture."¹³⁹ In the chapter titled "Ideology on the Eve of October" of his memoirs, Lunacharskii recalls that Proletkult had decided that all aspects of bourgeois culture – except its technical accomplishments – were "unworthy of life" and needed to be utterly destroyed.¹⁴⁰ Not only were the so-called bourgeois specialists – the intelligentsia – boycotting Narkompros' fledgling enlightenment project, but Proletkult was asserting that they neither needed nor wanted their cooperation.

For all their aggressive, belligerent tone, however, Proletkult leaders often exerted little control over their diverse, far-flung constituency, and, in spite of their "nihilistic and iconoclastic pleas, workers continued to sample elements of the past in their (artistic creations)."¹⁴¹ The workers' appetites for the productions of the older culture – unspecified "tastes" that Lunacharskii invoked in 1921 as the potentially weaponized raw material of the theater – didn't correspond to Proletkult ideologues like Bogdanov's notions of factories as laboratories of a new, proletarian culture. According to historian Richard Stites, "Proletkult was a genuinely novel experiment designed to teach and arm an entire class in quick time to construct wholly new

¹³⁹ Ermakov, A. *Lunacharskii*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ A. Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sovetskaia Rossiia", 1968), 167.

¹⁴¹ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 71.

culture in a still very illiterate society and to do so with minimal guidance from the past.”¹⁴² As Peter Kenez, another historian, points out, however, “[a]n unqualified assertion of illiteracy is misleading, not only because a substantial portion of the population could read and write, but also because illiteracy was unevenly distributed; politically crucial segments of the population could be reached by the printed word.”¹⁴³

The question of the depth and breadth of illiteracy notwithstanding, the theater was conceived by Lunacharskii and Kruspaia within Narkompros, and Lenin above it, as the most effective means of propagating a Bolshevik vision of the future. The crucial question, aside from the political tug-of-war over the inclusion – or “mastery,” as Lunacharskii and Bogdanov would have it – of the classics, was finding the proper balance between amusement and indoctrination. In 1923, Lunacharskii wrote, as part of a discussion within the pages of the official newspaper of the Central Committee of Communist Party that, “The revolutionary workers’ theater is, without question, a theater-school; it is in fact a cultural-enlightenment institute. But bear in mind, it must also be artistic. It must delight and agitate, make people laugh, because within the artist’s effect on the spectator, there is an unspecified agitational force that brings us, propagandist-agitators, running to art as the form by which to inculcate definite feelings and ideas.”¹⁴⁴

In subordinating entertainment and ideology to purely artistic experimentation, the avant-garde in the theater could have incurred the wrath and condemnation of the new communist regime. Yet Lunacharskii was a mostly enthusiastic supporter of the productions of Vladimir

¹⁴² Ibid., 72.

¹⁴³ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 72.

¹⁴⁴ Lunacharskii, A.V. *Lunacharskii*, vol. 3, ed. Ovarchenko (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia Literatura”, 1964), under “Eshche o teatre krasnogo byta”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/ese-o-teatre-krasnogo-byta> [accessed April 16, 2014]

Maiakovskii, Meierkhol'd and others.¹⁴⁵ Lunacharskii appointed Meierkhol'd to head the theatrical department within Narkompros (TEO) in 1921. He held the post for only one year, however, as Lunacharskii became disenchanted with Meierkhol'd's concept of "Theatrical October," which he considered an excessively radical re-configuration of the theater's form and function. According to Fülöp-Miller: "Meierkhol'd declared that the theater no longer had the right to an independent existence...A theater which merely stimulates its audience to rummage through worthless soul-junk, is absurd and worthless."¹⁴⁶ Writing in the November 5 1918 edition of the newspaper *Petrogradskaia Pravda* (*Petrograd Truth*), Lunacharskii expresses his approval of Meierkhol'd's production of Vladimir Maiakovskii's pre-revolutionary play, *Misteria-Bouffe*: "In futurism there is one wonderful feature: it's going in the direction of the young and brave. As long as it proceeds toward the intersection with the communist revolution it will facilitate the ability of others to become drummers for our red (*krasnoi*) culture. But along

¹⁴⁵Lunacharskii's second wife was the actress Nataliia Lunacharskaia-Rozenel' (1900-1962) whom he married soon after the Revolution, taking advantage of the Bolsheviks' liberalization of marriage laws to divorce Bogdanov's sister Anna Malinovskaia. Closer in age than her husband to Maiakovskii, Lunacharskaia-Rozenel' devotes an entire chapter of her memoirs to the poet/playwright. In it she recounts how he and Lunacharskii would often spend evenings at the Commissar's apartment, playing billiards. On another occasion in the early 1920s, Lunacharskaia-Rozenel' recalls: "Sometimes Anatolii Vasil'evich was annoyed by Maiakovskii's associates, in particular those who called themselves the 'theoreticians of LEF'. [LEF was the journal of the Left Front of the Arts – a motley assortment of avant-garde writers, critics, artists, and designers – and which published sporadically through the 1920s in the USSR.] After a gathering one evening at Maiakovskii's place, he said to me about them: 'I love you, my comet, I just don't love your long tail'. But in general it was like a sun spot, which doesn't prevent it from shining, from burning, and in the relationship between Lunacharskii and Maiakovskii there was much light and warmth." From N. Lunacharskaia-Rozenel', *Pamiat' Serdtsa* (Memory of the Heart) (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1962), 26-27. Lunacharskii had an affair with a 16-year-old ballerina from the Bol'shoi company in 1924, who gave birth to a daughter, Galina Sergeevna Lunacharskaia. Her son, Georgii Sergeevich Lunacharskii, current president of the handicapped soccer federation of Russia, in a recent (February 2, 2013) interview says that, "Anatolii Vasil'evich was very enamoured of women, and he often lost his head...Probably, this often happens to many people, an attraction arises between them, then a moment of weakness..." From *Segodnia.ua*, under "Zhizn'", <http://segodnya.ua/life/people/Vnuk-revolucionera-i-pisatelya-Anatolya-Lunacharskogo-on-platil-dengi-opekunam-zamamu.html> [accessed December 11, 2014].

¹⁴⁶Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 120.

with futurism's ability to beget informed aesthetic satisfaction with the old world, there will be its inclination toward jokes, somersaults, toward everything rare and unprecedented."¹⁴⁷

The primary distinction between avant-garde theater directors like Meierkhol'd, Nikolai N. Evreiov, Aleksandr Tairov on one side, and Proletkult artists on the other, was that whereas the former were committed professionals, the latter were emphatically amateur. As Lars Kleberg describes the situation: "The avant-garde program was developed in a two front war against the 'academic' art establishment on the one hand, and Proletkult's mass movement on the other."¹⁴⁸ In that middle ground, and in the void created by the lack of structural or theoretical coherence in Narkompros, the avant-garde sought to advance its cause through access to Lunacharskii and his subordinates in the theatrical department, and in the form of subsidies. The battle between the various political and artistic factions continued within Narkompros, as they competed for a maximum of both money and artistic freedom. Proletkult, however, wanted to dictate the terms of cultural policy. The aggressively iconoclastic Kerzhentsev, spoke at the First Proletarian Conference in 1918 about the need for "a completely new repertoire, new actors, nationalization of theater, and that the bourgeois theaters be broken up."¹⁴⁹

Lunacharskii, while insisting on the preservation of the older theaters, was willing to grant Proletkult both autonomy and funding, as long as they didn't do so at the expense of other groups. After a compromise of sorts was achieved in the summer of 1919 whereby theatrical affairs would be centralized, Lunacharskii had to clarify that he wasn't offering subsidies to all theaters, something that would have been impossible given the economic conditions of 1917-21.¹⁵⁰ In the aftermath of this partial re-organization, in which only so-called state (formerly

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁸ Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 15.

¹⁴⁹ Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 96.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 145.

imperial) theaters were under the direct control of Narkompros, the ideological battle continued between Kerzhentsev and Lunacharskii. Kerzhentsev was impatient with the pace of cultural transformation, writing in 1918 that little had changed in the theater since “those October days,” and that Narkompros was acting “as if nothing had changed.” Criticizing avant-garde theatrical innovators like Meierkhol’d, Kerzhentsev argued that they were “instinctively remote from proletarian ideology,” that for them revolution was first all an opportunity for artistic experimentation and “not a fact of the socialist reconstruction of society.”¹⁵¹ Kerzhentsev wanted the bourgeois theaters to remain open only as museums, while Lunacharskii argued that the workers actually preferred classical themes in the theater.¹⁵²

This dispute took an odd twist over the contents of Lunacharskii’s one-act play, *Ivan Goes to Heaven* (1919). In the play, Ivan does just that, and there manages to convert God, Jesus, and the heavenly host to atheism, whereupon they submit to the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the November 20 edition of *Pravda*, Kerzhentsev criticized the play as “too religious.”¹⁵³ He also found fault in Lunacharskii’s play *The Magi* (1918), claiming that it was full of “petty-bourgeois anarchist philosophy.”¹⁵⁴ Kerzhentsev apparently didn’t believe the disclaimer in the preface to the play, where Lunacharski wrote that, “Like most of my plays, this was written at night, after a hard day’s work...My fantasy is written in the terminology of occultism and mysticism, and a reader might conclude that this reflects my personal beliefs, which is certainly not the case...In one of my earlier essays, written while I was imprisoned in Tagan, I discussed my philosophy of a Dionysian religion, but it has long ceased to be part of my worldview, remaining only as part of

¹⁵¹ Kerzhentsev, *Revoliutsiia i teatr*, 5-6.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

the storehouse of my artistic mythology; of course *The Magi* is only remotely connected to the events we are experiencing now.”¹⁵⁵

The avant-garde criticized Lunacharskii for his support of Proletkult, and Proletkult attacked him for his support of traditional theaters, while the attacks on his plays stirred up questions about his trustworthiness in political matters. Lenin, still at odds with Bogdanov, the unofficial leader of Proletkult, disapproved of the organization, and thought that less attention should be paid to “proletarian culture”, and more on combatting illiteracy and economic matters. In December of 1920, the Central Committee of the Communist Party published a letter in *Pravda*, titled “On the Proletkults” in which they decreed that Proletkult would become subordinate to Narkompros, but would retain its artistic autonomy. In the same piece, they criticized not only Proletkult, the futurists and Bogdanov, but also Lunacharskii for his various ideological heresies, beginning with god-building, and continuing through what was perceived as an overly permissive, insufficiently focused cultural policy. Attacking the political error of creating an organization outside the government apparatus, of creating proletarian culture in a laboratory, at the 3rd Congress of Komsomol in 1920 Lenin declared: “Proletarian culture is not something arising from an unknown source; it is not the invention of people who call themselves specialists in the realm of proletarian culture.”

¹⁵⁵ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Dramaticheskie proizvedeniia v 2-x tomakh*, vol.2 (Moscow: Glavlit, 1923), 2



A.V. Lunacharskii & Friends



V.E. Meierkhol'd



Emile Verhaeren



The 1920 production of *The Dawns*

Chapter 2: *First bring me the rabbit!:* Lunacharskii, Meierkhol'd, and the struggle over The Dawns.

In his memoirs, General Ivan Boldin recalls his first encounter with Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii in 1921, when they both attended a play at Meierkhol'd's Revolutionary Theater:

During the intermission the People's Artist Vsevolod Emil'evich Meierkhol'd, an honorary member of our Red Army regiment, introduced the Commissar to me. "Anatolii Vasil'evich, this is my commander, and if I may put it this way, the father of Moscow's Red Army regiment." "Pleased to meet you," Lunacharskii said, shaking my hand. "I saw some of your soldiers performing on stage, and from the bottom of my heart I salute the zeal your regiment has for the dramatic arts." Anatolii Vasil'evich took off his pince-nez, wiped the thick glass with a cloth, and continued. He recalled how he had visited the city of Tula, 100 miles south of Moscow and on the front of the Civil War, and how an enemy general had been taken captive there. "Now that is a theme for playwrights! It is necessary to tell the people about the heroes of October and the Civil War. We need to celebrate the Red Army." Lunacharskii gave a deep sigh and added, "I dream of such plays!"¹⁵⁶

After the Bolshevik overthrow of the Provisional Government in the fall of 1917 until the spring of 1921, Russia was engaged in a civil war. The Red side was led by Marxist revolutionary intellectuals, skilled in the use of propaganda for the purpose of mass mobilization, while the Whites consisted mostly of less ideologically motivated former Tsarist army officers. By the spring of 1920, Bolshevik victory appeared fairly certain, for many of the same reasons they had prevailed in 1917: where their opponents appealed to nationalism and little else, the communists offered a positive program of reform, and more importantly, given the impossibility of implementing these programs right away, the Bolsheviks were skillful at military, political

¹⁵⁶ Ivan Vasil'evich Boldin, *Stranitsy Zhizni* (Life's Pages) (Moscow: Bukinisticheskoe izdanie, 1961), under: "Biografiia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/general-boldin-o-lunacharskom> [accessed November 20, 2014].

and economic improvisation, the last in the form of so-called war communism: the forced requisitioning of grain, and the nationalization of most trades and industries.¹⁵⁷

According to Bolshevik ideology, they were the vanguard of the proletariat, and the Revolution in 1917 was the first step in establishing the dictatorship of this class. Ironically, whatever weak class structure that had existed before the Bolsheviks came to power disintegrated under the stress of war and revolution. As factories and industries closed and collapsed, most of the small industrial proletariat – presumably the new ruling class – either returned to their villages or were mobilized into the Red Army. The old capitalist bourgeoisie no longer existed as a class, and from the urban, Bolshevik perspective, the peasant majority of the population existed as a shapeless, and unshapable, mass. As a result of this social disintegration and fluidity during the Civil War, assignment of class identity was used as a way to distinguish between ally and foe. The Bolsheviks also authorized legal discrimination according to class, laws that took into account pre- and post-revolutionary social position.¹⁵⁸ Self-identification was unreliable, as individuals often laid claim to proletarian status for political or professional advantage. The disjunction between reality and perception undermined the ideologically essential element of so-called “class consciousness,” as it pertained to only the politically and symbolically significant – but demographically insignificant – bourgeoisie and proletariat

¹⁵⁷On the Civil War in Russia see: Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919-1920: The Defeat of the Whites* (Berkeley, London, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); W. Bruce Lincoln, *A History of the Russian Civil War 1918-1921* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989); Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996); Rex A. Wade, *The Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001); Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1918-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); David Bullock, *The Russian Civil War 1918-22* (New York & Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008); Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (London: Pegasus Books, 2011).

¹⁵⁸ In 1919, the prominent Soviet jurist I. Kozlovsky wrote: “For the Marxist, any crime is the product of the irreconcilability of class differences...more and more law will be turned into rules for the management of economy; judges will become its managers.” From the collection *Oktiabr'skii perevorot i diktatura proletariata* (The October Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat) (Moscow, 1919), 231-240. In William G. Rosenberg, ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia, Part 1* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 172-3.

classes. The very real Civil War thus in part represented “the great class struggle...being waged by a surrogate proletariat (the Red army and the Communist Party) against a surrogate bourgeoisie (the White Army and the urban intelligentsia).”¹⁵⁹

The civil war period was also characterized by factional struggle within the Bolshevik Party involving a contest of several smaller groups against each other and the main, larger Leninist faction.¹⁶⁰ On the one hand, factional skirmishes reflected the tension between Lenin’s call for authoritative centralization and party democracy. On the other, the divisions amongst the Bolsheviks represented a confrontation between classes – real or attested – and the clash of workers with intellectuals. Many of the factions objected to the use of economic specialists, presumably privileged, politically unreliable bourgeois leftovers. In the military, Party dissidents protested Trotskii’s practice of giving former tsarist officers command positions in the Red Army. While the Party’s rank and file consisted of lower class workers and the leadership and Party elite were almost entirely intellectuals, they both theoretically had access to “proletarian consciousness,” which evolved from signifying support for the 1917 Revolution to participation in the building of socialism.¹⁶¹ Ideological enlightenment was part of the construction process, at the center of which was the theater as a vehicle for education and propaganda that popularized the Bolshevik cause, making the dramatic arts in the early 1920s “in effect the cradle of the cultural life of the new Soviet republic.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “New Perspectives on the Civil War,” in Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, Ronald Gregor Suny, eds., *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 6.

¹⁶⁰ These factions included: the Left Opposition in 1918, a mostly intellectual group; the Military Opposition in 1919; the Democratic Centralists; the Workers’ Opposition; Trotskii’s faction in 1920-21.

¹⁶¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma: Class, Culture, and Politics in the Early Soviet Years” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 47, No.4 (Winter, 1988), 612.

¹⁶² Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 104.

In this chapter, I argue that a surrogate war over political and cultural terrain, involving the same stridently ambiguous class categories, mirroring both the national and intra-Party fights, was replicated in the events surrounding the director Vsevolod Meierkhol'd's staging of the play *The Dawns* in 1920. When the Bolsheviks formed a government and set a cultural agenda, most of the artistic intelligentsia, with the exception of Meierkhol'd and a few others, gave them the cold shoulder. This chapter shows how the Bolshevik regime, with limited human and material resources, improvised in the realm of culture and how they, primarily in the person of Anatolii Lunacharskii, solicited, indulged, and ultimately recoiled from this early attempt at "revolutionary theater." In Marxist terms, each class creates its own culture, and Lunacharskii in his writings and speeches always insisted that an authentically proletarian culture would take time to evolve. In this chapter I argue that the contest between this organic, educational approach, and Meierkhol'd's combative, confrontational strategy, expressed in his notion of "Theatrical October," was aggravated rather than resolved in the denouement of this production of *The Dawns*. According to the British theater historian Robert Leach, the campaign of "Theatrical October" was "comparable to that of Bolshevik shock troops who in 1918 and 1919 had raided the countryside and requisitioned grain for the starving urban proletariat."¹⁶³ I maintain that the struggle over *The Dawns* reflects the reality but limitations of Lunacharskii's power and reputed tolerance, as well as his capacity for saying two things at once, or less charitably, duplicity. Much of the historiography of this period notes, and often celebrates, the cultural – and political – debates of the 1920s, setting them against the officially-promulgated, socialist realist doctrines of the 1930s. This chapter is a case study of the parameters and outcomes of one such lively, and very public, debate.

"A searcher who has lost his way"

¹⁶³ Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1994), 63.

Vsevolod Meierkhol'd (1874-1940) was born on January 28 in Penza, a quiet provincial city about three hundred miles southeast of Moscow which enjoyed an especially lively theatrical culture. He was the eighth child of a prosperous German vodka distiller, who christened him Karl Teodor Kazimir Meyergold in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. After his father's death in 1895, he renounced the family business, changed his name, and took Russian citizenship. That same year, Meierkhol'd went to Moscow to study law, but spent most his time attending the theater or visiting museums, and the following year he gained admittance into the Moscow Philharmonic Society Drama School. After graduation, he joined the Moscow Arts Theater (MKhAT), founded and led by Konstantin Stanislavskii (1863-1938) and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943).

Following a break with MKhAT four years later, Meierkhol'd launched his directorial career in the provinces. Beyond the influence of the Symbolist movement sweeping the capital cities at the turn of the twentieth century, Meierkhol'd initially imitated the realist aesthetic and technique of Stanislavskii, but began experimenting with his own new ideas and theatrical forms, eliminating the stage curtain and incorporating Kabuki dance-drama elements into the performances. In 1908, Meierkhol'd joined the Imperial theaters in St. Petersburg, and for the next decade worked in the Aleksandrinskii Theater and Mariinskii Opera as director and actor. Lunacharskii, then living in Paris but an observer of the Russian theatrical scene, criticized several of Meierkhol'd's productions, calling the young director "a searcher who has lost his way."¹⁶⁴

Meierkhol'd welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution in October of 1917, and joined the Communist Party the following year. He believed the political revolution opened unlimited space

¹⁶⁴ Cited in the introduction to volume 3 of Lunacharskii's *Collected Works*, ed. I.I. Anisimov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1964), under "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3> [accessed September 10, 2014].

for his own artistic innovations, the “possibility of overcoming tiresome creative contradictions.”¹⁶⁵ Meierkhol’d saw an opportunity to realize his pre-revolutionary notion of the theater as a form of literal play, where the actors and action merged with the audience, “in the name of a spiritual confluence of the people, overcoming their social disconnection.”¹⁶⁶ Meierkhol’d was self-consciously part of the larger avant-garde, yet not a member of any of the so-called Futurist, Leftist, or Formalist factions within it. Commissar Lunacharskii recognized the distinctions between the various groups, but in his public pronouncements, tended to refer to all artistic innovators collectively as “futurists.”¹⁶⁷ In an article for a German magazine written in 1920, addressed to German theater workers, Lunacharskii wrote: “In Russia, within the theater itself as the Revolution found it, there took place a small revolution of its own... The Revolution took in its arms the futurist theater. In her burning hands, this futurist theater shone with true communist fire.”¹⁶⁸ While Meierkhol’d continued to work in the Imperial Theaters, Lunacharskii appointed him as deputy of the Petrograd Theater Department (TEO) of Narkompros.

Meierkhol’d was one of several authors of a “notification” in the February 14, 1918 edition of the newspaper *Izvestiia*.¹⁶⁹ The new, “profoundly democratic” government, the authors claimed, was summoned to gradually implement the “principles of the people’s cooperation,” and had assigned part of this colossal task to the theater. The state reserved for itself the right to

¹⁶⁵ I.I. Shneiderman, “Teatr RSFSR”, in *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, ed., A.Z. Iufit (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1968), 140.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁶⁷ Nadezhda Krupskaiia (1869-1939), second-in-command at Narkompros and Lenin’s wife, wrote that Lunacharskii used the short hand *komfut* to refer to “communist futurists,” N. Krupskaiia, *Narkom Lunacharskii*, under “Issledovaniia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/issledovaniia/narkom-lunacharskij> [accessed July 21, 2014].

¹⁶⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Teatr i revoliutsiia” (Theater and Revolution) in Vol. 3 of his *Collected Works* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964) under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/lib/ss-tom-3/teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed August 15, 2014].

¹⁶⁹ “Notification of the theatrical soviet under Narkompros on the beginning of the soviets’ activities and putting before them their duties,” in *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, ed. A.Z. Iufit (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1968), 40. The other signees were: Ol’ga Kameneva (head of the Petrograd TEO, and Lev Trotskii’s sister), Lapitskii, Menzhenskaia, Ignatov, Rink, Shternberg, and Pashkovskii.

ensor, but its main job was to limit the plundering of the existing theaters by private entrepreneurs. “To give the theater to the people – that is the goal.” Accomplishing this, according to the members of the Petrograd TEO, would mean that the people’s “consciousness will be ennobled and grow under the radiance of art.”¹⁷⁰ The article in *Izvestiia* also reported that at the first meeting of the theatrical soviet or council, a questionnaire had been devised for the purpose of determining what the masses wanted and expected from the theater. The “notification” concluded with the assertion that the development of a new repertoire and artistic pedagogy were things to which “nobody can remain indifferent who values art and the personal interests of the people.”¹⁷¹

Meierkhol’d soon became personally involved in the Civil War and the Red Army theaters on the front. Overextended and ill with tuberculosis, he went to Crimea in the spring of 1919 for treatment and relaxation, but was forced to flee when the White Army captured Yalta. Meierkhol’d joined his family in Novorossiisk, but an informer betrayed him, and Meierkhol’d spent four months in prison before the Red Army liberated him, after which he remained in the city, where he helped create the first Red Army amateur theater. Meierkhol’d declared that he would “first militarize the theater and then ‘theatricalize’ the Military Training Administration.”¹⁷² Toward the end of 1919 on the Civil War front alone there were more than twelve hundred Red Army Theaters and approximately one thousand theater “circles.”¹⁷³ Propagandistic theater was the main – though not the only – genre of the Red Army units during the Civil War. These productions included professional actors as well as amateurs from the army, and the Red Army was visited by “propagandistic brigades” who usually prepared the repertory,

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷² Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 112.

¹⁷³ *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 6.

which included: *The Fight against Typhus; The Plots of the Counterrevolution; The Toilers' Army; The Fight against the Bagmen*.¹⁷⁴

The proliferation of theaters within the army reflected a nation-wide enthusiasm for the dramatic arts. During the Civil War almost every factory had its own dramatic circle, and there were approximately three thousand professional troupes in the Russian Republic alone. The Bolsheviks considered as part of their revolutionary mission transferring Russia's cultural wealth, including the theater, from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. They also saw the theater as an inexpensive tool for instilling essential but elusive class consciousness in a largely illiterate, often indifferent population exhausted by war, disease, and famine. The theater had the advantage of being easily adapted from one performance, audience, and location to the next, and this elasticity helped make indoctrination of rigid ideology palatable to audiences who hungered for entertainment rather than edification. Theater also offered the possibility of mass participation in the creative act, for actors, technicians, and spectators alike. Red Army theaters thus performed multiple, almost redundant functions, insofar as the military itself was, and remained, an institution that mandated political, social, cultural education and homogenization.¹⁷⁵

While on a trip to the south on an agit-train, Lunacharskii met Meierkhol'd – dressed in full martial regalia – in the port city of Rostov-on-Don in August, 1920. Having heard of the director's theatrical and para-military exploits, Lunacharskii invited Meierkhol'd to come to

¹⁷⁴ Nikolai A. Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edward Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 142.

¹⁷⁵ One Red Army officer wrote: "A great deal has been done, but how much more needs to be done to raise the cultural, intellectual, and moral level of the Red Army masses! How much we need to work to reveal to them their class consciousness, to explain to them the aims of the struggle in which they are the main participants." N.I. Kiriukhin, *Iz dnevnika* (Diary Extracts) (Moscow, 1928). Cited in von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, 113.

Moscow and replace Vera Menzhinskaia (1872-1944) as the head of the entire TEO.¹⁷⁶ In his memoirs, the actor Igor' Il'insky (1901-1987) described Meierkhol'd's appearance at the time: "He was wearing a soldier's greatcoat and on his cap there was a badge with Lenin's picture... In spite of its apparent simplicity, his appearance was somewhat theatrical, because although he was dressed modestly, the style was still á la Bolshevik: the carelessly thrown on coat, the boots and puttees, the cap, the dark red woolen scarf – it was all quite simple, but at the same time effective enough."¹⁷⁷

“The early revolutionary spring cannot bear ripe fruit”

Meierkhol'd officially assumed his new post September 16, 1920, and on October 9, Lunacharskii issued an instruction in which he succinctly formulated the task in front of Meierkhol'd and TEO: "Concentrate the work of TEO under new leadership on the regularization of theatrical life in the entire country, and in particular on the development of new types of theater." In the same order, Lunacharskii specified that the Bol'shoi, MKhAT, the State Children's Theater, and several others should be placed under the purview of the State Academic

¹⁷⁶ Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 62. Agit-prop trains – and ships – were active during the Civil War, carrying agitators bearing leaflets and posters, and other propaganda materials. Trains carried radios and printing presses, and established agit-prop stations along the way. From Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State; Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 59.

¹⁷⁷ Igor' Il'insky, *Sam o sebe* (About Myself) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962), 106. Cited in Vsevolod Meyerhold, *On Theatre*, trans. & ed. Edward Braun (Reading, UK: Methuen Drama, 1998), 162. In *Pobezhdaiushchii Meierkhol'd* (Triumphant Meierkhol'd), Il'inskii referred to some of the director's nicknames: "“Doctor Dapertutto”, ‘Maitre’, ‘Old Man’, ‘Master’, the dear and unforgettable teacher, theatrical wizard, charlatan and magician, genial improviser, a remarkable if not always consistent pedagogue, deep thinker, patiently listening and taking in everything that was valuable, talented, or new from what surrounded him in life, literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, music, cinema, theater.” (Doctor Dapertutto is a character from E.T.A. Hoffman's story *Adventure on New Year's Eve*, and the nickname Meierkhol'd gave himself in 1909. Today there is a Doctor Dapertutto Theater in Penza.) Igor' Il'insky, *Pobezhdaiushchii Meierkhol'd*, under *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom: Sbornik vospominanii* (Encounters with Meierkhol'd: A Collection of Remembrances) ed. L.D. Vendrovskiaia (Moscow: VTO, 1967), http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/vstrechi/#_Toc218770713 [accessed December 12, 2014].

Theaters, a group described as “those theaters which must be preserved in their present state, following a path of their own development.”¹⁷⁸

Earlier that year, Lunacharskii had cautioned against wholesale destruction of the old for the sake of the new: “In Russia, amongst the Communists, there are those who groundlessly reject the old theater as bourgeois...who with particular zeal combine the Revolution with a love of so-called ‘left’ art, which in Russia is usually nicknamed futurism.” Just as each epoch should have its own theater, so there should be socialist theater, he said, but “however careless it might be to decorate the naked branches of early spring with paper flowers, it is even more dangerous if plays are of the counterfeit-revolutionary kind.” A new repertoire was needed, Lunacharskii went on, but it was a mistake to classify all the dramatic works of the past as politically suspect, and it could ruin the theater, make it “hateful to the public,” if it were to be filled with “revolutionary pulp.” In Russia’s revolutionary epoch, while artillery sounded on the front of the Civil War, creativity could produce “splendid flowers” only after the basic problems of life – “victory over hunger, cold, and disease” – had been resolved. Extending his horticultural metaphor, Lunacharskii insisted that, “The fruits of pure culture are usually a later manifestation; the early revolutionary spring cannot bear ripe fruit.”¹⁷⁹ While Lunacharskii was sympathetic toward new art forms, he also wrote that he had seen “how the proletariat found tedious the staging of several ‘revolutionary’ plays, and heard the declarations of sailors and workers, saying they wanted an

¹⁷⁸ Cited in A.P. Shul’pin, *Teatr i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975) under “Issledovaniia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/issledovaniia/teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed September 10, 2014].

¹⁷⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Teatr i revoliutsiia” in Vol. 3 of his *Collected Works* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1964), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/lib/ss-t-m-3/teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed September 14, 2014]. In the same passage, Lunacharskii invoked Karl Marx, writing that the German “was mistaken about the tempo of history and predicted the death of capitalism much sooner than it occurred, or will occur, but the spiritual death of capitalism is already here. In the context of cultural production there has been a long decline, the dull evening of capitalism, interrupted to be sure, by the summer-lightning of distinctive talent, but the phrase, spoken by Engels, ‘the proletariat is the only successor of the great philosophers and poets’, remains true.”

end to these revolutionary spectacles, and demanding that the dramas of Gogol and Ostrovskii replace them.”¹⁸⁰

Not merely theatrical figures, but all artists who had been considered revolutionary before 1917 were encouraged by Meierkhol'd's appointment. This group referred to themselves as “leftist,” in contrast to the “right,” who favored more traditionalist forms. According to the theater critic Konstantin Rudnitsky (1920-1988), “this demarcation was drawn particularly sharply in the theater...from the ‘left’ point of view, all traditional theaters, and especially academic theaters represented bastions of aesthetic reaction and conservatism.”¹⁸¹ The leftists – or *komfut*, in Lunacharskii's parlance – were guided by a simple slogan: whatever is new is good. Where Lunacharskii had seen an artistic revolution within the political one, the poet and playwright, and self-proclaimed Futurist Vladimir Maiakovskii (1893-1930) drew a parallel between the Civil War and the schism in the arts: “The Revolution has divided all of Russia into two camps, a border has even been drawn between the left and right and art...only the proletariat will create the new, and only with us, the Futurists, is there a common road with the proletariat.”¹⁸²

In his new – according to Rudnitsky, “authoritarian” – position, Meierkhol'd capitalized on the notion of political and aesthetic combat and instituted “Theatrical October” in TEO. Meierkhol'd began to refer to the abbreviation TEO in two ways: *Teatral'nyi otdel* (Theater

¹⁸⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Imenem proletariata” (In the Name of the Proletariat), *Vestnik Teatra*, 1920, No.51, 3. From *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 17. Aleksandr Ostrovskii (1823-1886) was an enormously popular and prolific Russian playwright, whose dramas mostly lampooned the mores of the merchant class, and who was at the vanguard of creating a truly Russian theatrical repertoire after a century of imitation of mostly French dramatic forms. In 1923, Lunacharskii coined the slogan “Back to Ostrovskii” as a battle-cry of the counter-attack against the perceived excesses of “revolutionary theater's” experimentation.

¹⁸¹ Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 58.

¹⁸² Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Collected Works in 13 Volumes*, vol. 12 (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1959), 452. Cited in A.L. Shul'pin, *Teatr i revoliutsiia*, (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975) under “Issledovaniia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovaniia/teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed September10, 2014].

Department), and as *Teatral'nyi Oktiabr* (Theatrical October).¹⁸³ In a speech to his co-workers on October 11, 1920, Meierkhol'd advanced the idea of making the department's journal, *Vestnik Teatra* (Theater Messenger) into a vehicle of this new doctrine: "We are unable to find sufficiently loud words with which to salute the course of Theatrical October, which opens a new page in the history of Russian and the world's theater...Look at the territory of the RSFSR as a continuous theatrical front, and with every step forward we must attempt to make a different theater live and overcome the pre-existing ones."¹⁸⁴

Prior to Meierkhol'd's appointment to lead TEO, *Vestnik Teatra* had been mostly devoid of political polemics, satisfied with reporting on current events of the theater world. Henceforth, the journal began to advocate a more leftist position and the tone of the courier of "Theatrical October" became confrontational, aggressive, with frequent references to "a civil war in the theater."¹⁸⁵ Using the shorthand *aky* for the so-called "academic theaters," the journal denounced them as the refuge for enemies of the Revolution, and deplored the apolitical nature of their repertoire. Meierkhol'd's former mentors and employers, Stanislavskii and Nemirovich-Danchenko, found themselves on the wrong side of the "theatrical front," ranked in the same category as the officers of the White Army. TEO itself began to resemble a military command center, with *Vestnik Teatra* as the main weapon in a struggle to requisition the *aky*'s material and manpower. Meierkhol'd and his supporters coveted what they felt was squandered on these "nests of reaction," and demanded that their considerable resources be redistributed to the

¹⁸³Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 59.

¹⁸⁴ In *Vestnik Teatra*, 1920, No.71, 4. Cited in A.P. Shul'pin, *Teatr i revolutsiia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975) under "Issledovaniia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovaniia/teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed September10, 2014].

¹⁸⁵ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 59. Soon after *Vestnik teatra's* transformation, Lunacharskii and others within Narkompros created the journal *Kul'tura teatra* for the purpose of publicly rebutting *Vestnik's* claims.

amateur and Red Army theaters.¹⁸⁶ The Theatrical October campaign against the *aky* was a rhetorical one in more ways than one, as Meierkhol'd's authority at TEO did not extend to academic theaters, which were under the direct control of Lunacharskii and Narkompros.

According to the Hungarian journalist Rene Fülöp-Miller (1891-1963), a critic of the Bolsheviks who spent time in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, "The 'Theatrical Octoberists' formed, as it were, the storming troops of this 'militant theater.' Their function was to take the field with merciless energy and destructive fury against the old theater, quite in the spirit of the 'militant communism' of the period." The essence of Meierkhol'd's conception of the theater, he continued, was as a weapon of political warfare, and not simply art for art's sake. For Meierkhol'd and his army of dramatists, the stage was a means of collective organization, the principles of "Theatrical October" conformed with Marxism in that it made "prominent the *unindividual*. Meierkhol'd is not concerned with the individual soul, but he puts the mass soul in its place...the communication of which is the social function of the theater."¹⁸⁷

In Lunacharskii's judgment, the expectation by the supporters of "Theatrical October" that in the early years of the Revolution the masses would – or could – participate in creative collaboration was futile, something he compared to "expecting a miracle." He acknowledged that great strides had been made in this direction, and that, "the proletariat and peasantry has shown a great instinct: a rush of the mass to the side of art, and particularly to the side of theater. Thousands, if not tens of thousands of workers' and peasant theatrical groups have begun to flower in Russia." But he scolded the "Theatrical Octoberists," saying they had become "completely infected with futurism...they have hopelessly confused their artistic revolution with

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 60.

¹⁸⁷ Rene Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (London: Chiswick Press, 1926), 114-115.

the proletarian one.”¹⁸⁸ Lunacharskii’s own idea of what constituted proper proletarian culture was itself essentially tautological: art created for proletarians by proletarians – presumably infused with the necessary revolutionary consciousness, itself the product of communist acculturation. The Commissar also did not waver from his earlier instruction on the academic theaters, and confronted Meierkhol’d’s assault head-on. In the December 4, 1920, edition of *Vestnik Teatra* he wrote: “I am prepared to entrust Comrade Meierkhol’d with the destruction of the old and bad and the creation of the new and good. But I am not prepared to entrust him with the preservation of the old and good, the vital and strong, which must be allowed to develop in a revolutionary atmosphere.”¹⁸⁹

Meierkhol’d was an audacious but mostly ineffective administrator, and soon realized that it was one thing to declare “Theatrical October,” and another to bring it about. He also came to recognize that the notion of creating purely proletarian art on command was an illusion, and he set about looking for new aesthetic forms – and venues – that “could contain and express the spirit of the Revolution.”¹⁹⁰ In the summer of 1920, Meierkhol’d took possession of the former Zon Theater in Moscow and discarded the decrepit theater’s interior architecture and decorations, constructed ramps that connected auditorium and stage, eliminated the footlights, and festooned the exposed bare brick walls with political slogans and posters.¹⁹¹ The theater was

¹⁸⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Teatr i revoliutsiia” in Vol. 3 of his *Collected Works* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-t-m-3/teatr-i-revolucia> [accessed September 14].

¹⁸⁹ In *Vestnik Teatra*, No. 76-77. Cited in Vsevolod Meyerhold, *On Theatre*, 164.

¹⁹⁰ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 60.

¹⁹¹ Posters were an important part of Agitprop (*Agitatsiia i propaganda*; Dept. of Agitation and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party). The Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) posters, initiated by Maiakovskii, were mainly designed to provide people with the latest news bulletins, reminiscent of the *lubok*, or popular broadsheets, originally peasant paintings on wood. In the 1920s, the amateur theatrical group *Siniaia Bluza* (Blue Blouse) began to bring the *lubok* to life through the “living newspaper,” in which actors would act out the contents of the news bulletins. This was usually followed by dialogue-duets between the actors, a quick-fire speech, and finally some tongue-twisters, rhymed and full of puns. The Blue Blouse repertoire also included agit-trials, where the audience was encouraged to take sides. The “accused” ranged from the murderers of Rosa Luxembourg, the clergy, to an effigy of alcoholism. Kathleen McCreedy and Richard Stourek, *Theatre as Weapon:*

“made to resemble the street, or a political rally.”¹⁹² Not all were enthralled, and according to the critic Viktor Shklovskii (1893-1984), “The stage area is stripped; the theater resembles an overcoat with the collar ripped out. It is neither cheerful nor light.”¹⁹³ Meierkhol’d called his new theater RSFSR Theater 1, with the idea of developing a network of RSFSR theaters across the nation, each with its own “revolutionary” repertoire.¹⁹⁴ In a sense he was merely following orders, as Lunacharskii had instructed Meierkhol’d to create “model theaters, imbued with the revolutionary spirit and reverberating with revolutionary agitation in new and absolutely artistic forms.”¹⁹⁵ Meierkhol’d conceived of his new theaters as part artistic production line and part school, and consisting of four sections: agitation, neoclassical plays, socialist plays, and one for the promotion of “new art forms” under the guidance of Maiakovskii.¹⁹⁶ To mark the celebration of the third anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, RSFSR Theater 1 chose as its first production the staging of the Belgian symbolist poet Emile Verhaeren’s (1855-1916) play in verse *Les Aubes* (*The Dawns*, or *Zori* in Russian).

“He stands on the threshold of the pantheon”

In 1919, the Repertory Section of TEO, of which Meierkhol’d was a member, had promulgated a bulletin in which they recommended a series of foreign plays on socialist themes. Topping the list was Verhaeren’s *The Dawns*. The section observed that, “The Belgian poet’s

Workers’ Theatres in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain 1917-1934 (London: Routledge, 1986), 11;13;28. See also: Lynn Mally, “Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theater,” *Slavic Review*, Vol.62, No.2 (Summer, 2003), 324-342.

¹⁹² Nancy van Norman Baer, “Design and Movement in the Theater of the Russian Avant-Garde”, in *Theatre and Revolution Avant-Garde: 1913-1935*, ed. Nancy van Norman Baer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 45.

¹⁹³ *In Zhizn’ Iskusstva* (The Life of Art), December, 1920, 10-12. Cited in Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 60.

¹⁹⁴ RSFSR stands for *Rossiiskaia Sovetskaia Federativnaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika*, or Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic.

¹⁹⁵ A.V. Lunacharskii, “K voprosu o teatral’noi politike” (On the Question of Theatrical Politics), *Vestnik Teatra*, 1920, No. 74, 2. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy: 1917-1921*, 139.

¹⁹⁶ Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 63. RSFSR Theaters 2, 3 and 5 were also in Moscow, number 4 in Nizhnii Novgorod; the fifth became known as TEREVSAT, or The Theater of Revolutionary Satire.

drama is worthy of particular attention from the theaters as much for its undoubtable poetic merits, as for the intense passion that makes this drama the apotheosis of socialist revolution. Unfortunately, because of the complexity involved in staging the play, it is unsuitable for rural theaters, and in this regard the director needs to help, and come up with a plan for its simplification.”¹⁹⁷

Emile Verhaeren was born May 21, 1855 in a “nice little corner of Flanders,” but wrote his poetry and plays in French.¹⁹⁸ In 1916 Verhaeren perished, Anna Karenina-like, under the wheels of an oncoming train, although his death was accidental. While largely forgotten now, at the beginning of the twentieth century Verhaeren was one of the most widely read and translated poets of his day, and a perennial candidate for the Nobel Prize. *The Dawns*, written in 1898, was his first play, and the third part of a trilogy, of which the first parts were the poems *Les Campagnes hallucinées (The Hallucinated Countrysides, 1893)* and *Les Villes tentaculaires (The Tentacled Towns, 1895)*. In the play, set in an unnamed country in an unspecified age, a modern industrial city – Oppidomagne – sucks the wealth from the impoverished countryside, causing the starving peasants and beggars to besiege the city. After “The Regency,” which controls the city, violates a truce with the opposing forces, the tribune Hérézien secretly allows the enemy to enter Oppidomagne, after which he declares: “It is only you, the conquerors, who could realize

¹⁹⁷ “Bulletin No. 1 Repertuarnoi sektsii, 13-16 Apr., 1919”, *Vestnik Teatra*, 1919, No.20. 9-10. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy: 1917-1921*, ed. A.Z. Iufit, 45. Other recommendations for foreign plays on “socialist themes” included the Dutch playwright Herman Heijermans’ (1864-1924) drama *Op Hoop van Zegen* (Dutch for *Trusting Our Fate in the Hands of God*; The English title was *The Good Hope*, rendered in Russian as *Gibel’ Nadezhdy*, or *The Destruction of Hope*); The French playwright Octave Mirabeau’s (1848-1917) *Les affaires sont les affaires (Business is business*, the title in Russian was *Vlast’ deneg*, or *The Power of Money*); the French dramatist Prosper Merimee’s (1807-1870) *La Jacquerie* (staged in Russia with the title *Nedovol’nye*, or *The Dissatisfied*). Three other plays were said to require modification and a pre-performance explanation in order to make them “consonant” with contemporary socialist conditions: the German playwright Gerhart Hauptmann’s (1862-1946) *Die Weber (The Weavers*, or *Tkachi* in Russian); the Austrian playwright Ludwig Anzengruber’s (1839-1889) *Der ledige Hof* (staged in Russia as *Nashla kosa na kamen’*, an expression meaning *Diamond cutting diamond*, or *He has met his match this time*). Other members of the Repertory Section included: Aleksandr Blok, V.V. Gippius, V.V. Bakrylov, P.P. Gnedich, F.F. Zelinskii, P.B. Ivanov, S.E. Radlov, N.A. Kotliarevskii, A.M. Revizov.

¹⁹⁸ Stefan Zweig, *Emile Verhaeren*, trans. J. Bithell (London: Constable & Company, 1915), 9.

our dream. Revolutions always begin by the renunciation of privilege; you renounce victory.”¹⁹⁹ For his high-mindedness – or gullibility – Hérékien is almost immediately assassinated, a martyr to his faith in mankind. Yet all is well that ends well, and the play concludes with The Regency deposed, and the townspeople and peasantry joining together in song.

Meierkol'd and the Symbolist poet and critic Georgii Chulkov (1879-1939) – who translated the play into Russian – along with assistant director, Valerii Bebutov (1885-1961), made Hérékien into a Bolshevik and “Sovietized” the play in several ways. They inflated the role of the masses, and introduced many new crowd scenes of their own. Where Verhaeren’s original play had no Marxist “class enemies,” the revised version included the demise of businessmen at a Stock Exchange and members of Parliament, along with the slogans “dictatorship of the proletariat” and “a world-wide proletarian revolution.” Meierkol'd and his collaborators also updated the final scene to include a radio broadcast and the raising of a “Stellar Flag,” a representation of Soviet Russia.²⁰⁰

Until RSFSR Theater 1’s 1920 staging, the strange, mystical play was mostly read rather than performed. In his biography of Verhaeren, Franz Hellens argues that *The Dawns* remained in obscurity primarily because Verhaeren “so resolutely takes the side of the revolution...but of all his plays it is the most airy, the most capacious, the most human.”²⁰¹ In his study of the Belgian poet and playwright, P. Mansell Jones maintains that *The Dawns* was the product of the naïve optimism characteristic of turn-of-the-century socialism, and “the belief that pacifistic propaganda could disband troops in action, and noble arguments destroy armaments.”²⁰² Writing in the journal *The Town Planning Review* in 1912, Patrick Abercrombie offers a more

¹⁹⁹ Emile Verhaeren, *The Dawns*, trans. Albert Symons (Chicago: Charles H. Sergel, Company, 1898), 87.

²⁰⁰ Nikolai A. Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 136.

²⁰¹ Franz Hellens, *Verhaeren* (Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1964), 69.

²⁰² P. Mansell Jones, *Verhaeren* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 39.

idiosyncratic interpretation, one that perhaps accounts for the play's appeal to Bolsheviks preoccupied both with celebrating the proletariat and encouraging a rapprochement between the urban and rural dispossessed. Abercrombie writes, rather mystifyingly, that insofar as *The Dawns* represents movement to the city instead of "flight to unspoiled nature, and foretells a purging by blood leading to a better future, Verhaeren might be called the poet of town planning."²⁰³ In 1915, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) observed that *The Dawns* posed a challenge to most theaters "because of the fact that here, too ethical an idea is expressed, with all the glow and ecstasy which as a rule in modern drama is only found in the utterances of erotic desire."²⁰⁴

The Russian writer and critic Valerii Briusov's (1873-1924) translation of Verhaeren's *The Tentacled Towns* (*Goroda-spruty*, or *Octopus-cities* in Russian) had been popular and influential with university students and intellectuals in Russia, and according to Zweig, Verhaeren was considered a "spiritual pioneer" there.²⁰⁵ Living outside of Russia at the time, Lunacharskii had read *The Dawns* in French, and in an article published in St. Petersburg in 1914 entitled "Drama revoliutsii" (Revolutionary Drama), he described the play as compelling, but confused: "There is that lively combative, only half-visible, partly unjust but noble mob...but the play seems ripped from the earth...and the drama is somewhat unreal."²⁰⁶ In the journal *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) in May of the same year, Lunacharskii provided a broader –

²⁰³ Patrick Abercrombie, "The Many-Tentacled Town: the Vision of Emile Verhaeren," *The Town Planning Review*, Vol.3 (July, 1912), 135.

²⁰⁴ Zweig, *Emile Verhaeren*, 166.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 257. In 1920, Briusov composed a five-stanza ode to Lunacharskii which begins: "In the days of victory, where in the fierce whirlwind/All the past could be drowned/You perceived with a foretelling eye/Above the disintegration the foundational path." The poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) in November of the same year, right after a public debate on Lunacharskii's plays, wrote a short poem addressed to the Commissar, "Chuzhomu" (To a Stranger) which includes the lines: "Your victories are not mine!/ Different ones have been dreamed of!/We are not at two ends of the Earth/In two constellations!" Under, "Biografiia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/posvascheniya/cvetaeva-lunacharskomu> [accessed January 11, 2014].

²⁰⁶ A.V. Lunacharskii, "Drama revoliutsii", in *Bor'ba* (Struggle), 1914, No.3, under "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-7/pisma-o-proletraskoj-literature> [accessed August 2, 2014].

and hyperbolic – assessment of Verhaeren’s literary career, saying that the poet had fathomed the depth and breadth of human ecstasy, fusing the religious and creative urges of mankind. Furthermore, Verhaeren was, "needless to say," a true modernist, and even a ‘true futurist’. According to Lunacharskii, Verhaeren was the first to “push to the limits the beauty of the eternal and triumphant conditions found in the labor and life of modern man, modern metallic and electrical culture...his entire work extends into the future.” He asserted that the Italian futurists pointed to Verhaeren as one of their teachers, but that the Belgian was “altogether hostile to the notion of war with the past, because the future does not tear him away from the present, and the present from the past.”²⁰⁷ This formulation casts Verhaeren as a kindred spirit, insofar as Lunacharskii thought a militant socialist spirit should guide efforts to enlighten the proletariat, while preserving the cultural riches of the past.

After Verhaeren’s death in 1916, on December 12, Lunacharskii gave a speech at a memorial service for him in Geneva in which he – with a hint of condescension – proclaimed: “He lives, Emile Verhaeren! O Verhaeren, you are one of us! Although our path is more difficult than that of the patriots of your small fatherland, we will sing the hymns of your past and

²⁰⁷ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Poslednie knigi Verkherena” (Verhaeren’s Last Books), *Sovremennik*, May, 1914, No.10, under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-5/poslednie-knigi-verharena> [accessed July 15, 2014]. Lunacharskii was not alone in his assessment of Verhaeren as a futurist. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti ignited the Futurist movement with his 1909 “Futurist Manifesto” published in an Italian newspaper, and re-printed in France’s *Le Figaro*; publishing manifestos was one of the main attributes of Futurism. According to Vera Castiglione, the French poet René Ghil was “quick to challenge Marinetti’s claim of having been the first to glorify the industrial world by reminding him of Verhaeren’s poems: ‘You claim that ten years ago, you yourself published the first books that glorified factories and machines that were used across the cities. But already before you, Emile Verhaeren played to the same tune.’” Vera Castiglione, “A Futurist before Futurism: Emile Verhaeren and the Technological Epic,” in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, ed. Gunter Berghaus (Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2009), 103. In his manifesto, Marinetti had recommended performing plays backwards, pouring glue on the seats, spreading sneezing powder around the audience, arranging fistfights and fires in the auditorium, “all to the glory of speed and dynamism.” Meierhold’ referred to this as he was preparing to stage Maiakovskii’s play *Mystery-Bouffe* (a parody of the Noah’s Ark story) in 1921. Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, trans. Charles Rougle (London: MacMillan Press, 1993), 74.

future.”²⁰⁸ Several years later, in a series of lectures on “The History of Western Literature and its most important moments” at Sverdlov Communist University, Lunacharskii recommended Verhaeren highly, saying that of all the “western” poets he was the closest to the Russians, and that through him one could “learn to be a proletarian poet.”²⁰⁹ In an article for the *Literaturnaia Entsiklopediia* in 1929, Lunacharskii was able to put Verhaeren’s work in the proper scientific-socialist framework, saying that *The Dawns* had prophesized the victory of socialism: “However, Verhaeren does not simply celebrate the march of the historical process. He remembers that the process is a struggle.” Lunacharskii conceded that Verhaeren was not a genuinely proletarian poet – and implicitly that socialism was perpetually on the verge of realization – and not within the “pantheon of our great writers, but he stands on the threshold of that pantheon.” Last, and most certainly not least, Lunacharskii assured his students that Lenin had enjoyed and approved of Verhaeren, and “on sleepless nights would read him.”²¹⁰

“First give me the rabbit!”

Meierkhol’d made clear from the beginning of the production the importance of combining amusement and indoctrination. In a speech delivered on October 9, 1920 to RSFSR Theater 1’s company before the first rehearsal of *The Dawns*, he criticized professional actors for their apolitical attitude, saying that “no man has ever been apolitical; man is always the product of the forces of his environment.”²¹¹ In a speech to his actors later that month, Meierkhol’d said the classics, subject to alteration, could be the basis of a revolutionary

²⁰⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Rech’ na vechere pamiati poeta v Zheneve” (Speech on the evening of the poet’s memorial in Geneva), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/emil-verharn> [accessed November 13, 2014].

²⁰⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Trinadtsataia leksiia” (Thirteenth Lecture), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-4/lekcia-13>

²¹⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Verkharen”, in *Literaturnaia Entsiklopediia, Vol.2* (Moscow: Kommunisticheskaia Akademiia, 1929), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-5/-verharn> [accessed July 6, 2014].

²¹¹ V.E. Meierkhol’d, “Iz informatsii ‘O sovremennom teatre’” (On the Contemporary Theater), *Vestnik Teatra*, 1920, No. 70, 11-12. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 143-144.

repertoire, and that “we shall tackle the task of adaptation fearlessly, sure of its necessity.” Not just the classics, but the consciousness of the actors was in need of modification; there should be no more “psychology or ‘authentic emotions.’ Here is our theatrical program: lots of bright lights, merriment, grandeur, enthusiasm, creativity, and the participation of the audience in the creative act of the performance.”²¹²

The premiere of Meierkhol’d’s and Bebutov’s staging of *The Dawns* took place on Sunday, November 7, 1920. According to one observer, the theater critic Boris Alpers (1894-1974), the “revolutionary atmosphere” in the theater was palpable: there were no ticket-takers, and the cold winter air came in through the open doors, so that most people left their coats on; “in the halls people could crack nuts and smoke tobacco.” A noisy and impatient crowd of Red Army soldiers and young factory workers filled the theater, having received – unnecessarily as it turned out – free tickets. “Most of them did not remove their caps, since for one thing it was too cold, and for another, one felt as if he was the master of the place.”²¹³

The curtain consisted of a red circle against a black velvet background, with a yellow area within it bearing the letters “RSFSR.” The action of the play had been modified so that it corresponded to a political rally or meeting, and the actors wore nearly identical costumes, with neither wigs nor make-up. The lights of the auditorium were left on, and military searchlights, located in the boxes, were aimed at the actors’ faces. To enhance the sense of a conjoined stage and auditorium, Meierkhol’d also dispersed actors throughout the audience who occasionally

²¹² V.E. Meierkhol’d, “Iz rechi V.E. Meierkhol’da pered truppoi teatra RSFSR 1” (From a speech by Meierkhol’d in front of the troupe of RSFSR Theater 1), *Vestnik Teatra*, October 31, 1920, No.72-73, 19-20. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 144-145. Meierkhol’d began his speech by saying that, while some say mankind is entering an “ice age,” and the sun was too weak to warm the earth anymore, “We have nothing to fear! The warmth of another sun gives us inner strength. Our new sun is the creative construction of a new communist world. This inner heating comes about in the process of producing new forms of life – it is that unique warmth that heats the heroes of the Revolution and the ranks of its workers.”

²¹³ B.V. Alpers, “Teatr sotsial’noi maski” (The Theater of the Social Mask), in *Teatral’nye ocherki, t.2* (Theatrical Notes, vol.2) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977), under: “Alpers B.V.”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Alpers/Ocherki1/#_Toc377638905 [accessed November 5, 2014].

would shout out lines in response to a speech delivered from the stage. He also deployed a sort of Greek chorus – in this case a group of young people in their winter coats – who would contribute to the dialogue from the orchestra pit.²¹⁴ An anonymous eyewitness to the premiere recalled that: “the actors not only performed in the area where the footlights used to be, but descend on a wide staircase toward the audience...the impression is that these mass responses are coming from the audience...during the awesome sounds of the funeral march over the coffin of the slain leader, I saw Red Army men instinctively take off their hats. You could feel the beating of a common pulse.”²¹⁵

The most striking – and bewildering – aspect of the production was Vladimir Dmitriev’s set design, built in response to Meierkhold’s vague instructions: “We want our backdrop to be either an iron pipe or the sea or something built by the new man.”²¹⁶ Dmitriev himself had written in *Vestnik Teatra* that “decorative sets have no meaning.”²¹⁷ Dmitriev’s set was “futurist” in the broad, Lunacharskiiian sense of the word, but strictly speaking reflected the Constructivist, Suprematist aesthetics of Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) and Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953).²¹⁸ Like Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, or *Tatlin’s Tower*, an icon of the Russian avant-garde in the 1920s, Dmitriev used simple shapes made from rope, iron, wood, and wire to sculpt the now empty space of the former Zon theater. The set consisted of multi-colored cylinders, triangles, and gray cubes on and above a bare stage, all against a background of two

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 61.

²¹⁶ V.E. Meierkhol’d, *Stat’i, pis’ma, rechi, besedy* (Articles, letters, speeches, discussions), ed. A.V. Fevral’skii (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), under “Meierkhol’d V.E.”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Meierhold/articl_1/ [accessed November 25, 2014].

²¹⁷ Cited in Nancy van Norman Baer, “Design and Movement in the Theater of the Russian Avant-Garde,” 45.

²¹⁸ In “Resolution ‘A’ in Art”, Malevich advocated: “#16: To commit to social care all the workers of academic arts, as invalids and the arrière-garde of the economic movement.” K.S. Malevich, *Essays in Art 1915-1928, Vol.1* (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968). In Rosenberg ed., *Bolshevik Visions, Part 2*, 243.

plywood circles, one red and one gold.²¹⁹ In the radical design for *The Dawns*, Fülöp-Miller found an example of the “typically Russian” lack of moderation in all things. He lamented that whereas Meierkhol’d only a few years earlier had supported the “purely decorative methods of stylistic theater,” he was now embarked on a “fanatical campaign against every tradition of scenic beauty.”²²⁰ The laziness of the “typically Russian” slur notwithstanding, the proudly iconoclastic Meierkhol’d would have wholeheartedly agreed with this critique.²²¹

Contradictions characterized the entire production. The actors’ passionate soliloquies clashed with the austere sets, which also seemed to form a barricade rather than a bridge between audience and stage. In an article entitled “To My Opponents,” Lunacharskii recalled the confused reaction of the audience, self-conscious about their cultural deficiencies, and “practically sweating as they pointed to the sets and asked ‘What does it all mean?’”²²² Some of the more successful innovations were extemporaneous. During the performance of *The Dawns* on November 18, news arrived at the theater that the Crimean city of Perekop had been captured by the Red Army. Meierkhol’d decided to read the telegram from the stage, in place of the line uttered by the herald in the play, announcing victory. From then on, ROSTA (the Russian

²¹⁹ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 61.

²²⁰ Joseph Gregor and Rene Fülöp-Miller, *The Russian Theatre: Its Character with Special Relevance to the Revolutionary Period* (London & New York: Benjamin Blom, 1930), 67.

²²¹ In an article published the day of the premiere, Meierkhol’d and Bebutov wrote: “For us there is no significance in ‘decoration.’ All that is for the German and Austrian artist at the end of the 19th century, and the restaurants of Venice and Munich...If we turn to the latest follower of Picasso or Tatlin, then we know we have something in common: we build and they build, and for us, the manner of execution is more important than the patterns, designs, or colors...Our artists, throwing down the paint-brush with pleasure, pick up an axe, a pick, and a hammer and carve out new stages...” V.E. Meierkhol’d and V.M. Bebutov, “K Postanovke ‘Zor’ v 1-om Teatre RSFSR” (On the Staging of *The Dawns* in RSFSR Theater 1) *Vestnik Teatra*, November 7, 1920, No. 72-73, 8-10. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 147. Katerina Clark describes the contests within the world of art after the Revolution less as one between traditionalists and the avant-garde, as between monumentalists and iconoclasts. “The first premise of the avant-garde is the destruction of time and space...new men and new consciousness comes about less as a result of individual perception, than by establishing an entirely new aesthetic.” Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 49-50.

²²² A.V. Lunacharskii, “Moim Opponentam” *Vestnik Teatra*, December 14, 1920, No. 76-77, under: “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-2/moim-opponentam> [accessed January 3, 2014].

Telegraph Agency) communications became a permanent part of the production.²²³ In spite of its flaws, deficiencies, and strangeness, *The Dawns* ran for over a hundred performances to mostly packed houses and, according to one Meierkhol'd biographer, "proclaimed a new epoch in the Soviet theater."²²⁴

The re-working of *The Dawns* was accomplished with large cuts to the original text, and this abbreviation and translation into modern political terms rendered the play almost unintelligible according to most early reviews.²²⁵ Most of the criticism came from theater traditionalists. Yet even some innovators like the director Aleksandr Tairov (1885-1950) – improbably included under Lunacharskii's "futurist" rubric – disapproved of Meierkhol'd and Bebutov's creation. Tairov thought that art and politics were fundamentally incompatible, and in a lecture entitled "Twilight of *The Dawns*" delivered on January 17, 1921 he called the production a "vulgar popular print" and said that "the mass spectator" (*massovyi zhe zritel'*) welcomed the revolutionary slogans emanating from the stage, but was entangled in the "metaphorical text," and recoiled from its "incomprehensible formulations."²²⁶

In an article in the November 10, 1920 edition of *Pravda* (Truth), Nadezhda Krupskaja conceded that the audience seemed enthusiastic, and she approved of *The Dawns'* "revolutionary" themes. Yet she implied that the hero Hérénien's aversion to combat made him

²²³Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 61. According to Rudnitsky, Meierkhol'd liked this innovation so much he planned a production of *Hamlet* in which he asked Maiakovskii to re-write the gravediggers' scene in order to transform it into a "political review." In the November 25, 1920 issue of *Izvestiia*, an unidentified writer recalled how at a performance of *The Dawns*, after the actor playing the part of a scout read an actual letter about how the Red Army had "captured Crimea, the auditorium and all the actors with great passion shouted out, and after the scout had finished, everybody spontaneously began singing the 'Internationale'. The play was not interrupted but continued, spiritualized by flaming enthusiasm." In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 153. Lars Kleberg writes about Meierkhol'd's innovation: "What was interesting about this device...was not that art and reality were 'united', but rather that they confronted each other without erasing the distinction between them. For a moment reality got the upper hand and the aesthetic function played a subordinate role." Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, 66.

²²⁴V.E. Meierkhol'd, *On Theatre*, trans. and ed., Edward Braun (Reading, UK: Methuen Drama, 1998), 164.

²²⁵I.I. Shneiderman, "Teatr RSFSR", 141.

²²⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

morally dubious, although his achievement of peace by means of “propaganda” was evidence that he was a “powerful leader.” Krupskaia – who insisted on referring to Meierkhol’d’s theater as “the former Zon Theater” – recognized the “vagueness” in Verhaeren’s original *The Dawns*,” but wrote that this was the “whole charm of the play, which excites and satisfies the spectator.” As for the set design, she asked, “Just what is this? A large circle of golden paper, a wooden plank in the air – yet neither an airplane nor a plank, but something that a housepainter might hang while he paints a house, some sort of cubes, cylinders, and flat surfaces that protrude in the most perverse way, against the laws of nature.”

For Krupskaia, reflecting the same conservative artistic tastes as her husband, the only lasting impression from all the visual and spoken confusion was disappointment, and an aversion to the identical “cylindrical clothing” and to the conditions which were not “in any way normal.” In accommodating the play to Soviet circumstances, turning the peasants and beggars into the proletariat, the Regency into the bourgeoisie, the “hostile” into imperial forces, the “miraculous tale had been turned into a tawdry farce... With the change of only a few words and phrases, the fairy-tale (*skazka*) about the achievement of the brotherhood of peoples suddenly loses its luster, and gold is turned into tinsel. The Russian Revolution itself is the most beautiful, most enchanting, most magical fairy-tale.” Krupskaia concluded by calling for a restoration of Verhaeren’s original text.²²⁷

In an article in the November 20, 1920 issue of *Vestnik Teatra*, the theater critic M.B. Zagorskii defended Meierkhol’d’s version of *The Dawns* against those who argued that

²²⁷N.K. Krupskaia, “Postanovka Zor’ Verkharena (v Teatre b. Zona)” (The Staging of Verhaeren’s *The Dawns* in the former Zon Theater), November 10, 1920, *Pravda*. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 147-148. She continued on the theme of fairy-tales – and undeveloped Russian masses: “Children do not like it when their favorite fairy-tales have a single word changed. ‘You don’t know how to tell a story,’ they say when that happens. ‘You don’t know how to tell a story’ we want to tell the authors who have transformed *The Dawns*. In our real revolutionary fairy-tale the depth is fathomless, the beauty is ineffable, it is disconcerting to hear the twaddle uttered by Verhaeren’s revolutionary hero.”

transforming it was a sort of “delusion.” Zagorskii asserted the opposite, writing that if one tossed aside Verhaeren’s entire “quota of familiar rhetoric,” what still remained was a contemporary “proletarian revolutionary production.” Even the “genuine materials” of the set design corresponded “wonderfully to the authenticity of our revolutionary experience.” Parenthetically, Zagorskii addressed Krupskaja’s charges, and argued the play and its décor represented a type of realism, one that showed the Revolution not as “a fairy-tale, but as fact.” In contrast to the moribund productions of the classical repertoire, he claimed Meierkhol’d and Bebutov’s version of *The Dawns* provided a glimpse of modernity which theater audiences had been starved for, longing “to find our time in art, to feel its rhythm, to touch its bewitching pulse.” “Only the blind” could be oblivious to the spirit of the Revolution transmitted by this production, to the fact that this was the “first truly revolutionary play of the last three years.” Zagorskii admitted that the production had been prepared in haste, but it was “surprising and unusual in spite of its inadequacies.”²²⁸

In the same issue of *Vestnik Teatra*, the Proletkult gadfly and theater critic Platon Kerzhentsev (1881-1940), saying it was “difficult to be indifferent to the production,” offered a mixture of praise and constructive criticism.²²⁹ He wrote that the directors, “unfazed by the

²²⁸ M.B. Zagorskii, “Zori etiid” (A study of *The Dawns*), November 20, 1920, *Vestnik Teatra*, No. 74, 5-6. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 148-149. During the 1920-21 theater season of RSFSR Theater 1, Zagorskii had experimented with the use of audience questionnaires, first proposed by TEO in 1919. The results from the responses given by spectators to *The Dawns* are in the Central State Archive of Literature and Art (TsGALI) in Moscow, but Zagorskii summarized all his findings in the journal *LEF* in 1924: “There is no single spectator, neither is there a single performance. The revolutionary current switched on from the stage splits up the auditorium, organizes and differentiates its positive and negative elements.” Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, 95.

²²⁹ Proletkult (Proletarian Organization for Cultural Education) was, until 1921, a non-governmental group with a nation-wide network of clubs, reading groups, and studio theaters dedicated to creating working-class culture. By 1920 there were approximately 80,000 people participating, although the leaders and instructors were usually veterans of the professional stage, especially actors from MKhAT, including the future film director Sergei Eisenstein. Proletkult had been politically suspect from its inception before the Bolshevik Revolution, and Lenin and the Central Committee of the Communist Party condemned it as a den of “futurists, decadents, partisans of an idealistic philosophy hostile to Marxism, mere losers.” In 1932 Proletkult was liquidated altogether. Kerzhentsev

country's zealots," had brought courage, intelligence and talent to bear in the staging of *The Dawns*. Kerzhentsev said that at the first performance, the audience reaction – and not merely the theater itself – had been “cold and restrained” in its response. Contrary to Krupskaja's assertions, he suggested that the main reason for this failure of the production to fully satisfy the audience of Red Army soldiers and workers was that Verhaeren's play had not been revised “as much as it could have been.” According to Kerzhentsev, the Proletkult theaters had been the first to try to adapt *The Dawns*, diminishing the role of Hérénien and making the mob or masses the prime moral mover, something Meierkhol'd and Bebutov had “absolutely not accomplished;” if Hérénien was to remain at the center of the action, it was crucial that he not show “one iota of compromise.”

A militant Bolshevik, who joined the Party in 1904, living in a time of bombastic slogans and speeches, Kerzhentsev identified a debilitating flaw in the original, insufficiently abridged text, writing that, “Verhaeren's pathos is cold, philosophical...for the laboring masses it remains in the final analysis a collection of loud and bombastic words.” Along with the various technical devices – the actors seated in the audience reading proclamations, the staircase connecting stage to the hall – Kerzhentsev found the insertion of the chorus in the orchestra pit “clever” but insufficient to reach the “authentic proletariat.” He ended his review on an optimistic note, predicting that “in two weeks of collaborative alteration we will see a much more significant play than the one we saw on November 7.”²³⁰

was a Proletkult theorist and agitator in the early 1920s, but after 1928 he was head of the Central Committee Department of Cultural Propaganda and became a sort of “theatrical Robespierre, condemning all work that did not meet his strict criteria.” From Laurence Selenick, *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Theater* (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 307-308; 178-179.

²³⁰ P.M. Kerzhentsev, “Retsenziia Zori” (Review of *The Dawns*) November 20, 1920, *Vestnik Teatra*, No.74, 4. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 149-150.

On November 22, 1920, a well-attended public debate on *The Dawns* was held inside the RSFSR Theater 1. Open public debates, where Party officials, intellectuals and the masses all participated, were a notable feature of revolutionary Russia in the early 1920s.²³¹ In the first few years of Soviet rule, the regime had the will but lacked ways to completely control dissent, and multiple, competing visions of what communist society and culture should be thrived.²³² In the debate over the style and substance of *The Dawns*, Meierkhol'd and his collaborators were essentially put on trial, where judges and judged alike were accomplices in a sort of revolutionary drama – or melodrama – an ideological and aesthetic contest that resembled agitation trials, plays that were performed as part of the Soviet state's propaganda repertoire from 1917 to 1933, and a subcategory of the *agitki* (an abbreviation for *agitatsionnaia p'esa*, or agitation play) that originated in the Red Army theaters. By the late 1920s, the USSR's

²³¹ In connection with an article by Kerzhentsev in the November 20, 1920 edition of *Pravda*, a public debate over several of Lunacharskii's own plays took place on November 26 at the Dom pechatii (Print House, referred to by some wags as Dom *skuchati*, or Boredom House). Among those participating were Tairov, Maiakovskii, Briusov, Shklovskii, and Mgrebov. Kerzhentsev had criticized Lunacharskii's *Oliver Cromwell* for excessively celebrating the individual leader – “extolling the Danton of the English Revolution, while shaming its Marats” – and as a “hymn” to the spirit of political compromise, the play was in opposition to the “communist mood” of the present day. Kerzhentsev asserted that if one deciphered the symbolism of Lunacharskii's play *The Magi*, it revealed itself to be typically “petty-bourgeois, anarchistic,” insofar as it took no position, instead “blessing all sides, the right and the left, the White Guard and communism, Lenin and [the White General] Wrangel.” *Ivan in Heaven*, in which Ivan, finding himself in Paradise, converts Jesus Christ, God, and the rest of the heavenly host to atheism and the cause of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Kerzhentsev accused of being “too religious,” and Lunacharskii of conveying “reactionary ideas” in poetic form. In response, Lunacharskii argued that his *Oliver Cromwell* was a real revolutionary, but one of the seventeenth century, and while the Levelers might be closer to the Bolsheviks in terms of their ideals, they did not “feel the historical process” as keenly. As for *The Magi*, Lunacharskii maintained that symbolism was merely “outer clothing” concealing “realistic thought.” “The poet has the right to show Wrangel thanking Lenin for ‘saving his soul’...the pamphleteer (*publitsist*) does not have this right.” Lunacharskii defended *Ivan in Heaven* and its hero as someone who had “outgrown both the old and new gods...all that remains is one idea— eternal movement, the eternal growth of human psychology...And if I have sinned, then I stubbornly do not repent for these sins!” From “Vystuplenie na dispute o dramaturgii A.V. Lunacharskogo” (Statement on the Public Debate on the Plays of A.V. Lunacharskii), under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/lib/publikatsia-fevrasnogo/vystuplenie-na-dispute-o-dramaturgii-lunacharskogo> [accessed December 3, 2014]. A witness to the public debate later said that “Lunacharskii had spoken wonderfully, like God.” Kornei Chukovskii, *Dnevnik 1901-1969 v 2-akh tomakh* (Diary 1901-1969 in two volumes), under “Biografiia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.ru/bio/jornej-chukovskij-iz-dnevnikov> [accessed July 21, 2014].

²³² See Michael S. Fox, “Censorship and the Problem of Party Policy in Cultural Affairs, 1922-1928,” *Soviet Studies*, Vol.55, No.6 (1992), 1045-1068.

ensorship apparatus was able to efficiently limit the production of plays to those with pre-approved socialist content, and these mock-trials themselves became the template for the ritualized public purges of the 1930s and 1940s, in which thousands of Soviet citizens were called to collective account.²³³ Where previously substantive debate had taken place in the course of imaginary trials, under Stalin fictional charges were adjudicated in very real courtrooms.

There were eleven speakers, including the self-identified Futurist writer and critic Osip Brik (1880-1945), the actor Aleksandr Mgebrov (1884-1966) who played the role of the village prophet, or seer in the play, the critic Petr S. Kogan (1872-1932), Maiakovskii, Meierkhol'd, and Lunacharskii.²³⁴ The public debate was continued on November 29, proved popular, and thereafter occasional Monday evening post-production discussion/debates took place until the end of *The Dawns'* run in the spring of 1921. Many of the speakers noted the obvious, that Meierkhol'd and Bebutov's version did not conform to Verhaeren's original play. The writer Pavel Gromov (1899-1975) complained that the "passionate agitation" of the crowd was absent in the production, and while the "groupings were beautiful," the characters were all dressed identically, and it was necessary to know who was a peasant, a townsperson and so forth, as Verhaeren's play was about "class struggle." The stylized decoration and modernized plot

²³³ Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 10-13.

²³⁴ At the time, Brik worked in the Visual Arts Section of Narkompros. In 1924, writing in the Futurist Journal *LEF* (*levyi front iskusstv*, or Left Front of the Arts) that he and Maiakovskii edited, Brik reflected on the experiments of Meierkhol'd and others: "Attempts have been made to explode the theater 'from within' in vain. The expert dynamiters conscientiously expended their supplies of dynamite...but must the theater be blown up? Let it stand as a monument to art and olden times." In Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, trans. Charles Rogle (London: The MacMillan Press, 1993), 116. In 1919, Kogan wrote: "Among the means by which a class illuminates its collective consciousness, sharpens emotions and forges its will, the theater is the most powerful instrument. It always issues a call to action and to struggle. It does so even when it appears as just an amusement." P.S.Kogan, "V preddverii griadushchego teatra" (In Anticipation of the Coming Theater), *Vestnik Teatra*, No.2, February 6-7, 1919, 13-17. In Rosenberg, ed., *Bolshevik Visions, Part 2*, 134.

rendered it even more bewildering, and this was “most vexing, for so much effort has been wasted...trying to reach our proletarian audience.”²³⁵

In addition to representatives from Narkompros and RSFSR Theater 1, members of the public contributed to the discussion. A certain unidentified Shur, who claimed to represent the “humble spectator,” complained that, “instead of being uplifted, the public sat and laughed...everything, in every detail, from beginning to end, makes the most depressing impression.” He advised that the production be shut down immediately, and be given to another theater, perhaps MKhAT, an institution on the opposite side of the theatrical front from RSFSR Theater 1.²³⁶ Another speaker, Tepalov, sharply criticized the production, saying that he had patiently waited for the realization of a theater developed according to “new principles” involving the unification of the stage and the audience. He said that while he sat in the audience during the performance of *The Dawns*, around him sat “hundreds of people who were below me in their development, and if I could understand nothing, what could they possibly comprehend?” Echoing Krupskaja’s confusion, Tepalov said that he need someone to explain to him what the design on the curtains signified, what the “hanging boards” meant, as he felt “absolutely nothing.” The end of the play was the only bright spot, “when banners with slogans were raised, and people joined together in singing the ‘Internationale’.” But Tepalov didn’t ascribe this momentary success to the production, and said the play was a failure because “it fails to give the broad masses the nourishment they require.”²³⁷

The theater critic S.A. Margolin joined the fray, criticizing the play for having left him “utterly cold,” and speaking wistfully about how Verhaeren’s original play had been filled with

²³⁵ *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 157.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

the “blood of the two warring camps.”²³⁸ Kerzhentsev, in his review, had asserted that there was too much “compromise” in the original, but according to Margolin, struggle and combat were already “the spiritual and physical basis of the play...and the wonderful theme of hostility has been omitted.”²³⁹ Though most of the speakers insisted that RSFSR Theater 1’s staging of *The Dawns* had not inspired them, they all admitted that the audience, while puzzled, was not apathetic; they simply disagreed as to whether the spectators were right or wrong. A.M. Gan spoke as much about the shortcomings of the production, as he did about the “atavistic tastes” and sluggishness of the audience. The satirical writer Efim Zozuliia (1891-1941) pointed out that many innovators were only understood after their deaths, and that while these artists had the right to ignore the public, it was their own fault if the public turned their backs on them. “The play has no uplifting moments, no clear plot, no engaging story, it is ‘uninfectious’.”²⁴⁰

Meierkhol’d’s supporters admitted that, as a consequence of the short production schedule, many of the elements were far from artistic perfection, but insisted the theater was on the correct path. In Maiakovskii’s opinion, the principal aesthetic and ideological contribution of *The Dawns* was the understanding that “the theater cannot exist outside of modernity.” In radical Futurist terms, the correct path meant “revolutionizing everything that is old and decrepit in the theater, we should blow up that kind of theater. Long live the theater of Meierkhol’d, even if at first he has produced a bad play!”²⁴¹

²³⁸ In an article in the December 31, 1920 issue of *Zhizn’ iskusstva* (Life of Art), Margolin wrote that he had “waited for ‘Theatrical October,’ as one waits for spring, but as soon as I heard the expected, long-anticipated slogan uttered in RSFSR Theater 1, my spring seemed like rainy, inhospitable (*nepriutnyi*), slushy fall.” S. Margolin, “Mezhdu mitingom, misteriei i karnavalom” (Between Meeting, Mystery and Carnival) December 31, 1920 *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, No. 648, under “Meierkhold’ v russkoi teatral’noi kritike 1920-1938”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443758 [accessed November 22, 2014].

²³⁹ *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 158.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

Lunacharskii, one of the last speakers, was characteristically long-winded: “Comrades, I am going to speak for the friends of the [RSFSR Theater]...to try to understand our first few steps, for while mistakes may not have fateful consequences, they may be harmful.” Lunacharskii addressed one of the most persistent criticisms, the awkward attempt at reconstituting Verhaeren’s play as a Soviet political meeting. Mutating “meeting” into different parts of speech (*mitingovat’*, *miting*, *mitingist*), Lunacharskii said that he considered himself “an expert and master of the subject...and the meeting is so tedious a thing that there is no need to drag it onto the stage.”²⁴² In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, such official gatherings had been inspiring, and still were in some “provincial backwaters,” but in the city they now “set your teeth on edge.”

Lunacharskii argued that the theater, in contrast to the meeting, was a great synthetic art form, it had the ability to “take a person into non-existence (*v nebytie*), into a dream, which is only interesting if the person emerges enriched and stronger than when he entered – that is the duty of the theater.” He said that meetings contained within them artistic elements, but their essence was “logic itself.” The question of the meeting in the theater, and theater in meetings was significant insofar as it reflected the challenge and dilemma facing artists and bureaucrats alike in the Soviet Union: how – to what extent and purpose – to combine art, ideology, and pedagogy. As for the creative efforts of Meierkhof and others, Lunacharskii equivocated: “I am not saying that ideology must be put in the background...can there be a revolutionary theater? Of course, but for now it can remain an artistic one.” Nor should the theater itself be merely background to the Revolution. On the contrary: Lunacharskii said the dramatic arts had the

²⁴² Tairov supported Lunacharskii on this point: “It is high time to say that propagandist theater after the Revolution is like mustard after dinner.” Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 61.

monumental task of demonstrating “a new attitude toward human nature, toward the past, to marriage, to women, to grandchildren, to children.”

Lunacharskii attempted to realign and reconcile the various left and right factions within the arts, before and after 1917. Abandoning his *komfut* formulation, there was, he claimed, a proletarian theater, and some of the “leftists” had gone against the “rightists,” the young against the old, and this same opposition was manifested in the theater before the Revolution. Yet people needed to keep in mind that “amid the rightists were true revolutionaries, and amid the new, there may be imperialists.” While much of what the leftists had produced was “lively,” Lunacharskii continued, and he was “not their enemy,” the fact remained that the peasants and proletariat did not understand the new art. “We let [the futurists] decorate the city and countryside, and this has evoked either a hollow rumble or frightful protests.” The proletariat did not accept or understand theater sets that appeared to be just a jumble of empty forms, of a purely decorative character. Criticizing form without discernable content, Lunacharskii quoted Dostoevskii: “Every religion without faith is like sauce without the rabbit. First give me the rabbit!”²⁴³

Resorting to the all-purpose “futurist” epithet, Lunacharskii attacked experimentation seemingly for experiment’s sake: “Futurism is worn out (*otstal*), it already stinks...I agree that it has only been in the grave for three days but it already smells bad.”²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he thought

²⁴³ Lunacharskii had in mind the words of the former revolutionary Ivan Shatov, a character – and mouthpiece for the author – in Fedor Dostoevskii’s prophetic novel, *Besy* (*The Demons*, 1872): “In order to make sauce out of rabbit –you need a rabbit!” Ironically, the novel tries to show that Christian faith is Russia’s only real solution, as opposed to the violent alternatives offered by the nihilists...and ultimately the communists of the twentieth century. In Dostoevskii’s semi-autobiographical novel *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*, 1862), about the life of convicts in a Siberian labor camp, he describes the delight and brief sense of freedom the inmates experienced through assuming a different identity in the prison theater.

²⁴⁴ In an open letter to Lunacharskii published in the November 30, 1920 issue of *Vestnik Teatra*, Maiakovskii wrote: “At the public debate on *The Dawns* you told the masses the most unbelievable things about Futurism and about art in general...and then vanished.” He pointed out that what Lunacharskii loosely referred to as “futurist” were in fact Cubist and Suprematist aesthetics. If the Commissar was going to condemn Meierkhöld’s production

that the production, for all its shortcomings, had been a success, and one “had to admit that a bold new revolutionary act has been achieved.” In spite of the “pretentious futurist” re-working of Verhaeren’s text, real emotion was evident in the actors’ speeches. It was true, Lunacharskii conceded, that there was not much applause, but one could “feel, feel that life was being created.” He said that, once the play had been improved and the “sun of Russia is no longer obscured by militarism and fog...when even in the cultural sphere our Revolution will begin to fight,” both Soviet and playwrights and directors of other countries would use this as model of a “new proletarian revolutionary theater.”²⁴⁵

Meierkhol’d rose to thank all the speakers for helping the two directors “continue on the path” they had begun. In response to those who accused him and Bebutov of having lost the essence of Verhaeren’s original play, Meierkhol’d maintained that they should have “re-worked” it even more, but had been prevented by a lack of time. “We cannot concoct over the course of two or three weeks a play, which in the end will bear the stamp of a *pop-agit* (popular-agitational play).” While RSFSR Theater 1 may have made mistakes, these errors were committed in the spirit of keeping the theater in “full contact” with modernity. Meierkhol’d claimed he would be happy to give *The Dawns* to MKhAT, freeing his company to apply their Cubist and Suprematist aesthetics to another play. “Perhaps we will bring in trapeze artists and teach our acrobats to

as being too “leftist,” Maiakovskii said he had a long list of other artists and works that art that could and should be suppressed for the same reason, including some of Lunacharskii’s own plays. Maiakovskii wondered if the “corpses” of the Chekhov-Stanislvskii school smelled any better than the futurism which Lunacharskii said was the “crown of the bourgeois past.” V.V. Maiakovskii, “Otkrytoe pis’mo A.V. Lunacharskomu” (Open Letter to A.V. Lunacharskii), [http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Otkrytoe_pis'mo_A.V.Lunacharskomu_\(Maiakovskii\)](http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Otkrytoe_pis'mo_A.V.Lunacharskomu_(Maiakovskii)) [accessed December 2, 2014]. As Michel Aucouturiere writes: “The Cubo-Futurists did not join the Bolshevik Revolution, they appropriated it as a manifestation of futurists aesthetics. This explains their condescending attitude toward the Bolsheviks in 1917, (seeing them) as merely a lower, preliminary stage of spiritual revolution.” Michel Aucouturiere, “Theatricality as a Category of Early 20th century Russian Culture” In Lars Kleberg and Nils Ake Nillson, eds. *Theater and Literature in Russia 1900-1930: A Collection of Essays* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984), 18.

²⁴⁵ “Stenogramma vystupleniia A.V. Lunacharskogo na dispute o spetakle *Zori*” (Stenogram of A.V. Lunacharskii’s appearance at the public debate on *The Dawns*), November 22, 1920. TSGALI, f. 363, op. 1, ed. khr. 10, 16-21. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 150-152.

work in such a way, so that the entire essence of our revolutionary theater will remind us, through the bodies of the acrobats, that we are enjoying ourselves, that we are fighting.” According to Meierkhol’d audiences, especially the Red Army soldiers, weren’t going to see Chekhov’s *Uncle Vania* (1897), but came to *The Dawns* because they considered it “their theater.”²⁴⁶ In his response, Bebutov, after a comprehensive account of the directors’ approach and technique, said that, instead of a return to Verhaeren, they would “embark on a path of even more radical alterations.”²⁴⁷

The Monday evening public debates continued, growing into more general discussions about the problems confronting the contemporary, “revolutionary,” Soviet theater. A report delivered by Meierkhol’d on December 6 at the Polytechnic Museum, “On the Vulnerable Places in the Theatrical Front” was the main topic of discussion at the gathering on December 20, 1920. The enormous, overflowing crowd in the RSFSR Theater 1 auditorium was especially raucous, due mostly to the clash between factions of “Meierkhol’dists” and “Tairovists,” the latter being supporters of the director Tairov, who, while boldly experimental, disapproved of mixing politics and art. *Vestnik Teatra* reported that the stenographer’s notes in the margins of the transcript included: “shouts...doesn’t let him speak...whistles...unbelievable shouting...such noise and uproar that nothing is sorted out, everyone is shouting, nearly coming to blows.”²⁴⁸

“Of course the dawn was still pale, but undoubtedly a fresh, red dawn”

The play underwent some minor modifications, but the ascetic stage design, the stilted speech, and mechanical movement of the actors remained. In an undated review of *The Dawns* by the writer Aleksandr Serafimovich (1863-1949), he ridiculed the set with its triangles, circles,

²⁴⁶ V.E. Meierkhol’d, “Vystuplenie na pervom ponedel’nike Zor’ (Statement at the First Monday of *The Dawns*), under “Meierkhol’d V.E.”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/#_Toc144567988

²⁴⁷ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 61.

²⁴⁸ *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 158.

and “flying boards – like masts on a ship.” He found particularly disturbing the way the actors in “motley costumes” stood on the cubes and “howled” their lines. “How they howled!” Serafimovich compared the scene to wolves in winter surrounding “snowy, sleepy villages...they strike at the heart. Just who is howling in this way? It is, as it turns out, the workers for the Revolution.”²⁴⁹ In the February 16, 1921 issue of the railway workers’ newspaper *Gudok* (Train Whistle), V. Valia addressed the seemingly endless, and pointless, revisions to the play.²⁵⁰ He recalled his own experience at a performance of *The Dawns*, when he had seen the grim faces of the proletarian spectators, gloomily and uncomprehendingly looking at the geometric figures on the stage. Valia wrote about “a comrade” of his who had seen the play, and how this person had asked a Red Army soldier whether he liked the play, and if he had seen it more than once. The soldier responded that he did not care for the production, but was there for the third time. The comrade was baffled. “They are making adjustments,” the soldier explained.

1921 saw “adjustments” to Meierkhold’s political career and RSFSR Theater as well. In a letter to Lenin just before the New Year, Meierkhol’d invited him to see the new, improved version of *The Dawns*: “Dear Leader! The troupe of RSFSR Theater 1, the artistic soviet and all the technical personnel convey to you our warmest desire to see you at a performance of *The Dawns* in its new variant on December 28, [1920]. Knowing that you are busy, the troupe asks you, if you are unable to attend on that date, to see a performance of *The Dawns* as soon as possible.”²⁵¹ Not long after that, in early February, 1921, Meierkhol’d was relieved of his

²⁴⁹ “Retsenziia A.S. Serafimovicha na spektakl’ *Zori* v Teatre RSFSR 1” (A.S. Serafimovich’s review of the play *The Dawns* in RSFSR Theater 1), TSGALi, f. 457, op. 1, ed. khr. 110, 22. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy 1917-1921*, 153.

²⁵⁰ A number of prominent writers worked at *Gudok* in the 1920s: Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, Iurii Olesha, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Valentin Kataev, Mikhail Bulgakov.

²⁵¹ V.E. Meierkhol’d, “Telefonogramma V.I. Leninu”, in *Stat’l, pis’ma, rechi, besedy*, under “Meierkhol’d V.E.”, [http: teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/articl_2/#_Toc21070632](http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/articl_2/#_Toc21070632) [accessed October 13, 2014]. According to the diary of RSFSR Theater 1, Lenin responded by telephone to Meierkhol’d, saying that he was too busy on December 28, but that he would – “without fail” – attend a performance as soon as possible. It is unclear if Lenin ever saw *The*

position as head of TEO, and shortly thereafter he left the Theater Department altogether. On September 6, 1921, performances at RSFSR Theater 1 ceased, and *Vestnik Teatra* closed down in August of that year. The principled differences between Lunacharskii and Meierkhol'd had always left the Commissar somewhat conflicted, convinced as he was of the director's enormous talent. This tension was reflected in a 1926 newspaper article in which Lunacharskii reflected on Meierkhol'd's leadership of TEO: "The amazing Vsevolod Meierkhol'd quickly took a seat on the war horse of the futurists' set, and led supporters of 'Theatrical October' in an assault on the 'counterrevolutionaries' of academism."²⁵²

At the Tenth Party Congress in 1921, open combat between political factions came to an official end when the delegates accepted a resolution "On Party Unity."²⁵³ A truce in the realm of the dramatic arts, however, was not forthcoming, and Meierkhol'd soon established his own Revolutionary Theater. There, unconstrained by bureaucratic or formal political obligations, he continued innovating, including his system of "biomechanics" whereby actors would mimic rather than induce "proletarian consciousness."²⁵⁴ In 1922, with Meierkhol'd and the grievances

Dawns. According to the same diary, the new variant consisted of: "stronger images (*bolee ukrepleny obrazy*), livelier characters, more vividly depicted scenes and interior contraposition of ideas and personalities – considerable changes that are the work of V.E. Meierkhol'd and V.M. Bebutov in response to criticisms of the first variant." The revised text of the play was published in the January 27, 1921 issue of *Vestnik Teatra*, No. 80-81, 26-31.

²⁵² A.V. Lunacharskii, "Eshche o teatre Meierkhol'da" (More about the Theater of Meierkhol'd), *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 22 April, 1926, No. 92, under "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/ese-o-teatre-mejerholda> [accessed August 5, 2014].

²⁵³ The resolution "hereby declares dissolved and orders the immediate dissolution of all groups without exception...non-observance of the decision of the Congress shall entail unconditional and instant expulsion from the Party...All class-conscious workers must clearly realize the perniciousness and impermissibility of factionalism of any kind...in practice factionalism inevitably leads to the weakening of team work and the intensified and repeated attempts by enemies of the Party...to widen the cleavage and to use it for counterrevolutionary purposes." From: Resolution of the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, "On Party Unity," March, 1921 (Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. II, book 2, 497-501. In Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London: University Press of New England, 1993), 109.

²⁵⁴ Biomechanics were an application of Taylorist production principles to the theater. Meierkhol'd said about biomechanics that, "In the past, the actor has always conformed to the society for which his art was intended. In the future, the actor must go even further in relating his technique to the industrial situation For he will be

around *The Dawns* seemingly remote, Lunacharskii reflected that, “There was too much shouting on the stage it is true, but there were real orators and revolutionary enthusiasm. It was a new form, clean, simple, sublime, and of course the dawn was still pale, but undoubtedly a fresh, red dawn.”²⁵⁵

As Lunacharskii had remarked to General Boldin, his dreams for a revolutionary, proletarian theater remained unfulfilled in 1921. Part of the dilemma was the absence of authentically proletarian, Soviet playwrights, and thus the necessity of using – and “adjusting” – foreign or pre-revolutionary Russian plays. Yet Meierkhol’d’s version of *The Dawns*, for all its “futurist” provocations, had at least partially satisfied Lunacharskii’s longing to glorify the exploits of revolutionary and Civil War heroes. As chief cultural arbiter in the young Soviet Union, Lunacharskii’s ideal Soviet drama tended to be obscured rather than clarified by his endless articles and speeches on the topic. Variations on the basic theme of preserving the old while formulating the new persisted throughout his pronouncements, but he became ensnared in his own compromises and inconsistencies. If Lunacharskii’s utterances were ambiguous, where he scolded or implored, the voices of the many advocates for a new, socialist culture were similarly polyphonic in the years before Stalin came to power. Experiments, projects, plans, dreams all flourished in what the historian Richard Stites has called “Lenin’s vast laboratory... Unlike Stalin, [Lenin] did not close it down, did not arrest and exterminate its principal investigators.”²⁵⁶ Though fluid and complex, there were limits on acceptable – or at least state-funded – innovations, and in 1923 when Lunacharskii, eager to rein in experimentation in the

working in a society where labor is no longer regarded as a curse but as a joyful, vital necessity.” V.E. Meierkhol’d, *On Theater*, 197.

²⁵⁵ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, ed., I.I. Anisimov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964), 123-124. Under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3> [accessed August 4, 2014].

²⁵⁶ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 46.

theater, launched the slogan “Back to Ostrovskii!” Meierkhol’d responded with a radical, Bolshevized staging of Ostrovskii’s *The Forest*, dismantled into a series of discrete episodes, “reconfigured as an elaborate harlequinade.”²⁵⁷ The play was an enormous success.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Nicholas Rzhevsky, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 281.

²⁵⁸ *The Forest* was a comedy, and a perennial favorite of Russian audiences since its debut in 1871. In contrast with the austerity of *The Dawns*, Meierkhol’d crowded the stage with familiar, commonplace – with the exception of some live pigeons – objects, and dressed the actors in distinct, multi-colored costumes, elements of a production “where low buffoonery fused with elevated lyricism.” Meierkhol’d modernized the play, making some characters into profiteers, and others into the “fighting young communists of the 1920s.” His version of *The Forest* enjoyed a remarkable 1328 performances. Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater*, 117-118.



Front Row: Karl Radek, Lunacharsky, Lady Astor, Shaw, and Artemii Khalatov in Moscow, 1931



Tairov and Shaw looking at photos of the 1924 production of *St. Joan* in Tairov's office, 1931



The 1924 production of *St. Joan*

Chapter 3: *She Circles Above the Abyss: Saint Joan in Moscow*

In his introduction to George Bernard Shaw's *The Rationalization of Russia* (1932), Harry Geduld describes an incident from the playwright's 1931 trip to the Soviet Union:

On July 25, after a morning spent at Soiuzkino (The Soviet Film Authority), where a commemorative film of Shaw's stay in Moscow – beginning with a speech by Lunacharskii in praise of the author – was shot, GBS paid a visit to Saint Isaac's Cathedral, which had been stripped of its religious trappings and converted into the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. A young girl representing the Society of the Godless showed him various exhibits that illustrated the religious superstitions of the peasants. When they reached a case containing the undecayed corpses of two peasants, the girl knowledgeably explained how priests maintained that such miracles of preservation happened only to saints. She was dumbfounded when Shaw instantly queried how she could be certain that the two *muzhiks* had not been saints.²⁵⁹

At the same time the Bolsheviks venerated and sanctified the Russian proletariat and peasantry, they sought to destroy, with words and wrecking-balls, the country's religious symbols and structures. Total eradication of belief was impractical and unrealistic, so the Soviets resorted to a kind of dialectical immaterialism, transforming and exploiting the stubborn religious impulse, either by converting churches into museums and monuments to atheism, or though the mechanics of occult schemes like Lunacharskii's "god-building." Shaw's challenge to his young, godless guide illuminates the strange, and bewildering, intersection of religion and politics, theology and science. Explicitly, his comment confounded and confused the absolute separation of the two realms; it undermined her sense that the undecayed corpses were untouched by both physical and priestly corruption. Implicitly, Shaw's whimsical reply made it clear that while he understood canonization as the result of human rather than divine forces, more subversively, he conceived of logic and belief as two sides of the same metaphysical coin. The

²⁵⁹ Bernard Shaw, *The Rationalization of Russia*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 24-25. "There are even so-called religious museums which would delight the soul of Martin Luther and all sturdy Protestants from Belfast to Philadelphia. They are really historical museums to warn against the abuses of priestcraft and the horrors of religious persecution." G.B. Shaw, "Touring in Russia", *Nash's Pall Mall Magazine* (1932), 19.

anecdote illustrates the paradoxes inherent in Soviet society of the early 1920s, as well as those latent in Shaw's politics and art.²⁶⁰

In the early 1920s, Party leaders were in a similar spiritual and political muddle. The Bolsheviks' belief in the existence, and sanctity, of a Russian proletariat in the first decade after the October Revolution was itself a form of quasi-religious superstition. Until the first Five-Year Plan, and its program of rapid industrialization, bore fruit at the end of the 1920s, the Soviet Union lacked a critical mass of class-conscious urban workers. After the Civil War, revolutionary utopian fervor was frustrated in other ways. In 1921, in response to popular, particularly peasant, unrest, Lenin suspended the food requisitions of War Communism, and restored a money economy with a regular system of taxation. The state would continue to control large-scale industry, banks, and foreign trade. The government adopted the New Economic Policy (NEP) at the Tenth Party Congress in March of 1921. In April, Lenin declared: "The effect will be the revival of the petty bourgeois and of capitalism on the basis of certain amount of free trade...the only sensible policy is not to put a lock on the development of capitalism, but to direct it into the channels of state capitalism...Can the Soviet state, the dictatorship of the

²⁶⁰ The literature in English on Soviet anti-religious campaigns includes: D.E. Powell, *Anti-Religious Propaganda in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978); D.V. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Programs, Vols. 1 & 2* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Sabrina Petra Ramet ed., *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Arto Luukkanen, *The Religious Policy of the Socialist State: A Case Study* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997); Vladimir Brovkin, *Russia after Lenin: Political, Culture, and Society, 1921-1929* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); Peter J.S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism, and After* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovations, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Robert H. Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

proletariat, be combined, united with state capitalism? Are they compatible? Of course they are...²⁶¹

The co-existence of private and public sectors was sanctioned by law under NEP, and those who were able to enrich themselves from the new arrangement were known as NEPmen. Lenin and others, but not everyone, within the Party hierarchy considered NEP to be a necessary but temporary measure. They had to confront the reality of a devastated Russian economy after the Civil War, which the compromises of NEP could restore even as they undermined the purity of socialist ideals. Historian William G. Rosenberg describes NEP as more than just a liberal time of transition before a return to “harsh authoritarianism under Stalin. Rather, NEP was a period in which those in power were forced somehow to come to terms with complex social and cultural residues of prerevolutionary Russia, implicitly at odds with ongoing goals of building a socialist or communist order.”²⁶²

In this chapter, I argue that during NEP, a similar process of reconciliation with past, prerevolutionary “cultural residues” took place in the theater. While the economic realities of the early 1920s challenged Bolshevik revolutionary rhetoric, Lunacharskii proffered a “new realism” that he excavated from the theater of the nineteenth century. The director Aleksandr Tairov responded to this emphasis on artificial reality with his own variations: “neo-realism,” “structural realism,” and “concrete realism.” I show that the further Soviet policies actually diverged from the “path to socialism,” the more strident the exhortations to “realism” became. In an age of compromise, Lunacharskii formulated his ostensibly benign and inclusive “artistic-

²⁶¹ V.I. Lenin, “The Tax in Kind” (April, 1921), Selected Works, Vol. II, book 2, 544. In Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia from Lenin to Gorbachev* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 112-113.

²⁶² William G. Rosenberg, “NEP Russia as a ‘Transitional’ Society” In Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, Richard Stites, *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3.

revolutionary” template for the theater in 1922. I demonstrate that Lunacharskii, without premeditation and contrary to his own aversion to so-called formalism, unintentionally used this formula to dilute both artistic and revolutionary content in the theater. I argue that, in combination with the propagation of realisms – like Tairov’s varieties – this hollowing out planted the seeds of the aesthetically insipid doctrine of socialist realism, itself a strident exhortation to revolutionary heroics cast in prerevolutionary forms.

Lunacharskii’s notion of the “artistic-revolutionary” had the same unexpected, paradoxical effects as state capitalism had on the theater. The contraction of government subsidies caused many theaters to go bankrupt. Of those that survived, however, they were liberated in their choice and interpretation of the repertoire. Lunacharskii’s designation of Tairov’s Kamernyi Theater for continued subsidy was itself a mixed blessing: on the one hand the Kamernyi received an, albeit diminished, allotment; on the other hand, the restlessly inventive Tairov had to endure criticism and guidance from Narkompros. In this chapter, I show that in the early 1920s there was still room to move creatively, in spite of the proliferation and superimposition of official organizations monitoring this creativity. The first few sections of this chapter are a description and analysis of the effects of NEP within Narkompros and the theater, and to the re-organization of the Commissariat, including the creation of a redundant body devoted to censorship – Repertkom. After a discussion of the history of the Kamernyi, I use Tairov’s production of *St. Joan* to argue that there was still room to move in the realm of censorship as well, where Lunacharskii, Tairov, and Repertkom confronted and challenged each other, and it was often unclear who had the upper hand or final say. *St. Joan* also provides an opportunity to explore the perpetual problem of the paucity of proletarian playwrights in the Soviet theater, and the strange presence of a peasant-saint on the stage.

Another theme of this chapter is the reaction of the world, or at least Western Europe, to the art of the Kamernyi as a presumed representative of Soviet Art when it performed in France and Germany in 1923. Bernard Shaw's own socialist and Russian sympathies, as well as his trip to the USSR, are a means to gauge this reaction, however idiosyncratically or myopically.²⁶³ One of Lunacharskii's functions, after he resigned from Narkompros 1929, was a representative in his own right, as a model of Bolshevik gentility; he was on his way to Spain to serve as ambassador when he died suddenly in Southern France in 1933. Lunacharskii, the erudite polyglot, was almost quite literally the mirror image of the Soviet Union that Shaw wanted to believe existed, or could exist, a land of approximate equality presided over by benevolent philosopher kings. In this chapter, I argue that Shaw and Lunacharskii were misshapen mirror images of each other in several respects. While no one ever doubted Lunacharskii's commitment to Marxism and the Soviet state, many of the same accusations of "eclecticism" and "paradoxilism" that he leveled at Shaw were also directed against him. Both men were boundlessly extroverted, each in perpetual, polemical engagement with the public, either through speeches and debates or their voluminous writings. While both Lunacharskii and Shaw wrote essays and dramas, as a playwright Shaw was a genius, and Lunacharskii the relentless, remorseless amateur. Conversely, Lunacharskii considered Shaw a political amateur, a revolutionary dilettante content to cheer – or mock – from the sidelines, while the Bolsheviks built the world's first socialist state. Finally, they both felt Christianity was exhausted, spiritually and socially, but understood the creative potential of the raw religious impulse to remake the world.

“We will surely find a way out in the end”

²⁶³ Though Joan of Arc was from a prosperous peasant family – prehistoric kulaks – Shaw wrote: “A Russian village is so horrid that the Communists burnt it the moment that they persuaded its inhabitants to come into a collective farm and live decently...Imagine a Brobdingnagian dog kennel of ugly brown painted wood. That is a Russian peasant's house...the Soviet, in 'liquidating' him and burning his kennel as soon as possible, is acting in the interests of civilization.” Shaw, “Touring in Russia,” 8.

With the end of the Civil War and the economic restrictions of “war communism,” Lunacharskii and others inside Narkompros anticipated a more substantial allotment of state funds. Writing in the fall of 1921, Lunacharskii complained that the Commissariat’s portion of the budget during the war had been a paltry 3%, “an undoubted scandal for a civilized state.”²⁶⁴ His lament obscured the fact that during the Civil War, in financial terms, the theater had fared better than some other entities within Narkompros, especially its publishing department. However, those relatively generous payments were now in jeopardy, when in 1921 a series of changes in tax policy toward the peasants and the revival of a limited free market as part of NEP undermined Lunacharskii’s dreams of more generous subsidies. As state revenues and the size and scope of government diminished, Narkompros’ share of the overall budget fell to just below 3% in 1922.²⁶⁵ In NEP’s initial phases, private capital was insufficiently established or organized to compensate for the contraction of state support, and according to historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, “the crucial issue for theaters in 1921 was not freedom but finance.”²⁶⁶

An early and obvious consequence of NEP was that the theaters would have to be self-supporting. Theater subscriptions had been abolished in 1919, yet most theaters continued to charge admission and cheap tickets were distributed to schools, Red Army units, and trade unions. In October of 1921, the newspaper *Pravda* reported the conclusions of the “Central commission on the improvement of the lives (*byt*) of workers,” which had taken up the question of giving subsidies to workers for theater tickets, concluding that there should be no financial

²⁶⁴ A.V.Lunacharskii, “Education in Danger”, *Izvestiia*, No. 214 (September 25, 1921), 1. In Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 259.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

impediments blocking their access to the theater.²⁶⁷ Merely making theaters quasi-capitalist enterprises was no guarantee of their survival, however, as the state academic theaters in Moscow and Petrograd were still not financially solvent, in spite of receiving state support and having always charged admission. For all the menace and reality of bureaucratic belt-tightening, in 1921 the Finance Commissariat complained to Lenin that Narkompros was still too profligate, spending twenty-nine billion rubles on the theater as opposed to only seventeen billion on higher education.²⁶⁸

A counterattack by Narkompros was partially – and surprisingly – successful, as they avoided some of the draconian measures taken against other Commissariats. After a recommendation was made to remove all theaters – with the exception of the Children’s and agitational – from the state budget, Narkompros was able to preserve a nucleus of academic theaters in Moscow and Petrograd. In June, 1922, Lunacharskii had petitioned Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars) to provide “as much material as possible” and monetary subsidies for the period May-September, 1922 in the sum of 80,375,000 rubles for Moscow’s State academic theaters, and 51,625,000 for those in Petrograd.²⁶⁹ Of those theaters left to fend

²⁶⁷ “No impediments” did not mean free however: “The soviet of people’s commissars, in the conference of October 14, 1921, having considered the question, has resolved to apportion 25% of the seats of the academic theaters, from every row, for distribution among workers at a price of one thousand rubles and temporarily setting a levy price of no more than five hundred rubles for standing-room (*veshalki*).” “Postanavlennii Sovnarkom o raspredelenii mest v gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov sredi rabochikh” (The commissars’ ruling on the distribution of seats for workers in the state academic theaters). In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 31.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 267. Lenin’s response was that this was an “outrage” (*bezobrazie*). Lenin did not personally involve himself in resolving the debates about the funding of theaters. For him, and others in the Party leadership, continuing to finance theaters took a back seat to the battle with hunger, building industry, liquidating illiteracy, and putting out newspapers. In T.V. Lanina, “Politika kommunisticheskii partii i Sovetskogo pravitel’stva v oblasti teatral’nogo iskusstva” (The policy of the Communist Party and Soviet Government in the area of the dramatic arts) *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, ed. A. Ia. Trabskii (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1975), 23.

²⁶⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Khodataistvo Narkomprosa v Sovnarkom ob izmenenii sistemy finansirovaniia gosudarstvennykh teatrov” (Narkompros’ petition to Sovnarkom about the changes in the financing of the state theaters), June 10, 1922. TsPA, IML pri TsK KPSS, f. 19, op. 1, ed. khr. 507, 244-245. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 46. While the government continued to subsidize the academic theaters, it is unclear if they did so in the amounts Lunacharskii requested. In 1923/24, the total state budget was 2, 317,

for themselves, a third of them in existence at the beginning of 1922 were in liquidation by the end of the year.²⁷⁰

Having arrived at a compromise, the Politburo nevertheless continued to consider government allocations to the theater, and in 1922 a commission headed by former People's Commissar of Agriculture Andrei Kolegaev (1887-1937) issued a special mandate to close – if necessary – the Mariinskii Theater in Petrograd, as well as Moscow's Bol'shoi.²⁷¹ Lunacharskii wrote Kolegaev personally, arguing stubbornly that, "to close [these theaters] in the middle of the season is, from a cultural point of view something barbaric, and of little real use for the government."²⁷² When Kolegaev's commission persisted, Lunacharskii wrote to Lenin about the threat to the Mariinskii and Bol'shoi: "We surely will find a way out in the end, and be able to provide the government with savings without the closure of the two main theaters of the republic, which we support at the cost of great personal sacrifice by me and all the artists during these most difficult times. The closure of these two theaters would create a most unfavorable impression on both the world's intelligentsia – who are sympathetic to us – and its mostly negative press."²⁷³

Keeping up socialist appearances – and finding the means to do so – while implementing the capitalistic elements of NEP, was a central concern of the Soviet Union's cultural warriors.

600,000 rubles. The budget for "Social and Cultural" was 113, 000, 000, 000; Education 113, 600, 000, 000; Defense and administration 647, 500, 000, 000. Source: *Sotsialnyi stroi SSSR* (Social Structure of the USSR) (1934), 442-3. In Roger A. Clarke, *Soviet Economic Facts 1917-1970* (New York; Halsted Press, 1972), 33. See also: Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972).

²⁷⁰ Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 270.

²⁷¹ Kolegaev's tenure in the Commissariat of Agriculture was brief, from December of 1917 to March of 1918. In 1937 he was arrested and shot.

²⁷² A.V. Lunacharskii, "Pis'mo v Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)" 17 November, 1922. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 24.

²⁷³ A.V. Lunacharskii, "Pis'mo V.I. Leninu" (Letter to V.I. Lenin), no earlier than November 16, 1922. TSSA RSFSR, f. 2306, op.1. d. 3377, 144. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 24. In May, 1922, Lenin suffered his first stroke, which left unable to speak for several weeks, after which he resumes limited duties. A second stroke in December of that year, which left him partially paralyzed, caused him to withdraw from active, public participation in politics.

In an April, 1922 letter to Lunacharskii, E.K. Malinovskaia, the director of Moscow's academic theaters, boasted of the artistic success and international prestige of the Bol'shoi, claiming that the foreign press "placed Russian dramatic arts above that of the west." Yet, having "fulfilled their artistic task," they were left with minimal funds. Malinovskaia pointed out that, ticket sales notwithstanding, the Bol'shoi and other academic theaters had been almost entirely dependent on the government, and while the theaters' personnel had been satisfied with meager salaries, with the advent of NEP "in January of 1922 these workers had received barely 19% of their wages." The change in economic policies and the previous summer's monetary crisis, she went on, had left the academic theaters in dire straits, but it was the unexpectedness of the change in government guidelines for the theaters that had left her "unable to take measures to soften the blow." Malinovskaia recalled that in October of 1921 the government subsidy to Moscow academic theaters had been three billion rubles a month. Now, in order to balance the books, they had found it necessary to "periodically" increase ticket prices, she reminded Lunacharskii that a portion of the proceeds from ticket sales – one and a half billion rubles a month – had been "exacted to feed the hungry." In order to improve the Moscow theaters' circumstances, Malinovskaia proposed that the government free the theaters from taxation, and that workers' organizations be obliged to pay full price for tickets. She argued that it made no sense to pay three times more for a newspaper, and fifteen times more for a one-way tram ticket than an evening at the theater, even though "the expense of the theater is not an everyday thing;" that the government give the theaters additional credit of ten thousand rubles a month for electricity bills.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ "Pis'mo upravliaiushchei Moskovskimi gosudarstvennymi akademicheskimi teatrami E.K. Malinovskoi Narkomu po prosveshcheniiu A.V. Lunacharskomu o finansovom polozhenii teatrov" (Letter from the director of Moscow's state academic theater E.K. Malinovskaia to the people's commissar of enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii about the

“Of course, the soul differs from one to the next”

In February, 1921, partially in response to economic pressure but also to accommodate a shift in the tactics of cultural revolution after the Civil War, Narkompros began to undertake internal reforms. Lenin took an active part in the preparation of these functional and structural changes. In an article in *Izvestiia*, he described the basic shortcomings of Narkompros as “a lack of efficiency, practicality, and financial oversight, a failure to learn from experience, and the prevalence of generally argumentative and abstract slogans.”²⁷⁵ Two months later, in an article in the Narkompros organ *Theater Culture*, Lunacharskii observed that, to his dismay, these reforms had “divided theatrical pedagogy...and along with this, the pure task of the theater has also been divided, creating two theatrical centers: one in Glavpolitprosvet and one in the academic center.”²⁷⁶

In early 1922, Glavpolitprosvet (Chief Committee for Political Education) headed by Lunacharskii’s deputy Nadezhda Krupskaiia, was established by Sovnarkom – after a year of debate – as a part of the “organizational center” to compliment the “academic center” within Narkompros.²⁷⁷ While insisting that there was no absolute separation between the two centers,

financial condition of the theaters), April 1, 1922, GTSM, Lf., no. 154, TSTM No. 16894/878, 76-77. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 67-68.

²⁷⁵ T.V. Lanina, “Deiatel’nost’ Narkomprosa v oblasti teatral’nogo iskusstva’ (Narkompros’ operations in the area of the dramatic arts), In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 37.

²⁷⁶ In practical terms, Glavpolitprosvet functioned less as a compliment than as a means to monitor what many in the Party thought were the ideological flaccidity and self-indulgence of the artistic – especially theatrical – departments within Narkompros. For a detailed, and very dense, account of the creation of Glavpolitprosvet and the power struggles surrounding Narkompros’ reorganization see Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, chapters 7 and 8.

²⁷⁷ Krupskaiia’s first public utterances on the mission of Glavpolitprosvet were the epitome of political imprecision, an indication of the new organization’s double – and duplicate – function within Narkompros: charting a separate path of “enlightenment” from the academic theaters, and serving as restraint on Lunacharskii’s perceived permissiveness in terms of repertoire. She wrote, “The general task is the use of art for the propagation of communist ideas...The overall popularization of art, as well as the cultivation of the artistic tastes of the masses, are the province of the art department of Glavpolitprosvet. We need to work on the repertoire, including good plays that have been re-worked ideologically; perhaps we can initiate some sort of contest for this purpose.” N.K. Krupskaiia, “Iz zamechanii N.K. Krupskoi na proekt plana raboty kudozhestvennogo otdela Glavpolitprosvet” (From N.K. Krupskaiia’s report on the plans of the artistic department of Glavpolitprosvet), January-March, 1922. TsGA

Lunacharskii admonished Glavpolitprosvet not to use the theater to “pursue goals of purely political enlightenment, to create agitational theater and nothing else.”²⁷⁸ Instead, the theaters under Glavpolitprosvet’s purview – all those but the small core of academic theaters – should concern themselves with “those things that delight the soul: higher artistic, literary, historical, and psychological enlightenment.” On the other hand, Lunacharskii emphasized that the academic theaters should not be turned into museums for “mummies in the service of some sort of ‘pure’ art.” In addition to distinguishing the tasks under the two rubrics within Narkompros, Lunacharskii went on to re-specify the sorts of theater “we need – and do not need.” Invoking the murky and politically dubious notion of individual feeling, he described “artistic” theater as that which acts most powerfully on the soul of the spectator, though, “of course, the soul differs from one to the next.”

According to Lunacharskii’s article in *Theater Culture*, the present, revolutionary epoch required spectacles for the great mass, “emerging from the false dawns,” and incapable of reconciling itself to theater of the artistic, “shall we say, intimate type.” What were needed instead were plays of the “artistic-revolutionary type.” Lunacharskii cautioned that every epoch contained within it both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary “embryonic forms.” Comparing the evolution of the theater in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution to that of revolutionary Russia, he said that the peril lay in the fact that in general revolutionary theater

RSFSR, f. 2313, op. 6, d. 11, 8-9. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 58. Playwriting competitions were part of the “enlightenment” curriculum in the Soviet Union, with Lunacharskii serving as judge for several of them.

²⁷⁸ For Lunacharskii, the parameters for agitational theater were defined by two extremes: between those who “think that agitational theater cannot – and should not – exist,” and those who hold that “every bit of trashy, semi-literate stuff...as long as it has noble aims is therefore anointed from above and becomes red.”

was rather “slippery” (*skol’zkaa*), and plays that “not long ago had seemed revolutionary, can in the present context seem counterrevolutionary.”²⁷⁹

In conclusion, Lunacharskii declared that tragedy was necessary, and the theater of the past could supply it in the form of plays that were, in his curious formulation, “great, if not first-rate.” The majority of spectators were looking for dramatic forms of “genuine craftsmanship, not itinerant things made from scratch, not laboratory or artistic dishabille.” Lascivious farce, on the other hand, with its ribald anecdotes “we do not need,” nor the cheap theater which “imitates the revolution, and reeks from a verst [approximately .7 miles] away of yellow journalism.” “Artistic-revolutionary” reflected the de jure division of labor between the two artistic sectors within Narkompros, theoretically balanced by an aesthetic fusion, or confusion. The repertoire of the academic theaters, those with “all-Russian artistic significance,” should not be devoid of political content. At the same time, the non-academic theaters, “which have a greater measure of enlightening rather than artistic significance,” should be guided by Glavpolitprosvet in the service of cultural, and not merely political, enlightenment.²⁸⁰

In 1921, when Glavpolitprosvet was still in the planning stage, Lunacharskii had contributed to the public discussion, writing in the monthly literary journal *Krasnaia nov’* (Red Virgin Soil) about the new organization’s “tasks in the realm of the artistic education of the masses.” He urged the architects of Glavpolitprosvet to include the popularization of great artistic works of the past, “even if they lack a specifically propagandistic or agitational

²⁷⁹ “We do not need counterrevolutionary theater. We cannot allow on the stage those plays glorifying religious prejudice, jingoism, bourgeois morals, etc.” Describing the multiplicity – and hierarchy – of souls, as well as perhaps taking aim at the Stanislavskian, MKhAT formula, Lunacharskii added: “We do not need humdrum theater, even if it contains a lot of psychological analysis. Such drab, analytic theater is especially not desirable, even when it rummages around the soul of the peasant or worker, and it becomes altogether anachronistic when it shows the corrupted souls of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia.”

²⁸⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Kollegiia Narkomprosa – stat’ia A.V. Lunacharskogo o zadachakh teatra v sviazi s reformoi Narkomprosa” (The Board Narkompros – A.V. Lunacharskii’s article on the tasks of the theater in connection with the reform of Narkompros), *Kul’tura teatra*, No.4 (April, 1921), 1-5. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 41-44.

character.” According to Lunacharskii, those who imagined the proletariat as “naked people on a naked land,” rejecting all the culture of the past, were themselves merely “shameless anarchists.” He invoked Marx, who considered as “hopeless idiots, people who do not understand the significance of the art of the past for the proletariat.”²⁸¹ In sum, Lunacharskii had “no doubt whatsoever” that the proletariat and peasantry would benefit more from “profoundly ideological” artwork full of “human subject matter,” than from “pure propaganda, without plot, story, or theme.”²⁸²

Until the end of the 1920s, no real consensus formed around what constituted the necessary and desirable repertoire for theaters, state sponsored or otherwise. Beyond the central, but elusive, Bolshevik tenet that art should be by and for workers and peasants, the question of its form and content – and more crucially its regulation – continued to be probed, debated, and unresolved. By a decree of February 9, 1923, Sovnarkom created Glavrepertkom (*Glavnyi repertuarnyi komitet*, or Main Repertory Committee, henceforth Repertkom), a body within Narkompros devoted to monitoring – censoring – the theater. A comparable organization committed to the censorship of literature, Glavlit, had been established the year before.

²⁸¹ The critic Petr Kogan, a participant in the public debate over *The Dawns*, wrote in 1919 that, “We all still, in Marx’s expression, live in the prologue of history. We have not attained the true kingdom of humanity, where the humiliating struggle within human society will end in the harmonic organization of all human strengths. The historic mission of the proletariat is to lead society out onto the path. In the struggle for the realization of that mission, the proletariat cannot ignore such a weapon as the theater. The theater must knit together its feeling and will, must protect them from the weakening influences of the smoldering world...The proletariat will not eliminate the legacy of the past...Everything belongs to it by right of inheritance, but first, it must look at the world with its own eyes, imprint on it the seal of its own soul. It must find in the theater its own tribune, and then illuminate the treasures of the past with new light.” P.A. Kogan, “The Theater as Tribune”, *Vestnik teatra*, No.2 (February 6-7, 1919), 13-17, William Rosenberg ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia, Part 2* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 136-137.

²⁸² A.V. Lunacharskii, “Glavpolitprosvet i iskusstvo” (Glavpolitprosvet and art), *Krasnaia nov’*, No.1 (June, 1921). Under “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-7/nasi-zadaci-v-oblasti-hudozestvennoj-zizni> [accessed December 11, 2014]. Lunacharskii further condemned Marx’s “hopeless idiots,” writing that, “I think that people who see as ‘stuffy or moldy’ from a futurist point of view, or ‘useless’ from a communist point of view, for example, the works of Schiller, Michelangelo, Beethoven, Pushkin, or Glinka, simply does not deserve consideration from Glavpolitprosvet.” Kogan claimed that “parts of Schiller” were “dim presentiments of the future theater of action.”

According to historian Michael S. Fox, initially Repertkom's activities overshadowed those of Glavlit, due to the intransigence of its individual members, as well as "the greater importance attached to mass media and public performance, than to written texts."²⁸³ During the Civil War years, censorship duties had been dispersed across multiple institutions, including the military, the secret police, and transitory Party commissions. While the government relaxed the reins in the economic sphere with the advent of NEP, the end of the war enabled the Bolsheviks to consolidate civil institutions devoted to the overt coercion of ideological conformity in the arts. The unconcealed nature of the codification and application of censorship was distinctive of the Soviet Union in the first decade after the 1917 revolution. Historian Steven Richmond compares the "dark, inscrutable censorship of the 1930s, where even the word 'censorship' was censored" with the very open proclamations by Repertkom and its ilk during NEP, when censorship was "public and pugnacious."²⁸⁴

In their assault on the vestigial, "bourgeois" theater of the old regime, the members of Repertkom were ideological, but not necessarily artistic – stylistic – allies of the "futurist" left and the militants of "Theatrical October." For Meierkhol'd, Maiakovskii, and their supporters, a "theatrical front" divided the old from the new, the bad from the good. For the functionaries within Repertkom, the frame of reference was re-configured, where the core value of collectivism was to be defended against the predations of individualism. Even as the cultural battle lines were re-circumscribed they remained sufficiently fluid, and Meierkhol'd was not officially reprimanded for his experimental provocations. Yet this change in emphasis cast his precariously self-indulgent experiments in the individualist, eccentric category, and the first

²⁸³ Michael S. Fox, "Glavlit, Censorship, and the Problem of Party Policies on Cultural Affairs, 1922-28", *Soviet Studies*, Vol.44, No.6 (1992), 1057. Fox writes that, "in the third quarter of 1924...one in every eight plays was banned."

²⁸⁴ Steven Richmond, "'The Conditions of the Contemporary': The Censors and Censorship of the Soviet Theaters, 1923-1927", *Russian History*, Vol. 27, No.1 (Spring 2000), 2.

circular of Repertkom in 1923 called for a struggle against a repertoire which contained “severely abnormal individualism.”²⁸⁵ During the 1923-24 theatrical season Repertkom launched an attack on the Bol’shoi Theater, prohibiting the staging of Friedrich Schiller’s (1759-1805) *The Maid of Orleans* (a “free” version of the life of Joan of Arc, in which she falls in love with an English knight, repents of that, and then perishes on the battlefield rather than the pyre) on the grounds of its potential for spiritual contamination, and as a “mainstay of the bourgeois epoch.”²⁸⁶ In the spring of 1924, Repertkom also forbade MKhAT’s production of *The Brothers Karamazov*, arguing that “by its theme and development cultivates reactionary moods of Christian meekness, self-mutilation, self-humiliation, and so forth.”²⁸⁷

Lunacharskii was not opposed to censorship as such, but concerned about who should implement it. As part of the political tug-of-war over ultimate control of the repertoire, in July, 1923 Narkompros issued a resolution in connection with the control over the repertoire of the academic theaters. Narkompros’ board asserted that Repertkom should defer to Lunacharskii: “the planned repertoire is established by commissar of the main repertory committee, and all changes submitted by gl(avnyi) repert(uarnyi) kom(itet) are to be sent for review to [Lunacharskii].”²⁸⁸ An “open order” from Lunacharskii in 1924 provides some definite, if convoluted, evidence of his continued attempts to circumvent or undermine Repertkom, as well as the avenues available to formally appeal any censorship. Plays that were conceived “outside the repertory plan,” and requiring no further “guidance, improvement, or correction” could be promptly produced. In cases where Repertkom had vetoed a play and the director contested the

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 51.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸⁸ “Vypiska iz protokola no. 24/527 zasedaniia kollegii Narkomprosa o poriadake utverzhdeniia repertuara akademicheskikh teatrov” (Notes from protocol no. 24/527 of the meeting of the board of Narkompros on the order of approval of the repertoire of the academic theaters), July 25, 1923. GTsTM, Lf., No. 154, TsTM No. 168684/1014. 131. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 47.

veto, “the question eventually goes to the Scientific and Artistic Section of GUS (*Gosudarstvennyi uchenyi sovet*, or State Academic Council inside Narkompros), whose permanent members come from both Repertkom and the TEO of Narkompros. All decisions are final.”²⁸⁹

While the intramural struggle that pitted Lunacharskii against Repertkom and Glavpolitprosvet simmered, the Party provided guidance on the use of the theater for educational and propagandistic purposes. At the 12th Party Congress in April, 1923, a resolution was issued “On the questions of propaganda, publishing, and agitation.” Part 45 of the resolution addressed the use of theater for “systematic mass propaganda of the idea of communism.” To achieve this goal it was necessary to enlist “responsible powers” at the local and central levels for the purpose of building a “responsible and revolutionary repertoire.” Exploiting the “heroic moments of class struggle, the theater must be used as a means of anti-religious propaganda.”²⁹⁰ This fusion of class struggle and anti-religious agitation may help explain how, and why, Shaw’s *St. Joan*, which pits a peasant-saint against the Catholic Church, was able pass repertory muster at all, albeit with modifications.

“There has been a sickness”

²⁸⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Rasporiazhenie po Narkomprosu o poriadake utverzheniia repertuara akademicheskikh teatrov” (...), February 8, 1924. GTsTM, Lf., No. 154, 94. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 47.

²⁹⁰ XII s’ezd Rossiskoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol’shevikov), Moscow April 17-25, 1923. “Po voprosam propagandy, pechati, i agitatsii”. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 27. In 1921, the Central Committee of the Communist party declared that: “At the moment, there is no point at all in putting anti-religious propaganda in a place of first importance...Instead of petty attacks on priests, we have to touch on the subject of the general outlook of women workers and peasants, to come out against religion as a world view, as a system...Our anti-religious propaganda and agitation should precisely of this sort: concrete and deeply thought-out...our task is to replace a religious explanation with a scientific one.” Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, “On Anti-religious Propaganda and Agitation Among Women Workers and Peasants”, *Vestnik agitatsiia i propagandy* (The Bulletin of Agitation and Propaganda), September 15, 1921. In William G. Rosenberg, *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia, Part 1* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 246-247.

Coinciding with Aleksandr Ostrovskii's (1823-1886) centenary celebration, Lunacharskii coined his slogan "Back to Ostrovskii!," a call for a return to the dramatic realism introduced to the Russian stage by the nineteenth-century playwright. His plays, full of heavily idiomatic dialogue which posed a linguistic obstacle to their broad international appeal, portrayed the foibles of the emergent merchant class. As a theatrical vessel for socialist enlightenment, Ostrovskii's type of realism was replete with the "human subject-matter" Lunacharskii approved of in his 1921 *Krasnaia nov'* article. To make the old realism new and palatable to proletarian audiences, it was simply a question of discarding the exclusive scrutiny of the petty bourgeois, and casting them as villains against the triumphant working class. Lunacharskii insisted that the way forward was through the past, but he made clear that this was not a return to decadent, pre-revolutionary realism, but a "new realism." Articulating what his slogan meant, Lunacharskii put MKhAT's psychological realism in the same category as the pernicious formalist experiments of Meierkhol'd, contrasting them with Ostrovskii's theater, "which put the actor on the firm-footing that we seek out." Lunacharskii explained that in both the "left" and academic theaters "there has been a sickness" whose cure consisted of eliminating from the repertoire "all the trash" and bringing back "a classical artistic realism that is the most suitable form for the new theater."²⁹¹

Lunacharskii would continue to refine his notion of "new realism." Writing in the Omsk newspaper *The Workers' Way* in 1924, Lunacharskii argued that the art "growing up around us" should serve as an analysis of reality. In this sense, art and reality were not conjoined in the improvised manner of Meierkhol'd's *The Dawns*, nor was there any room in Lunacharskii's

²⁹¹ A.V. Lunacharskii, "Kakoi teatr nam nuzhen?" (What kind of theater do we need?), in *Collected Works*, volume 3, ed. I.I. Anisimov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1964), under "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/kakoj-teatr-nam-nuzhen> [Accessed July 6, 2014]. It is not always clear, and perhaps intentionally vague, to whom the pronoun "we" refers to in Lunacharskii's utterances. Is it the universal, collective, communal "we" of the socialist state, or a more restricted class, including only those cultural professionals and officials involved in the production and propagation rather than the consumption of theater.

formulation for *ars gratia artis*. For a Marxist, concerned “to the utmost with the freedom of art, the artistic mirror must remain sufficiently versatile.” But the Marxist needed to keep in mind that his mirror was necessarily bent by the artist’s “pure or mixed class inclinations.” The artist’s class consciousness is what makes art a “powerful weapon of propaganda and class struggle.” For Lunacharskii, artistic freedom coincided with this social duty, and Marxists “do not recognize the abstract freedom of will. When a person expresses himself freely, he above all expresses the community which influences him.”²⁹²

In letter to the editor of *Krasnaia nov'*, A. K. Voronskii (1884-1937), in the summer of 1923, Lunacharskii declared himself to be a great supporter of the “renaissance of realism, which in theory anyway” was being proclaimed everywhere. He maintained that restrained, classical realism of the kind practiced and perfected by Ostrovskii was “literally needed, like bread.” Literature, painting, music, posters, and the theater all required a sort of classical realism, but “sharper, more demonstrative, more monumental, with a light touch of pathos in one hand, and farce in the other.” While suggesting that the “new realism” was still unfulfilled, Lunacharskii asserted that some directors and theaters had transitioned from theoretical understanding to the practical application of his principles. He declared that Aleksandr Tairov and his Kamernyi (Chamber) Theater, which in 1921 Lunacharskii had included in the group of state academic theaters receiving a government subsidy, were among the converts. Lunacharskii told Voronskii that “even Tairov writes me to almost word for word, saying what I told him almost two years ago, when he was still resisting.”

²⁹² A.V. Lunacharskii, “Znachenie iskusstva s kommunisticheskoi tochki zreniia” (The significance of art from a communist point of view), *Rabochii put'*, December 21, 1924. Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-7/znachenie-iskusstva-s-kommunisticeskoj-tocki-zrenia> [accessed September 3, 2014).

Not everyone responded to Lunacharskii's new doctrine in the same way. If Tairov was putting into practice Lunacharskii's ideas about a "new realism," Meierkhol'd used the "Back to Ostrovskii!" call to arms as a way to flout them. In 1923, Meierkhol'd staged an enormously successful, but Bolshevized and experimental, version of Ostrovskii's *The Forest* (1870), in which the villains were represented as devious NEPmen. In the same season, Tairov produced a fairly restrained, straightforward version of the playwright's *The Storm* (1859).²⁹³ Theater critic and historian of the Kamernyi Konstantin Derzhavin observed that in Tairov's production of *The Storm* "one can observe realistic tendencies...derived from the 'imagistic theater', and also bearing witness to the impact of the MKhAT organism."²⁹⁴ The Kamernyi's repertoire until then consisted entirely of plays by foreign dramatists, and this was the first production by a Russian. Lunacharskii expressed his preference for Tairov's rendition of Ostrovskii, although the director had taken some liberties, moving the action from the countryside and "enclosing it in cramped, beamed cages...in order to convey the heaviness of the patriarchal order of life gloomily hanging over the characters' heads."²⁹⁵

In his letter, while celebrating the "new realism," Lunacharskii expressed his discomfort with the new censorship directives. He complained to Voronskii that Repertkom and their

²⁹³ Like censorship, the battles between Tairov's and Meierkhol'd's theaters were out in the open in the early 1920s. Tairov's supporters described Meierkhol'd's *Forest* as a "whimsical vaudeville." In his turn, Meierkhol'd called Tairov's *Storm* "imitative" and "amateurish." Occasionally, the two were allies, as the Kamernyi's newspaper put it: "In the struggle against the forces of naturalism in the Russian theater, the Kamernyi locks arms with Meierkhol'd." *7 dnei MKT*, No.8 (1-8 January, 1924) In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 257.

²⁹⁴ K.N. Derzhavin, *Kamernyi teatr*, under "Derzhavin KN", <http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Derzhavin/Kamernyi> [accessed January 23, 2015]. Tairov said about the play: "Ostrovskii requires concreteness, he does not resonate with abstraction." In Alisa Koonen, *Stranitsy zhizni* (Life's Pages) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), under, "Koonen AG", http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Koonen/Stranitsy_zhizni/#_Toc192914007 [accessed October 21, 2014].

²⁹⁵ Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 106. Gloominess was balanced with light-heartedness during NEP, and later that spring, Lunacharskii celebrated the entertainment in addition to "enlightenment" importance of the theater. In the *Weekly Bulletin of the Academic Theaters*, he wrote that after the strain of the "heroic years of revolution, we are experiencing a period of some relaxation. Russians citizens have the basic right to a pleasant, cheerful hour of light, carefree entertainment." In *Ezhenedelnik akademicheskikh teatrov*, No.12, 6.

“puritanical” journal *Na postu* (On Guard), were evidence that “good things do not last forever.” Describing the struggles over the theatrical repertoire and urging open debate, he wondered if art should be a subject of political discussion at all, either in the government or in the Party. “I am not trying to insist on some narrow line, on the contrary, I support greater breadth and inclusion, but at the same time let us have none of that anonymity (*bezlikost’*)...what we have now is some people pulling one way, others another.”²⁹⁶ One of those people pulling in very much his own way was Tairov.

“The great danger of emptiness”

Aleksandr Iakovlevich Tairov (1885-1950) was born on June 24 in Romny, a city in Ukraine’s Poltava *guberniia* where Lunacharskii spent his early childhood. In his autobiography Tairov, whose real family name was Kornblit, wrote that, “My father was a schoolteacher who loved the theater, and from childhood I often watched as he and his colleagues performed the classics from Pushkin, Gogol, and others.”²⁹⁷ In 1906, Tairov moved to St. Petersburg, where he acted and directed alongside Meierkhol’d in the Komissarzhevskii Theater.²⁹⁸ Tairov and his wife, the actress Alisa Koonen (1889-1974), opened the Moscow Kamernyi Theater (MKT) on December 25, 1914, and quickly the critics labeled it a Futurist theater. The critic Iurii Sobolev wrote in the April 7, 1918 issue of the journal *Teatr* that, “A. Tairov stands on the left flank of Moscow directors, indeed is the most left, more so in his own field than Maiakovskii is in

²⁹⁶ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Pis’mo k A.K. Voronskomu”, July 9. 1923. Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/pismo-k-a-k-voronskomu>. Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronskii (1884-1943), was a Soviet literary critic and writer, as well as editor of *Red Virgin Soil*; he was arrested and shot in 1937. He was later rehabilitated under Khrushchev in 1955.

²⁹⁷ A.Ia. Tairov, *Zapiski rezhissera, stat’i, besedy, rechi, pis’ma* (Notes of a Director, articles, interviews, speeches, letters), ed. P. Markov (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral’noe obshchestvo, 1970), 67. Like Lunacharskii, Tairov went to high school in Kiev, where he lived with his aunt, a retired actress, who would take him to the opera.

²⁹⁸ The theater was named for Vera Fedorovna Komissarzhevskaiia (1862-1910), one of the most famous actresses and theater entrepreneurs of late Imperial Russia. Her patronage of Meierkhol’d after his break with MKhAT allowed him undertake his first theatrical innovations.

poetry.”²⁹⁹ In 1921 Tairov wrote that, “[MKT] had to be born, it was written in the book of theatrical fate...If you want to know the story of the birth of the Kamernyi, read *A Thousand and One Nights*.”³⁰⁰ He described his mood then as restless and dissatisfied, “tossing between the Scylla of the naturalistic theater, and the Charybdis of stylized theater.”³⁰¹ Naturalism suffered from an excess of verisimilitude and “dysentery of formlessness.”³⁰² Tairov saw MKT as an opportunity to have his own small theater with its own sophisticated, like-minded audience, the sort of “intimate” venue Lunacharskii expressed disdain for in his 1921 *Theater Culture* article. Sophistication was the antidote to the dilettantism Tairov saw as the perennial scourge of contemporary Russian theater, “like a moth-eaten coat” and a shape-shifter, assuming different, but “always respectable identities.”³⁰³

Tairov described his new theater as a synthesis of realism and stylization. Taking aim at both the psychological realism of MKhAT’s “naturalistic” approach and the theater of “communal action” advocated by Meierkhol’d and others, Tairov was suspicious of evoking a “physiological” reaction from the spectator, saying, “It is not for nothing that the Spanish

²⁹⁹ Quoted in Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 15. In 1912, Vladimir Maiakovskii first published poems appeared in the Russian Futurists’ journal, *A Slap in the Face of Public Opinion*, which also included the group’s manifesto, calling for “throwing Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, and the rest from the steamship of modernity.” According to Rudnitsky, Tairov was not interested in Futurism as such, and well before MKT was “engaged in a battle on two fronts: against the ‘naturalism’ of Stanislavskii, and the ‘conscious theatricality’ of Meierkhol’d.”

³⁰⁰ Aleksandr Tairov, *Notes of a Director*, trans. and ed. William Kuhlke (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969), 55. “A theater needs the following: a location, money, and a troupe, none of which we had. Yet the Kamernyi came to be anyway. How? How does the sun rise? How does spring appear? How does human creativity happen? Thus arose the Kamernyi – with the same inscrutability and elemental logic of these natural occurrences...One thing was clear: we could not work in any of the existing theaters, we had to have our own.”

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 47. “Form is the sole means through which one’s creativity may be perceived by others.” In Tairov’s diagnosis of the theater in the decade before the Bolshevik Revolution, the naturalist theater’s rejection of form in favor of psychological reality had left it “unable to attract and audience by means of its self-contained art, and little by little, either turns into an experimental institute for psychotherapy or became a popular guide to the history of Russian and foreign literature.”

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 67.

Inquisition made a public show of its executions.”³⁰⁴ Tairov said that those like Meierkhol’d – as well as Rousseau, Wagner, and Rolland before him – in trying to resurrect the theater of antiquity were “turning back the wheel of theater art, and depriving it of its independent value.”³⁰⁵ He acknowledged that Russia was “on the road to socialism,” but the path of communal action, of socialist theater was not the creative path. Tairov argued for the absolute distinction and separation of stage and auditorium, declaring: “Long live the footlights!” He maintained that Meierkhol’d’s notion of returning the theater to a more primitive state, in which the theater should be a kind of temple where “it is so easy to run in ecstasy and join the service,” succeeded only in dragging it down from “a level of self-containment that it had which it took so long to achieve.”³⁰⁶

For Lunacharskii, art was a manifestation of the reality of class struggle, but it also transcended the struggle, and the theater could serve as the means to transform that reality. Meierkhol’d conceived of a theater where he imagined that neither art nor reality had the upper hand, encouraging their interpenetration while asserting mastery over both. To Tairov, life and art were both injured and insulted when they forgot their place: “for there are two kinds of truth – the truth of life and the truth of art...and artistic truth rings false in life.”³⁰⁷ His notion of a synthetic theater was a middle ground between the extremes of empty formalism and ponderous realism. Tairov also called this synthesis “neo-realism:” the complete integration of all the arts – a much scaled-down *Gesamtkunstwerk* – that was not merely an imitation of phenomenal reality,

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 76.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 136. Tairov fought for the theater’s complete independence from “the neighboring muses, who seemed to him like insolent parasites.” Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 15.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 142.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 44.

but theater that was resistant to “how mercilessly life destroys all its illusions.”³⁰⁸ Tairov was able to put the evolution – and inevitability – of his theater in succinctly socialist, Hegelian terms: “In the history of contemporary theater the naturalistic theater was the thesis, the antithesis of which had of necessity to be the stylized theater. Until the Kamernyi Theater, the time was not yet ripe for the synthesis.”³⁰⁹

Tairov, unlike Meierkhol’d, did not join the Party after the 1917 Revolution. He deplored the “murderous atmosphere” in which Russia and his theater were enveloped, but recognized in the rupture with tradition a chance to stimulate creativity.³¹⁰ Yet he was repelled by the notion of purposefully pedagogical, socialist, proletarian theater. Not long before the Revolution, Tairov asserted that “There should not be any kind of special ‘art for the people’.” Comparing the categorization of art according to class to the segregation of sleeping compartments on a train, he maintained that art should be unified, as it “has its own worth, since art is for everyone in whose soul lays a conscious, or unrealized, thirst for beauty.”³¹¹ In 1922, MKT staged Jean Racine’s (1639-1699) *Phaedra* (1677), with Koonen in the lead role. Lunacharskii declared the production

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 45. “A synthetic theater is one which fuses organically the various scenic arts so that in a single performance all those elements which are now separated – dialogue, singing, dance, pantomime, even elements of the circus – are harmoniously combined to produce a single, monolithic theatrical work.” Contamination from the “neighboring muses” was presumably prevented by this fusion, the subordination of the “elements” to the theater.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 48.

³¹⁰ The Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) visited the Soviet Union shortly after the Revolution and met with Tairov in his office at MKT. In the course of a brief interview, Kazantzakis asked the director: “What is the influence of the cosmogonic event, the Revolution, on your art?” Tairov responded that the effect had been enormous: “I am at a critical point in my artistic development. I am looking for something more quick, more truthful, and more dynamic, something that matches our contemporary soul. Not a narrow realism, nor a cloud-bound romanticism, but something new, a synthesis or whatever you want to call it, a neorealism perhaps.” In Nikos Kazantzakis, *Russia: A Chronicle of Three Journeys in the Aftermath of the Revolution*, trans. Michael Antonakes and Thanasis Maskaleris (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1989), 177.

³¹¹ A.Ia. Tairov, “Deklaratsiia khudozhnika” (An Artist’s Statement), in Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 55.

an “undoubted triumph...which created the impression of a beautiful shock.”³¹² Historian M.N Liubomudrova writes that between 1921 and 1925, MKT was in transition, developing along the “path of aestheticism, which characterized the cult of beauty and form.” According to her, *Phaedra* represented the first success of this transitional period, in which the drama was interpreted into the 1920s.³¹³ The director and historian Mel Gordon writes that in the early 1920s, a ticket to MKT was difficult to come by and the theater “provided an experience similar to a Broadway extravaganza”. Unlike Stanislavskii or Meierkhol’d, Tairov had “cosmopolitan tastes” similar to those of the New York Theater Guild and “rarely cared about the theater’s social mission.”³¹⁴

Lunacharskii recognized and saluted Tairov’s directorial skill, but scolded him for this indifference to social, and socialist, content.³¹⁵ In an article in the September-October, 1922 issue of the journal *Press and Revolution*, Lunacharskii observed that Tairov had displayed no special sympathy for the revolution as such, “as a revolution outside the theater.” Inside the Kamernyi Theater, Tairov had carried out a “systematic and well-planned revolution” under the influence, according to Lunacharskii, of “what can be broadly understood as ‘futurism’.” Liubomudrova, writing in the Soviet Union in the late 1960s, offers a slightly different view, asserting that while

³¹² *Izvestiia*, February 11, 1922. In Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 106. On page 18, Rudnitsky described Koonen as “a stranger to fashionable neuroticism, it seemed as though she were in the wrong epoch...Her characters came onto the stage to perish or conquer.”

³¹³ M.N. Liubomudrova, “Moskovskii Kamernyi teatr” In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 243. The critic and historian of MKT, K.N. Derzhavin, said of the 1924 production of *Phaedra*: “It does not seem strange or out of place to have Tairov’s play take place in snowy Moscow, when the play’s tragic tale resonates with the pathos of the first phase of the revolution.” K.N. Derzhavin, *Kniga o Kamernom teatre* (A Book about the Kamernyi Theater) (Leningrad: GIKHG, 1934), 109.

³¹⁴ Mel Gordon, “Russian Eccentric Theater: The Rhythm of America on the Early Soviet State” In Nancy Van Norman Baer, *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-garde Stage Design, 1913-1935* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 120.

³¹⁵ In 1922, Krupskaiia defined a communist as someone who “first and foremost, person involved in society, with strongly developed social instincts, who desires that all people should live well and be happy.” N. Krupskaiia, “Kakim dolzhen byt’ kommunist” (What a communist ought to be like), *Iunnyi Kommunist*, No. 8-9 (1922). In William G. Rosenberg ed., *Bolshevik Visions, Part 1* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 26.

Tairov continued to experiment after 1921, his productions still contained “obviously accentuated social motives and themes.”

Some of Lunacharskii’s language eerily, and ironically, foreshadowed the accusations of “formalism” used against him – and Tairov and Meierkhol’d – in the late 1920s. Lunacharskii criticized both Tairov and Meierkhol’d for being “indifferent to content.” This presented “the great danger of emptiness” that threatened “healthy” public tastes, and by which the “unforewarned proletariat could be poisoned by decadent culture.” Addressing the “path of aestheticism” and Tairov’s preoccupation with beauty, Lunacharskii pointed out that while Tairov had complained about the government’s “stinginess,” the state had facilitated his “uninterrupted and energetic work.”³¹⁶ Lunacharskii concluded by saying that, *Phaedra* notwithstanding, MKT’s path was “too roundabout, filled with wandering and delusion.” In the process some things were lost and others gained “which it would be better to do without.”³¹⁷

The following year, “wanderings” would take on a literal meaning as the Kamernyi embarked on a tour of Europe between February 23 and September 5, 1923. Prior to his departure, Tairov announced that: “We have proven our mastery of the theater, developed our technique, enriched the form. Further lingering in formalism is impossible...what we need is support, ideas – we need a playwright.”³¹⁸ MKT was chosen by the Soviet state for this cultural mission as much for its “mastery” as the fact that its international repertoire and relatively – compared with that of Meierkhol’d and others – subdued innovations probably made it more

³¹⁶ “I will not argue with Tairov here, I do that often enough in person and in letters,” Lunacharskii wrote, adding parenthetically, that “in truth, Tairov’s theater aspires to be an academic theater, even though this quest is a covert, inconsistent one.” By “covert” perhaps he meant that it was his idea and that, belatedly, Tairov was beginning to see the wisdom of including the Kamernyi in the group of academic theaters in 1921.

³¹⁷ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Teatr RSFSR”, *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia*, No. 7 (Sept.-Oct., 1922). Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/teatr-rsfsr> [accessed August 22, 2014].

³¹⁸ A.Ia.Tairov, “Itogi sezona” (A Summary of the Season), April 1, 1923. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 243.

presentable and comprehensible to foreign audiences.³¹⁹ As Liubomudrova observes, these “first ambassadors of Soviet art” still provoked strong, “stormy” responses. In Paris they were warmly received by Picasso, Cocteau and the rest of the French avant-garde, but others were more hostile.³²⁰ The Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* reported that in Paris, MKT was accepted as a progressive theater, “carrying on the struggle against the traditional theater,” and attracting the “young, new, and brave.” MKT was seen as the art of the New Russia, “refuting talk about ‘Bolshevik barbarism’.” Any negative reaction came from those unprepared for this “unfamiliar onslaught on the hundred-year-old tradition of the French Theater.”³²¹ In her autobiography, Koonen describes an “unexpected episode” that occurred after a performance of *Phaedra* in Paris. The union of Russian émigré writers had sent members of MKT an invitation to a reception in their honor at the Hotel de Lutèce. Koonen recalled that Tairov did not how to respond to what could seem like “a provocation,” so he sent Lunacharskii a telegram asking for guidance. “The answer came back quickly: ‘Accept the invitation, everything else depends upon

³¹⁹ MKT performed in Paris, Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, St. Gallen (Switzerland), Frankfurt-on-Main, Dresden, Baden-Baden, Breslau, Sopot (Poland), Königsberg, and Memelburg (present-day Lithuania). The repertoire included: E.T.A. Hoffman’s *Princess Brambilla* (1820); A. Charles Lecoq’s opera bouffe *Giroflé-Girofla* (1874); Racine’s *Phaedra*; Ernest Legouv  and Eugene Scribe’s *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (1849); Oscar Wilde’s *Salom * (1891); Arthur Schnitzler’s *The Veil of Pierette* (1900). Between October 1923 and May of 1924, MKhAT performed abroad as well, with stops in Paris, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, New Haven, Hartford, Newark, Brooklyn, Washington, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit, where they staged exclusively Russian fare: Maxim Gorkii’s *The Lower Depths* (1902), Alexei Tolstoi’s *Tsar Fedor Ioannovich* (1868), Anton Chekhov’s *the Cherry Orchard* (1904) and *Three Sisters* (1901). In Russia, the repertoire of non-Russian plays staged by MKT during this period included G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who was Thursday* (1908), Wilde’s *Salome*, Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881), and three Eugene O’Neill plays.

³²⁰ Liubomudrova, “Moskovskii Kamernyi teatr”. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 245. Jeann Cocteau wrote that Tairov’s *Phaedra* [in Paris] “is a masterpiece...and although it contradicts all my expectations and hopes, there is within it that monstrous beauty which with one leap transcends disagreements and controversies.” Zhan Kokto, *Portrety i vospominaniia* (J. Cocteau, Portraits and remembrances) (Moscow, 1985). In Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 106.

³²¹ “Gastrol’i Kamernogo teatra v Parizhe” (The Kamernyi Theater’s tour in Paris), *Izvestiia*, No. 90 (April 25, 1923). In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 245. Historian Steven A. Nash writes that MKT’s sojourn in Paris represented “things coming full circle, with east influencing west.’ Nash quotes Fernand L ger who said of the Kamernyi that “there is nothing in Paris to compare with this...my dream is to tackle plasticity on the stage as [they] have done.” Steven N. Nash, “East Meets West: Russian Stage Design and the European Avant-garde”, in Van Norman Baer, *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-garde Stage Design, 1913-1935*, 111.

your tact’.” As the theater troupe was leaving the hotel, Koonen writes that Tairov smiled and said: “Well, it seems the wolves are full, and the sheep are still whole.”³²²

Tairov had whetted the “wolves” appetites, granting an interview to a Russian émigré newspaper in Paris before MKT’s first performance on March 6. He told the reporter that MKT’s “main task was to return joy to the theater.” Tairov was concerned not only with the audience’s delight, but the actor’s as well, restoring his “regal robes,” and making him the complete authority on the stage. In order not to distract from the acting, pictorial set decorations were abolished, leaving “nothing superfluous...the stage is a keyboard for the actor.” Asked why the Kamernyi was touring outside Russia, Tairov responded that, while his company had already discovered the “basic foundations of the new theater,” in order to continue on this creative path, it was necessary “to develop, deepen, and perfect” them. “We have chosen this moment, when all our work has been presented to Moscow only, to have it scrutinized and verified by new audiences.”³²³

When the Kamernyi returned to Moscow at the end of the summer in 1923, Tairov issued a report on the artistic, critical, and financial aspects of the tour.³²⁴ He wrote that while the long

³²² Alisa Koonen, *Stranitsy zhizni* (Life’s Pages) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982). Under, Koonen, AG”, http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Koonen/Stranitsy_Zhizni/#_Toc192914007 [accessed November 15, 2014]. It is unclear....

³²³ “Interv’iu A.Ia. Tairova korrespondentu Parizhskoi gazety *Poslednie novosti* ob iskusstve Kamernogo teatra” (An interview between A.IA. Tairov and a correspondent from the Parisian newspaper *The Latest News* about the art of the Kamernyi Theater), March 3, 1923. TsGALI, f. 2328, op.1, ed. khr.32, 6. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 247. It was not only the audience of MKT that was exclusive: “In this epoch of our new culture, we make greater claims on the actor. That is why the Kamernyi does not accept into its troupe actors from other theaters, and why the Kamernyi had its own school, where along with lessons in diction there is instruction in balletic gymnastics, acrobatics, fencing, juggling, singing, etc...The entire play in its synthetic composition must combine speech, sound, movement, and emotion, re-worked into distinct rhythmic patterns.”

³²⁴ The theater critic, historian and literary director of MKhAT Pavel Markov wrote about the Kamernyi’s return that during its seven-month absence, “Moscow theatrical life took on a more distinct outline,” and that the 1923-24 season had been one of “vital experiments and sustained toil.” The question of how the theater developed “out of the depths organically and logically” was being resolved insofar as some sort of “leveling of the theater is occurring.” Creative distinctions, according to Markov, were beginning to disappear “and become blurred- the very idiosyncrasies that ought to justify the existence of each theater.” Pavel Markov, “The Return”, *Teatr i muzyka* (Theater and Music), No.35 (1923), 1105. In Sergei Ostrovsky and Laurence Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 181.

trip had been extremely valuable for its “social-political and artistic results, it was not a success in material terms,” and MKT was now unable to balance its books. Tairov argued that the repertoire, consisting of plays in production since the October Revolution, as well as those with “unfamiliar revolutionary content”, had resulted in the perception abroad that they were the representatives of the new art and culture of the Soviet Republic. This in turn had “provoked not only an adverse reaction,” but a boycott on the part of Russian émigrés in Paris and Berlin. Tairov complained that according to “certain groups” within the foreign press, MKT had been “commandeered for the purpose of agitation.” Others, like London’s *The Outlook*, wrote that, “those who insisted that the Bolsheviks had destroyed art were poorly informed, and the Kamernyi Theater completely refutes that lie.”³²⁵ Tairov concluded his report calling Lunacharskii’s attention to the fact that MKT was now “in very dire straits, without resources, and requesting your assistance in paying off the debts accrued from the trip abroad...By the way, in December of [1924] will be the Kamernyi’s tenth anniversary, which includes the difficult conditions of war and revolution.”³²⁶ Those conditions included the continued decline in Lenin’s health. He suffered a third stroke in 1923, which effectively ended his political career, though he remained the official leader of the Communist Party. Mute and bed-ridden, he died on January 21, 1924.

³²⁵ “Dokladnaia zapiska A. Ia. Tairova ob itogakh zagranichnikh gastroli Kamernogo teatra” (A.Ia. Tairov’s report summarizing the Kamernyi Theater’s foreign tour”, TsGA RSFSR, f. 2306, op.1, ed. khr.2745, 3-6. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 250-251. Tairov’s report included the following reviews: Paris’ theater journal *Comedie* wrote that “The Kamernyi is Lenin’s ballet;” Vienna’s *New Free Press* denounced the theater as “Soviet government propaganda;” The *New York Times*’ critic somewhat cryptically observed that “the [Kamernyi] is basically quite cosmopolitan, like the majority of ideas coming out of Bolshevik Moscow;” The *New York Observer* maintained that, “just as in Moscow, everywhere the Kamernyi goes it is entirely revolutionary and international;” Berlin’s *People’s Newspaper* wrote, “Moscow has sent us something remote from the rather unhelpful Proletkult;” Munich’s *People’s Review* claimed that, “obviously, beneath the fig leaf of art, Munich has been subjected to Bolshevik propaganda.” Tairov said that as a result of these attacks, MKT had to leave Munich, and been denied visas to several other countries.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

Lunacharskii's response to Tairov was characteristically ambivalent. In recognition of the tenth anniversary, Lunacharskii wrote an article in December, 1924 in which he declared that MKT had always stood out as an original against the background of contemporary Russian and European theater, seeking and developing a "higher order in the realm of aesthetic." However, he criticized the Kamernyi for its retreat from "social mindedness" (*sotsial'nost'*) and the fact that nothing – not the content, ideas, nor even the playwright – about a play interested Tairov but the exhibition of a character and his inner life.³²⁷ "Tairov's slogan of 'neorealism' he understands as the total rejection of every illusion, and the adoption of the transparent mask of the actor and ever more ascetic stage design." The ambiguity inherent in Lunacharskii's notion of the "artistic-revolutionary" could be used to divide and conquer. He maintained that Meierkhol'd attached much greater significance to the technical aspects of directing, and, "barring some catastrophe, we can foresee where that will lead: the theater of hyperbole and 'reviews'." In contrast, Lunacharskii asserted, Tairov's theater was "too refined for vulgar caricature, yet it is doubtful whether he will ever be able, with such a delicate touch, to echo the justice of our revolution." In this respect, Lunacharskii said, Tairov could never, for all his "aestheticism," be able to compete with Meierkhol'd and his revolutionary zeal.³²⁸

³²⁷ Sounding like the reader of fairy-tales she referred to in her critique of Meierkhol'd's *Dawns*, Krupskaiia wrote that: "A communist is, first and foremost, a person involved in society, with strongly developed social instincts, who desires that all people should do well and be happy." N.K. Krupskaiia, "What a communist ought to be like", *Iunni kommunist* (Young communist), No.8-9 (1922). In William G. Rosenberg ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural revolution in Soviet Russia, Part I* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 26.

³²⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, "K desiatiletiu Kamernogo teatra" (On the tenth anniversary of the Kamernyi Theater), *Iskusstvo trudiashchimsiaia* (Workers' Art), No.4-5 (December 23, 1924). Under, "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/k=desatiletium-kamernogo-teatra> [accessed September 3, 2014]. In 1924, Lev Trotskii, echoing Lunacharskii's notion of a "bent mirror" gave his own circular definition of Revolutionary art, writing that is consisted of "Works whose themes reflect the Revolution, and the works that are not connect to the Revolution in theme, but are thoroughly imbued with it, and are colored by the new consciousness arising out of the Revolution...There is no revolutionary art yet. There are elements of this art, there are hints and attempts at it, and, what is more important, there is the revolutionary man, who is forming the generation in his image and who is more and more in need of this art. How long will it take for such art to reveal itself clearly?" L. Trotskii, *Literature and Revoution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964). In Rosenberg, *Bolshevik Visions, Part 2*, 275.

The Kamernyi attempted to compensate for this deficit of revolutionary zeal with strident, surprising rhetoric. In anticipation of MKT's anniversary and the upcoming season, the Kamernyi's weekly journal issued a suspiciously Futurist-sounding manifesto in which the editors asked and answered: "Who? Contemporary authors. What? Plays taking us into tomorrow. What kind of tomorrow? More revolutionary than today. The play? High tragedy, buffonade, melodrama, farce, operetta, and pantomime...Academy? Aside with the academy!" If each play in the Kamernyi's repertoire contained all these elements, so much the better, the important thing was that "it must be new, not old." The editorial invoked the words of a certain workers' correspondent (*rabkor*) Poloshkin, who had written approvingly about the supposed tactics of Meierkhol'd's theater: "We gave our grandmothers tickets, and then closed them up in the theater for three day. We wanted to assault them with plays."³²⁹

Tairov took Lunacharskii's idea that art should "analyze reality" to heart. In a more subdued article in *Izvestiia* a few days later, Tairov wrote that, "Every epoch has its pathos. The pathos of modern times is simplicity."³³⁰ Where previously he had referred to his style as "neo-realism," Tairov now called it "concrete" or "structural" realism. The separation of life and art had always been an essential requirement of any performance, but now the Kamernyi pursued an even more refined, "strikingly intimate beauty."³³¹ Saying the play "appeared primarily as a form of theatrical reality", opposed to that of *byt*, or everyday life, Tairov chose George Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan* (1923) for the 1924-25 season. It is not clear in the end, from Tairov's writings or public declarations, why Shaw's play was chosen by the Kamernyi. Possibly, as Lunacharskii and others would imply, *St. Joan* was irresistible to the theater's prima donna, Koonen, offering

³²⁹ "Budushchi sezon MKT" (MKT's upcoming season), *7 dnei MKT*, No.15 (March 4-11, 1924). In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 252.

³³⁰ *Izvestiia*, March 16, 1924) In Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 194.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

her a starring role full of pathos, if not necessarily the revolutionary kind. Perhaps the appeal was the playwright himself. The fact that the quasi-Bolshevik Shaw had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 could be construed as a demonstration of the international appeal and force of socialist ideals, even if this particular play did not express them overtly. The Kamernyi could have had more pragmatic, pecuniary motivations for choosing *St. Joan*, hoping for a long and lucrative run, just as the play had enjoyed in successful productions in Europe. While the drama was based on a historical theme, it nonetheless represented Shaw's "conception of the future and perception of reality...which resonates with us."³³² *St. Joan (Sviataia Ioanna or Deva Orleana)* premiered on October 21, 1924 with Koonen as Joan and a set constructed by the brothers Vladimir (1899-1982) and Georgii (1900-1933) Stenberg.³³³

“She circles above the abyss”

The prolific Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) formed an early emotional and political attachment with Russia, although he postponed a visit there until 1931. He moved to London in 1876, where he patronized a circle of Russian émigrés and was a member of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, a group formed in support of the broadly and loosely defined Russian opposition to Tsarist autocracy; Shaw was the editor of the Society's journal *Free Russia*.³³⁴ In 1884, Shaw joined the Fabian society, the British socialist organization whose gradualist, reformist views were the antithesis of the Bolshevik doctrine of violent insurrection, led by a cadre of professional revolutionaries at the vanguard of the proletariat.

³³² A.Ia. Tairov, *Zapisiki Rezhisera, stat'l, besedy, rechi, pis'ma*, 210.

³³³ The shift to "structural realism" was connected to Tairov's collaboration with the Stenberg brothers, who also contributed to the left art journal LEF, and became famous for their design of film posters. The director began working with them in 1922, the beginning of a partnership that would last for over a decade. "The Stenberg brothers bridled and tamed the constructivist set." Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 195.

³³⁴ Olga Soboleva and Angus Wrenn, *The Only Hope of the World: George Bernard Shaw and Russia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 1-3.

Beginning with *Arms and the Man* in 1894, Shaw's plays enjoyed a series of successful productions, though *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1902), which portrays prostitution as a means of women's emancipation, was banned from public performance in the United Kingdom and the United States; the play was staged in St. Petersburg in 1907 at the Imperial Theater where Meierkhol'd was employed. While Friedrich Engels said of Shaw that he was a "most talented and witty writer," and Gorkii proclaimed him "one of the most courageous thinkers in Europe," Trotskii dissented, saying Shaw was "absolutely worthless as an economist and politician, and Lenin commented that "a good man has fallen amid the Fabians."³³⁵

From London, Shaw appraised Russia's cultural and political developments. Souls, collective or solitary, "differed from one to next," and in a letter to Gorkii in 1915 about the Ballets Russes, Shaw wrote that it was evidence of "this strange intensive culture of the Russian soul, which makes western souls seem vulgar in comparison."³³⁶ During the First World War, he contributed to the Menshevik newspaper *Novaia Zhizn'* (New Life), edited by Gorkii. Shaw had supported the Provisional Government after February 1917, and its overthrow by the Bolsheviks in October caught him by surprise and "appeared to knock him into silence."³³⁷ His biographer Michael Holroyd observes that Shaw "grew adept at taming the Soviet leaders' language," and came to see totalitarianism as simply massive public welfare. "Shaw let his imagination play

³³⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition* (New York: Random House, 1997), 614. Perhaps surprisingly, Shaw and Tolstoi were not political or philosophical allies, though they did both reject the notion of art for art's sake, peril, according to Lunacharskii, of "emptiness." In the dedication to *Man and Superman* (1903), Shaw wrote: He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none: he who had something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and conviction will carry him." In Soboleva and Wrenn, *The Only Hope of the World: George Bernard Shaw and Russia*, 51.

³³⁶ Soboleva and Wrenn, *The Only Hope of the World: George Bernard Shaw and Russia*, 4. The ballet company, which never performed in Russia, was conceived by impresario Sergei Diaghilev, with works by composer Igor Stravinskii, set designer/artist Leon Bakst, and others.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 118. In a description that could very well suit Lunacharskii, on page 126 the authors argue that Shaw's "intellectual dexterity, his open-mindedness, and ability to express sympathies with political positions differing from his own, certainly contributed to his reputation for paradoxical duplicity."

around Lenin's revolution until it flowered into a thoroughgoing Fabianism."³³⁸ The Fabians themselves were not so imaginative, and at a meeting of the Society in 1917, Shaw's announcement that, "We are socialists. The Russian side is our side," was greeted by cold silence. In a 1919 article in the British socialist newspaper *Labor Leader* entitled "Are We Bolsheviks?" Shaw answered in the affirmative.³³⁹ The institution of NEP in 1921, a sort of "gas and water Fabianism" according to Holroyd, seemed to Shaw as a way out of the disarray of revolution and an opening to reformist gradualism.³⁴⁰

In 1912, Lunacharskii, while living in Paris where he worked as a guide in the Louvre and theater critic, took no note of Shaw's politics in assessing his style as a playwright: "Shaw instructs through jokes." Yet he was not a typical writer of dramatic comedies, instead he "jokes differently than was done before, teaches differently than before." Lunacharskii described Shaw's wit as "bold, disorganized, virtuosic," but not so exaggerated as to shock the "refined tastes or routines" of the greater public, nor was it too intellectual or logical as to be beyond the "vulgar mind-set of modern-day good-time Charlies (*sovremennye zabavniki*)." It was jesting, Lunacharskii concluded, but "philosophical, bohemian-artistic jesting."³⁴¹ Twelve years later, in response to Shaw's criticism of the Communist International Congress, Lunacharskii wrote an essay entitled "Fellow-travelers in Europe," in which he engaged in similarly "philosophical" mocking, scoffing at Shaw's liberal – and liberated – socialism. To be sure, Lunacharskii wrote, Shaw is a clever, sensitive, and agile writer, who has "done a great service...but for him, to be

³³⁸ Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition*, 617.

³³⁹ Soboleva and Wrenn, *The Only Hope of the World: George Bernard Shaw and Russia*, 119. According to the authors, Shaw was not impressed by Leninism as such in the early 1920s, but was a willing convert because people like Georgii Chicherin and Lunacharskii were part of the government. A musician and linguist, Chicherin (1872-1936) was the Commissar of Foreign Affairs from 1918 to 1930.

³⁴⁰ Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The Definitive One-Volume Edition*, 617.

³⁴¹ A.V. Lunacharskii, "Frantsuzkii kritik ob Angliiskom komediografe" (A French critic on the English writer of dramatic comedies), *Teatr i iskusstvo*, No.23 (September 23, 1912) Under, "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tim-6/francuzkij-kritik-ob-anlijskom-komediografe> [accessed December 4, 2014].

Marxist is to be in shackles.” Shaw was proud of the fact that he was a skeptic, Lunacharskii argued, that he lacked a deep-rooted worldview while boasting of his eclecticism. Shaw was smart, but his mind was a sort of “harlequin’s coat, just like his writings...too fragmented to really grasp Marxism – for him it is a forbidden fruit.” Finally, Lunacharskii described Shaw as a “joyful iconoclast, pulling the wigs off of learned heads, and we applaud him for his pranks.” Lunacharskii wrote that in *St. Joan*, Shaw had demonstrated that the Inquisition was no worse than English law and that semi-barbaric tribes – or even “the brigands of Moscow” – conceded nothing to the salons of London. For this, Shaw was the Bolsheviks’ friend, “but our friend never lets us forget that we are, all the same, ‘barbarians’.”³⁴²

In 1928, Lunacharskii wrote a foreword to the Russian translation of Anatole France’s *The Life of Joan of Arc*. Lunacharskii observed that sometimes saints were self-anointed, and sometimes, as in the case of Joan, were passive instruments “in the hands of clever politicians.” According to Lunacharskii, her trial at the hands of the Catholic Church was compelling for the fact that its “injustice was connected to an unusual degree of judicial thoroughness.” Joan was burned at the stake in 1431 for heresy, but twenty-five years later the Pope rehabilitated her and declared her a martyr. She was beatified in 1909 and made a saint in 1920. Writing a decade before the Moscow show trials – and long before the rehabilitation of their victims – Lunacharskii said that Joan’s transformation over the centuries from a witch into a saint had the character of a “witty, pitiful, and amusing tragicomedy. Like never before have the fruits of class

³⁴² A.V. Lunacharskii, “Poputshiki v Evrope (po povodu Pis’ma Bernarda Shou)” (Fellow travelers in Europe (in connection with Bernard Shaw’s letter)), *Etudy kriticheskie* (Critical Studies), 1925. Lunacharski’s perception of Shaw is somewhat at odds with that of historian David Caute, who claims that the playwright was the “archetypical fellow-traveler, whose characteristics include: contempt for the Communist Party of one’s own country, coupled with a revolutionary commitment to a distant cause.” David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London: Weidnefeld & Nicholson, 1973),3.

politics been so evident.”³⁴³ Addressing Shaw’s *St. Joan*, Lunacharskii claimed that “the ironist and paradoxist,” had pursued several aims in his play, painting the cruelty and “political impudence” of the English with the “colors of contemporary imperialism.” Shaw wanted to show Joan as a natural genius, one who makes mistakes and speaks naively, but “she circles above the abyss and confounds the cunning diplomats of the court and Church.” Lunacharskii recognized that an artist had the right to elevate his subject, but the play was “too long: a motley of strange episodes, and quite ruined by the [epilogue] in which Joan is pronounced innocent after her death...bringing a great muddle to the work.”³⁴⁴

No one had more to say about Joan than Shaw himself. In the extended – over one hundred pages – preface to *St. Joan*, he writes that while Joan was a pious Catholic, she was in fact “one of the first Protestant martyrs, and also one of the first apostles of nationalism.”³⁴⁵ In dressing like men and fighting alongside them, Shaw maintained that Joan was a “pioneer in refusing to accept women’s lot.”³⁴⁶ Joan was charged with heresy, but according to Shaw, she

³⁴³ In the preface to *St. Joan*, Shaw writes: “There are no villains in the piece. Crime, like disease, is not interesting...Joan was burnt by normally innocent people. The tragedy of the murder is that it was not committed by true murderers. They are judicial murderers, pious murderers. This contradiction brings an element of comedy into the tragedy: the angels may weep at the murder, but the gods laugh at the murderers.” Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays with Prefaces, Vol. II* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1962), 312.

³⁴⁴ A.V. Lunacharskii, Foreword to the *Life of Joan of Arc* by Anatole France, trans. A. Vinogradov (Moscow: Zemlia i fabrika, 1928) Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-5/predislovie-k- knige-a-fransa-zizni-zanny-d-ark> [accessed October 15, 2014].

³⁴⁵ Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays with Prefaces, Vol. II* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1962), 265. Shaw wrote much of *St. Joan* in Ireland in 1920-23, and according to historian Tracy Davis, “The Irish Civil War and the struggles of English suffragettes saturate the text.” Tracy C. Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994) 123. The Civil War in Ireland was a conflict between opposing factions of Irish republicans over the Anglo-Irish Treaty establishing the Irish Free State and the partition of Ireland. Until the First World War, approximately one thousand suffragettes in England were imprisoned. Women over the age of thirty who met certain property requirements won the right to vote in 1918; ten years later an act was passed giving women the same voting rights as men. Harold Bloom observes that, “Shaw’s endorsement of Joan’s nationalism is perhaps most surprising [because] Shaw was an internationalist rather a romantic nationalist in politics, though he believed that countries should pass through nationalistic phase as part of their organic development.” Harold Bloom, ed., *George Bernard Shaw’s Saint Joan* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1982), 38.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 265. In 1923 Aleksandra Kollantai concerned that working class youth was “preoccupied with love and other such questions” wrote that, with the end of the Civil war: “The Revolution has gained the upper hand and has been strengthened, when the atmosphere of revolutionary combat has ceased absorbing man entirely and

was burned for her “Socratic impudence and for inspiring fear.” Men will do almost anything when driven by fear, especially, Shaw writes, “fear of a superior being [whose existence] is a mystery that cannot be reasoned away.”³⁴⁷ Describing the epilogue to his play, where the ghost of Joan appears and she is rehabilitated, he claimed that Joan is not “a harlot or witch...but a genius and a saint, the complete opposite of a melodramatic heroine.”³⁴⁸ In an article from 1931 in the BBC magazine *The Listener*, Shaw referred to the play’s epilogue in writing about the impossibility of allowing Trotskii into England, which would be “interpreted as an attack on the Russian government.” Trotskii’s own government was afraid of him and, “You may think of him as a sort of male St. Joan, who has not yet been burnt.”³⁴⁹

Lunacharskii’s and Shaw’s ideas about religion, or the religion of socialism, coincided in curious ways. Lunacharskii’s concept and design of “god-building” rested on the premise that there were no supernatural beings, miracles, heaven or hell, but that a system of anthropocentric rites and rituals could and would be constructed around Marxism –and its leaders – to make it intelligible to the masses. Theater historian Matthew Yde writes that Shaw considered communism to be not only a “scientifically advanced political system, but a new creed, a living

without respite, gentle-winged Eros, temporarily cited on the thornbush of neglect, once again is beginning to claim its rights...The ideal love of the working class, flowing from working cooperation and spiritual-volitional solidarity of members of the working class, men and women, naturally differs in form and content, from the conception of love in other cultural epochs...The ideology of the working class is not only destroying winged Eros, but is clearing the way toward the recognition of the value of love as a psycho-social force.” A. Kollantai, “Make Way for Winged Eros”, one of her “Letters to Toiling Youth” from the journal *Molodaia Gvardiia* (The Young Guard), No.3 (1923), 111-124. In Rosenberg, *Bolshevik Visions*, 84; 90-91.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 267.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 268. Holroyd says of Shaw’s *St. Joan* that it was a “vehicle for a dialogue between ancient and modern worlds. If Joan’s rehabilitation was an example of a modern show trial, the original court hearing seemed to Shaw like a star-chamber.’ In 1931 Shaw wrote that “Joan was killed by the Inquisition...the Inquisition is not dead,” and, according to Holroyd, he compared the OGPU – the name of the secret police in the Soviet Union between 1922 to 1934 – to “the Inquisition, pure and simple.” Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition*, 521.

³⁴⁹ *The Listener* (June 3, 1931), in Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, 126.

faith to replace ossified Christianity...what he called 'crossianity'."³⁵⁰ In letters written after his 1931 visit to the USSR, Shaw claimed that the Soviets were creating a new religion, or in Yde's words, "an earthbound heaven or utopia...where judgment would be transferred from God to an elite group of commissars, and the first commandment of this new creed was 'Thou shalt work'."³⁵¹ In 1932 Shaw wrote to an Anglican cleric that it was "a startling novelty to be in a country where the government is fanatically religious...and one of its religious aims is the total abolition of God."³⁵² In his 1923 preface, the religiously atheist Shaw wrote that "if Joan was mad, all Christendom was mad too." He argued that "when the Church Militant behaves as if it were the Church triumphant, it makes these appalling blunders about Joan and Galileo." In much the same way, the Bolsheviks' claim that theirs was the "ideology triumphant," that socialism had been achieved at the end of the first five-year plan, accounted in part for the appalling moral blunders of Stalinist Russia in the 1930s. A church – or a state – that gave no room for freedom of thought had, according to Shaw, "no future in modern culture, or faith in the valid science of its own tenets, and is guilty of the heresy that theology and science are two different and opposite impulses and rivals for human allegiance." While Lunacharskii had ridiculed Shaw's "freethinking" in his 1925 article, the fusion of theological and scientific "impulses" was really "god-building" in a nutshell.

St. Joan was Shaw's most successful play. When he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, the award speech described it as an "imaginative work [that] stands more or

³⁵⁰ Matthew Yde, *Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism: Longing for Utopia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 168. Bloom says that, "St. Joan stands Shaw's last tribute to human greatness. As such, it is one of the supreme statements of religious faith in a post-Christian world, the final masterpiece of Shaw." Bloom, *George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan*, 51.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 169. On page 29, Yde describes Shaw's religion as one of "the Life Force...religion was a matter of this world, and there was nothing otherworldly about it. For Shaw, God was simply the principle of change and development."

less alone as a revelation of heroism in an age hardly favorable to genuine heroism...and shows this man of surprises at the height of his powers as a poet.”³⁵³ Holroyd writes that Shaw had “sent out his play to rescue Joan from canonization and rescue her heresy, but found that it led to his own canonization.”³⁵⁴ In October, 1924 Germany, Max Reinhardt’s production of Shaw’s *St. Joan* at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin created a sensation, and according to Holroyd, “fed the atmosphere that was lifting the Nazi regime into power.” Holroyd says that Hitler himself declared Shaw’s version superior to Schiller’s, and the Prime Minister of Canada, MacKenzie King – a fan of Wagner like the Fuhrer - remarked that “spiritually, one day Hitler will rank with Joan of Arc.”³⁵⁵

“The revolution did not allocate him money for beauty”

Tairov’s production of *St. Joan* opened MKT’s 1923-24 season. Koonen described the play as a “significant contribution to our creative life.” At the time, she recalled, *St. Joan* was playing widely across Europe, and the “historical lampoon,” with its wicked and witty irony that Shaw used to “debunk the glorified religious mysticism of the romantic legend of Joan, showed her profoundly seamy side.” Koonen remarked about the play’s blending of styles, the combination of pathos and farce, which produced the “most unexpected effect.” She complained that Shaw’s “paradoxes,” his wit and witticisms “which fill the play, seem to me rather tiresome.” On the other hand, the character of Joan, which Koonen played, provided “interesting material to work on.”³⁵⁶ Lunacharskii, in a report on the 1923-24 season delivered at the State

³⁵³ Under, “Award Ceremony Speech”, [http: www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1925/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1925/press.html) [accessed January 24, 2015]. After the ceremony, Shaw commented that: “I can forgive Alfred Nobel for having invented dynamite, but only a fend in human form could have invented the Nobel prize.”

³⁵⁴ Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition*, 530.

³⁵⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, Volume 3, 1918-1951: The Lure of Fantasy* (New York: Random House, 1991), 417.

³⁵⁶ Alisa Koonen, *Stranitsy zhizni*, under, “KJoonen AG”, [http: teatr.lib.ru/Library/Koonen/Stranitsi_zhizni/#_Toc192914007](http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Koonen/Stranitsi_zhizni/#_Toc192914007) [accessed September 4, 2014].

Institute of Journalism concurred with Koonen, writing that *St. Joan*, as staged by MKT, had “great significance for the development of the Kamernyi and for the theater as a whole.” He claimed that he had always been fair to MKT, giving “even-handed guidance and protecting its remarkably interesting experiments.” Lunacharskii congratulated the Kamernyi on having survived the “hard times, the crisis,” even though Tairov, “perhaps sincerely, perhaps not,” maintained that any crisis was simply the “normal development of the theater.”

But in the end, Lunacharskii found Tairov’s production of Shaw’s play to be seriously, unredeemably flawed. Though he saluted the Kamernyi for its several “logical breakthroughs, [coinciding] with our social breakthroughs,” *St. Joan* was, nonetheless, an “unfortunate choice.” Previously, Lunacharskii argued in his speech at the Institute of Journalism, Tairov had been full of aestheticism, originality, and modernism, but “not at the cost of beauty...The revolution did not allocate him money for beauty.” Lunacharskii observed that as a result of straightened circumstances, Tairov had been forced to retreat from aestheticism toward simplicity, but until then he had not seen a single play as “hollowed out to the extent of *St. Joan*, though this simplicity is a step forward, not back.” Still, having read Shaw’s “great” preface, and the “not-so-great” play, Lunacharskii realized just how unsuccessful the production had been.

Lunacharskii recapitulated Shaw’s preface, inserting his own understanding of Joan’s guilt and medieval jurisprudence. He said that *St. Joan* showed only the English as – “imperialist” – villains, while the French were “not such bad people, only stuck in the shadow of the Church and Inquisition.” These good people “passionately” wanted to save Joan, to put her on the “true path, this is medieval rehabilitation.” According to Lunacharskii, Joan, as a harbinger of Protestantism and nationalism was a “representative of the bourgeoisie,” though her guilt consisted of “being a genius. She was an alien who had to be destroyed.” Yet what good

were any of these ideas, Lunacharskii asked, or of Shaw's analysis and dramatization of them? Repeating a familiar Lunacharskiiian formulation, he declared: "They are not needed." This did not mean the play should be withdrawn or prohibited, but, "if taken as a social play, it is the sort where the playwright is saying the Inquisitors were excellent, intelligent people."

Lunacharskii then turned to Repertkom's treatment of the play. He "understood perfectly," that before the censors had allowed the play, they had originally said it should be banned. In a statement that succinctly substantiates Lunacharskii's reputation for – relatively – enlightened tolerance, he declared: "But this is mind-boggling! We can censor Bernard Shaw ourselves! It should not be said that we must fear what Shaw says with our eyes wide open." Conceding that the play "does not resonate with our epoch," Lunacharskii speculated that perhaps Tairov chose *St. Joan* because it provided a good role for Koonen. As for censorship, he described Tairov as having "put Shaw on the operating table, and using delicate instruments, begun the surgery." But along came Repertkom "with an axe," and as a result what the public had was a play transformed, partially by Tairov, partially by Repertkom, which was now "largely incomprehensible," not just because of the drama's innate qualities, but because of "what happens on stage." Socialism would have to wait during NEP, and so "we have to wait," Lunacharskii maintained, until the Kamernyi got onto the "correct path, which is sometimes a circular path, which other theaters do not necessarily follow."

The crucial question of finding the proper repertoire, and the playwrights to generate it, was something Lunacharskii continued to emphasize. Addressing the perennial problem of the shortage of Soviet, proletarian dramas, he wrote: "Not long ago, we organized the union of revolutionary playwrights, and I maintain that we will find our playwright." Comrade directors and actors needed to do their part in this "profoundly important work," and Lunacharskii was

confident that they would. “Putting my ear to the chest of the Russian theater, I must say, inside it beats a warm, healthy heart,” and through collective combination of “all our abilities,” the immature theater would grow into a “grand theatrical hero.”³⁵⁷

Tairov would have the opportunity to respond to Lunacharskii’s criticisms at a public debate on “the contemporary theater” held November 16, 1924. In addition to Tairov and Lunacharskii, other participants included the director of Moscow’s Maly (Small) Theater Nikolai Volonskii, and V.I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, one of the founders of MKhAT.³⁵⁸ Tairov began by saying it was “bit too late to respond fully” to Lunacharskii’s critique, but would save it for another day, when he also had a full two hours. He noted that Lunacharskii had raised the important question of why the public’s patronage of theaters had declined recently. In the 1923-24 and 1924-25 seasons, attendance at the majority of Moscow’s theaters had fallen off drastically. Among the reasons for this was the raising of ticket prices and the absence of a contemporary repertoire, although Tairov reminded Lunacharskii that the Kamernyi enjoyed higher attendance, 71% of capacity, than the average of 61% for the rest of Moscow’s theaters.³⁵⁹

Tairov proceeded to answer some of Lunacharskii’s specific accusations, including the notion that the Kamernyi’s repertoire, “for a whole host of reasons,” had gone along “confusing, inconsistent paths.” Tairov rejected the suggestion – “the received opinion one occasionally

³⁵⁷ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Sredi sezona 1923-24”, Stenogramma doklada, pročitano Lunacharskim v Gosudarstvennom institute zhurnalistiki v 1924 godu (Stenograph of the report Lunacharskii delivered at the State Institute of Journalism in 1924). Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/sredi-sezona-1923-24-g> [accessed November 11, 2014].

³⁵⁸ Lunacharskii’s second wife, Natalia Rozenel’ was an actress in the Maly. The theater, part of the group of academic theaters, celebrated its centennial in 1924, and during the 19th century, was known as “The House of Ostrovskii.”

³⁵⁹ Tairov’s *apologia* included an assessment of Lunacharskii’s rhetorical skills. He acknowledged that Lunacharskii was a “great orator, as everyone knows, above all himself.” Tairov was familiar with Lunacharskii’s polemical strategy: staring slowly, gradually “swinging around”, then launching a “brilliant attack on his target.” Provoking laughter and applause from the audience, Tairov said he was lucky to have been one of Lunacharskii’s targets, and it was a given that “what is good for the marksman is good for the target...but this target is alive, and wants not only to enjoy the sport, but to respond somehow.”

hears” – that the selection of the repertoire was guided by the needs of MKT’s principal actress, Koonen. On the contrary he said, as an “actual collective, the Kamernyi always knew how to subordinate our separate interests to the interests of all.” In any case, the idea that *St. Joan* was primarily a vehicle for the theater’s prima donna was “seriously in error” as Shaw’s drama was not MKT’s first choice, but only one of several plays proposed as ones that “could display the current line of the theater.”

Adopting his foe’s technique of starting slowly before going in for the kill, Tairov’s defense took a hostile, cryptic turn. He claimed that while much work was being done in MKT and other Moscow theaters, there existed alongside them, “backyards filled with nasty, vile, toxic dust. This toxic dust sometimes shows its horns and, I am sorry to say, they manifest themselves through A.V. Lunacharskii.” Tairov called the audience’s attention to the fact that prior to MKT’s departure for Paris, he had told Lunacharskii that his theater was moving in the direction of “present reality, of social content.” The Kamernyi had always experimented, and would continue to do so, this is what made it a “living and not an academic theater, in spite of what critics might passionately assert.” Every performance was a new experiment, “a station on the road to becoming, and not real clothing.” Tairov said that, in this sense, he was naked, and if Lunacharskii “wants to put a political jacket on me, that is his work alone,” and furthermore, the Kamernyi would achieve its goals on a path “of its own choosing.”

Before closing, Tairov addressed Lunacharskii’s critique of the Kamernyi’s production of *St. Joan*. He “fundamentally disagreed” with Lunacharskii’s characterization of the play, and instead maintained that Shaw’s play was “completely modern,” in spite perhaps, of Shaw’s own intentions. Tairov acknowledged that Shaw, in his “vast preface,” insisted that he was writing a modern play, but many of the ideas discussed in the preface “do not emerge in the play itself.”

Shaw was sympathetic to the Inquisitors, but the make-up worn by MKT's actors had not conformed to Shaw's instructions, which dictated that they should be presented as "noble, even charming people." Tairov argued that beneath the surface, the Inquisitors were "rigid and cunning." The essence of *St. Joan*, he claimed, consisted in demonstrating how various estates in the Middle Ages – the clergy, knights, the nobility – were already losing some of their power and initiative. According to Tairov, "these estates clash with Joan, moving away from the people, from the mighty peasantry who, with their revolutionary intuition sense that France needed saving." Thus, *St. Joan* demonstrated that every revolutionary movement begins with the collapse and decomposition of society, and "always comes from below." It was a shame, Tairov said, that Shaw could – or would – not fully exploit this revolutionary potential, "leaving Joan on the stage alone, without the people."

Finally, Tairov discussed the "work conditions" surrounding the production of *St. Joan*, as well as the changes inflicted on the play. He had indeed deployed a "full array of surgical instruments," but the last-minute "rescue by Repertkom immaculately terminated my work." Tairov agreed with Lunacharskii, "publicly, in the presence of the Narkom of enlightenment," about the need for a union of revolutionary playwrights, who could "give birth to fruitful possibilities" required by Russia's theaters. Taking aim at Repertkom, Tairov said he was equally convinced, however, that no theater could flourish if they could not be sure of "systematically completing their work," and in this, a union was of no help. Tairov understood that under the current conditions, "in our Republic certain organs need to exist, as soon as the government created the necessity of establishing them." If he produced plays that were harmful to society, then by all means remove them from the repertoire, and if they were counterrevolutionary "then send me to prison...until then, just allow me to work freely." Tairov

complained that *St. Joan* had been approved by Repertkom, and only after MKT began rehearsals had certain important lines been struck from the play, “the key lines in the entire play...without which the drama makes no sense.” Shaw’s *St. Joan* ends with her exclamation: “O God! You, who have created this wondrous world, tell me when will it be ready to receive its saints? How long O Lord, how long?” In Repertkom’s sanitized version, the play ends with a soldier saying: “Tell me, please, what the devil are they good for, these kings, generals, priests, lawyers, and their like? In the end they leave you to rot in a ditch, and then you meet in hell!” Joan: “When will peace reign on Earth, truth and justice?”³⁶⁰

In the tension between the defiantly artistic and the relentlessly revolutionary, the latter seemed to always get the upper hand. Tairov made it clear that he was not opposed to censorship as such. What was intolerable were the repeated, unexpected demands for further revisions. He understood the need for “the most strict, most rigid severe revolutionary law, and will always obey it.” But when Repertkom submitted an entirely different, “completely mutilated” text just before a play’s premiere, it made it “impossible to work,” and much of *St. Joan*’s significance had “vanished.” As for Lunacharskii’s “beautiful words and perspectives” about a playwright’s union and the development of the theater, that was all well and good. According to Tairov, there was, however, a crucial thing left out of Lunacharskii’s speech: “He failed to insist on the firm certainty about work after it had been authorized by Repertkom. Anatolii Vasil’evich needs to keep this in mind.”³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1927 film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, based upon the transcript of the trial in the church archives, was censored too, but in favor of the Catholic Church.

³⁶¹ “Iz stenogrammy disputa o sovremennom teatre” (Stenograph of the public debate on the contemporary theater), November 16, 1924. TsGALI, f. 279, op.1. ed. khr.33, 2-9. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 252-255.

In his spirited – and lengthy – rebuttal, Lunacharskii turned to the semantics and taxonomy of the varieties of realism.³⁶² He had assumed that “everything had been ironed out,” yet Tairov has performed a “most unbelievable trick,” suggesting that the distinction between “neorealism” and Lunacharskii’s “new realism” was simply a matter of spelling. In defining and defending “neorealism,” Tairov had stated that “essentially what the audience should experience from the stage is aesthetic pleasure.” To which Lunacharskii said, “No. A theater that truly satisfies the spectator, provides intense emotion, is a social one.” If the emotion is “purely aesthetic,” and the spectator is satisfied with technical virtuosity, then the theater is not performing a social role, but one of luxury. Lunacharskii conceded that the Kamernyi had “grown up during a time when there were no playwrights.” Yet even if Tairov maintained that the Revolution was external to his artistry, now “conditions had changed,” and it was possible to sustain intense, social emotion in the theater.

Lunacharskii did not back down in his critique of the shortcomings of MKT’s *St. Joan*. Without any irony, he declared: “Comrades, the time has come for us to stop the endless use of abstractions; we need to arrive at concrete analysis of what we are really doing and creating.” Others at the public debate had attacked him for being overly negative, for offering only “lame examples.” Lunacharskii admitted that he had not yet seen either the Maly’s nor Meierkhol’d’s latest productions, and maybe they were deficient as well, but he was certain that *St. Joan* was an “infamous mish-mash.” According to Lunacharskii, a play could be altogether unsuccessful, or it

³⁶² Seven years later, as part of series of lectures “On the Methods and History of the Kamernyi Theater,” Tairov said: “*St. Joan* presented itself to us primarily as a form of theatrical reality. The general understanding of reality was for us the reality of the time when the action of the play takes place. The strength of this we see in the essentially schematic construction of the set, which was remarkably successful. The Gothic scheme worked because of its simplicity and its clear, impressive scenic forms. But all the same, it was only a scheme...and did not broaden the understanding of reality around us. Thus, the production of *St. Joan* was deprived of the forms of objective reality.” He concluded with a bit of Bolshevik *samokritika*: “In this period, the work of the Kamernyi Theater underwent a strengthening of the social aspect in its plays, but, owing to the crisis in our methods, we did not achieve authentic unity.” A.Ia. Tairov, *Zapiski rezhissera, stat’i, besedy, rechi, pis’ma*, 212.

could have numerous redeeming elements, but in the case of *St. Joan*, its “failure is due to the fact that it contradicted the tasks we set before the theater.”³⁶³

The December 9, 1924 issue of *The Working Spectator* provided a synopsis of the public debate. The journal reported that Lunacharskii had spoken about the “great crisis” in the contemporary theater: the lack of an audience. “Any theater worker” understood the need for spectators, and the main reason they were not going to the theater in sufficient numbers was “the lack of money.” According to *The Working Spectator*, there was also the problem of the repertoire, where “not all theaters were for the masses, nor do the masses shop at all the theaters.” For the time being there was a gulf between what was comprehensible to the working public and what cultured intellectuals enjoyed, but that did not mean that the more refined theater should be destroyed. “We have *Pravda*, which is incomprehensible to the worker, who is on a lower cultural level. For him, we have the *Workers’ Newspaper*, but we do not close down *Pravda* for all that.” The working public was constructing “its own worldview, and its own theater, tomorrow,” but in order to make this possible, it was necessary to make “the consumption of art free of charge.” The editorial concluded that MKT’s *St. Joan* had been “extremely unsuccessful...it does not resonate with our epoch, and was wounded by both Tairov and Repertkom.”³⁶⁴

³⁶³ “Iz zakliuchitel’nogo slova A.V. Lunacharskogo” (From A.V. Lunacharskii’s concluding remarks). *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1921-1926*, 255-256.

³⁶⁴ *Rabochii Zritel’*, No. 29 (December 3-9, 1924), 12-13. Not all the reviews of the play were unfavorable. MKT went a second tour of Europe in 1925. In Vienna, Robert Benchley, then a columnist for *Life* magazine, saw Tairov’s production of *St. Joan*, writing: “We are almost broke, but would gladly give our last dollar to see GBS’ face at a performance of [MKT’s] *St. Joan*...He would laugh his head off. These Russian boys have taken his sacred script, which the NY Theater Guild [who staged the play in 1923] nearly bled itself over, and have it on boards and gunnysacks and made a circus of it. The characters, with the exception of Joan, are clowns...the Dauphin is in actual clown make-up...giggles incessantly while bulbous-nosed churchmen discuss the state of the realm. The soldiers wear wool uniforms with tomato-can helmets. The maid alone is immune from the devastating parody. All of this sharpens the satire to the point of burlesque, and makes it a hundred times more malign. If Shaw really wants to kid his countrymen and show the centuries of pomp and ceremony and majestic clash of arms to be the bunk they seem to be, he ought to adopt the Russians as his sons, and if he is sore at all, he doesn’t understand his Shaw,

“Hope is counterrevolutionary”

Even with Shaw’s representations of absurd Catholics and sympathetic Inquisitors, it is surprising that *St. Joan* with its irreducibly Christian saint – or worse, a bourgeois individualist – was able to pass muster with Repertkom’s censors. Yet the contest over Christianity found its way on stage in other forms, including Lunacharskii’s several public debates with the head of the Living Church Aleksandr Vvedenskii (1889-1946).³⁶⁵ At one such encounter in 1925, Lunacharskii posed the rhetorical question: “Is Christianity democratic?” It was, he said, the “early biblical shoots” were “profoundly” democratic by proclaiming that the last would not only be equal, but “surpass the first.” He wondered whether Christianity was “revolutionary.” Lunacharskii’s somewhat mystifying answer was yes, insofar as it depended entirely on Judgment Day, about which “any sinner can speak endlessly, offending his fellow man.” Last, and certainly not least: “Is Christianity socialist?” Yes, in fact it was socialist “twice over.” The promise of the Christian millennium is socialist because it is “the one hungry, weary people dream of.” Christianity also offered a form of watered-down, non-combative, non-Bolshevik socialism, consisting of a future painted as a “fairy-tale of happiness, where work is superfluous, and everyone lives for their own pleasure.” Yet Lunacharskii cautioned that Christianity agitated against its own revolutionary impulses, telling the masses “not to rebel, but to be patient and hope.” According to Lunacharskii, “hope is counterrevolutionary, it hypnotizes people.”³⁶⁶

that’s all.” Robert Benchley, “Vienna Letter, July 19, 1925,” *Life* (August 10, 1925). In Sergei Ostrovsky and Laurence Senelick, ed., *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 183-185

³⁶⁵ The Living Church originally began as a grass-roots reform movement within the Russian Orthodox Church. The Living Church was infiltrated and corrupted by the Soviet secret services, who sought to exploit a schism within the Orthodox Church. In the spirit of Lunacharskii’s god-building program, Vvedenskii complained that the two main reasons for non-belief, at least among the intelligentsia, were: the disparity between Christian dogma and scientific knowledge; the reactionary nature of the Orthodox clergy. Roslof, *Red Priests*, 9-10.

³⁶⁶ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Disputy A.V. Lunacharskogo s Mitropolitom A.I. Vvedenskim, December 20-21, 1925” (The Public debates between A.V. Lunacharskii and Metropolitan A.I. Vvedenskii). In *Khristianstvo ili kommunizm* (Christianity or communism) (Leningrad, 1926). Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/religia-i-prosvesenie/hristianstvo-ili-kommunizm> [accessed December 25, 2014].

George Bernard Shaw had called the Soviet Union “the only hope of the world,” and in the summer of 1931 – the quincennial of Joan’s death – he finally travelled there. On the eve of Shaw’s arrival in the USSR, Lunacharskii, wrote an article in *Izvestiia* that was more a warning to Russians than greetings to the playwright. He wrote that Shaw was one of the “freest thinkers of the civilized world,” which had given him the ability to “disentangle himself from the spider webs of bourgeois sophism, hypocrisy, and prejudices.” Although Shaw was on the side of socialism, Lunacharskii continued, his freedom prevented him from being an “authentic socialist to the end...of the merciless struggle with capitalism.” He maintained that people like Shaw, a “brilliant representative of the intelligentsia” were “too free: they begin to doubt whether [socialism] does not produce some new ‘slavery’, a new ‘dogma’.” Lunacharskii commended Shaw for having done “much to bring the new world into being. But if it were only people like him fighting for the new world, it would never be born.”³⁶⁷

Shaw and his fellow travelers to Russia had little in common politically. As Shaw’s wife was ill at the time, he was accompanied by his good friend Lady Nancy Astor and her husband Waldorf as part of a larger party. On their first day in Moscow, as Shaw and Lady Astor were chauffeured past the Kremlin, he told her: “Remember, I was a Marxist long before Lenin was.” Shaw was brimming with such witticisms, the sort of idle “jesting” and “freethinking” that Lunacharskii frowned upon. When someone called Shaw’s attention to a church that was being demolished, he advised the Soviets to launch a Five-Year Aesthetic Plan.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Bernard Shou – nash gost” (Bernard Shaw – our guest), *Izvestiia*, No.199 (July 21, 1931) Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-6/Bernard-sou-nas-gost> [accessed September 23, 2014].

³⁶⁸ Shaw, *The Rationalization of Russia*, 18-19. On day three they visited the *Electrozavod* factory where Shaw signed the visitors’ book: “My father drank too much. I worked too much. Finish the five-year plan in three and take it easy.”

Lunacharskii was not amused, but served as the group's official translator for most of their stay. On the fourth evening in Moscow, July 26 – which was also Shaw's seventy-fifth birthday – the party attended a performance of Bertolt Brecht's (1889-1956) *The Threepenny Opera* at the Kamernyi.³⁶⁹ Before the play, Tairov delivered a short speech, after which MKT's entire troupe appeared on the stage with a red banner which read, in English: "To the brilliant master Bernard Shaw – a warm welcome to Soviet Soil." To celebrate Shaw's birthday, The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (*Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei*, RAPP) gave a dinner in his honor, with Lunacharskii presiding.³⁷⁰

As part of the birthday festivities, Lunacharskii gave a speech that was part congratulation, part reproach. He spoke about the subversive potential of satire, of laughter which, in Shaw's case, always came from below, against the prevailing order, and "this is victory." Shaw was turning seventy-five, "entering the last stage of his life, just as was capitalism," which he so hated. Re-stating his "fellow-traveler" critique, Lunacharskii added that it was one thing to be a "socialist by conviction, and another thing to facilitate the arrival of socialism: the destruction of capitalism is not the same as socialism."³⁷¹ Sitting by Shaw's side at

³⁶⁹ In 1931, Brecht completed his version of *Joan of Arc, Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, where she is cast as part of a Salvation Army-like group in Chicago. His second treatment of Joan, *The Visions of Simone Marchand* (1942), had the title character, who works at a gas station in central France, reading a book about Joan and her visions, after which reality and fiction become confused; Simone is finally taken away to a mental institution. Brecht's 1952 play, *The Trials of Joan of Arc of Proven, 1431*, remained mostly faithful to the historical record.

³⁷⁰ Soboleva and Wrenn, *The Only Hope of the World: Bernard Shaw and Russia*, 154. Unlike other literary groups formed in the USSR during the 1920s, RAPP showed some interest in the theater. Its members sought to establish "dialectical materialism," in the form of the struggle between the hero's conscious and subconscious selves, as the basis for proletarian theater. In 1931, deploying Meierkhol'd's notion of a "theatrical front," RAPP issued a "theatrical document" in which they denounced MKhAT and Stanislavski as "conservative, metaphysical, and idealistic." Meierkhol'd's work was condemned for its "fascination with technology and machinery," which substituted for ideology with "reactionary restoration-like tendencies." Tairov was accused of using "petit-bourgeois subjectivism." Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 208. Shaw wrote about meeting the Russian writers: "'You authors,' I asked, 'are you not Intelligentsia?' 'Certainly not,' they answered. 'Well, what then in heaven's name are you?' 'We are the intellectual proletariat.'" Shaw, "Touring in Russia", 19.

³⁷¹ A.V. Lunacharskii, "Bernard Shaw", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, No.8 (September, 1931) Under "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib-ss-tom-6/Bernard-sou> [accessed October 6, 2014].

the table of honor, Lady Astor, not a socialist of any sort, made a comment to him about the lack of real free speech in the Soviet Union. Shaw responded that at least the Russians were “free from the illusion of democracy.”³⁷²

On July 29, with People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maksim Litvinov translating, Shaw, the Astors, and Lord Lothian met with Stalin for over two hours. The content of the discussion was neither transcribed nor disclosed, an event that Michael Holroyd calls a “staged seminar. Though Stalin never lost his self-command, it was for him a most disagreeable experience, and he later complained to his daughter Svetlana that Shaw was an awful person.”³⁷³ One of Lunacharskii’s less-flattering revolutionary nicknames had been “Blissful Anatolii.” Shaw was equally blithe in his public utterances about his trip and perceptions of Soviet Russia at the end of the First Five-Year Plan. As reported by the *New York Times*, Shaw utterly discounted “rumors of famine, and enjoyed splendid dinners in the best hotels in Moscow and Leningrad.”³⁷⁴ In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* in March, 1932 signed by Shaw and twenty others, he wrote that “some of us” had travelled through a large part of the USSR’s “civilized territory” and seen no evidence of “economic slavery, privation...or cynical despair.”

³⁷² Shaw, *The Rationalization of Russia*, 18. Earlier that day, the group had been to the horse races, where Shaw quipped: “I suppose there will be only one horse in the race, since there is no competition in the Soviet State.”

³⁷³ Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition*, 627.

³⁷⁴ “They Say – Reality in Russia”, *The New York Times* (August 2, 1931). In Soboleva and Wrenn, *The Only Hope of the World: Bernard Shaw and Russia*, 158. In October, 1931 Shaw was part of a BBC broadcast for American audiences: “How are you dear old boobs who have telling each other that I have gone dotty over Russia? Russia had the laugh on us...We have rebuked her ungodliness, but now the sun shines on Russia as a country with which God is well pleased, whilst his wrath is heavy on us...Lenin and his friends to command of the Soviets and established the USSR exactly as Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Paine established the USA...Capital punishment is abandoned in Russia, they are very lenient on their criminals...” Edmund A. Walsh, *America, Russia, and George Bernard Shaw (A reprint of two radio addresses delivered by courtesy of the Columbia Broadcasting System from Washington D.C.)* [no other publishing information], 3.

What the western press was ignoring was the “helpful, enthusiastic working-class,” free at last from the “tyranny and incompetence of their former rulers.”³⁷⁵

The dilemma – and frustration – for the playwright Shaw had always been how to translate the revolutionary words and slogans in his plays into action. In the Soviet Union, he seemed to discover the incarnation of the “sympathetic Inquisitors” from *St. Joan*. In *The Rationalization of Russia*, Shaw insisted that, “we should not affect a squeamishness” about Russia. “Moral airs” were unnecessary when it was simply a matter of “our enterprising neighbor and former accomplice humanely and judiciously liquidating a handful of exploiters and speculators...our question is not whether to kill or not to kill, but how to select the right people to kill.”³⁷⁶

Repertkom were not the only ones to make adjustments to *St. Joan*. In her autobiography, Koonen recounts an episode from Shaw’s visit to Moscow. Tairov was departing the Kamernyi after rehearsal one evening when a messenger approached him, saying that “some foreigner, and elderly gent, accompanied by a lady in a *papakha* [Caucasian sheepskin hat] were in the director’s office, speaking unintelligibly.” Tairov went back inside the theater, where he found Shaw and Lady Astor, who had come directly from the train station to the Kamernyi before going to their hotel. Tairov learned that Shaw had come to express his indignation over the “improper treatment” of *St. Joan* in MKT’s 1924 production. Shaw took a newspaper clipping from his pocket with a picture of Koonen as Joan seated on a bench next to the Dauphin. As Tairov looked uncomprehendingly at the picture, Shaw launched into an “angry monologue,

³⁷⁵ Bernard Shaw, “Letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, March 2, 1932” Under, “Social Conditions in Russia”, [http: www.garethjones.org/Soviet_articles/bernard_shaw.htm](http://www.garethjones.org/Soviet_articles/bernard_shaw.htm) [accessed, January 16, 2015]. In 1932, the Russian writer Andrei Platonov (1899-1951) wrote a play entitled *Fourteen Little Red Huts (14 krasnykh izbushek)*, which features an elderly gentleman who was widely considered to be a parody of Shaw and his voyage to Russia the previous year. Robert Chandler, *The Portable Platonov* (Moscow: Glas Publisher, 1999), 110.

³⁷⁶ Shaw, *The Rationalization of Russia*, 112.

asking how Tairov could have created such buffoonery.” When Shaw was finished, Tairov showed him a picture of the production from a photo album that proved “how deftly the newspaper had edited the photo.” Shaw exclaimed: “Those rogues! Scoundrels! Have you ever seen bigger cheats than the newspapers?!”³⁷⁷

Though Shaw left the theater “in a good mood,” *St. Joan* was not completely laid to rest. A year later, Tairov wrote Shaw a long letter in which he recalled the scandal of the doctored photos, and how he had tried to “rehabilitate” the 1924 production of the play. The November 21, 1924 issue of the British newspaper *The Daily Sketch* included an article which had summarized Shaw’s negative reaction to the photos purportedly taken of MKT’s *St. Joan*. Tairov wished that he had been able to show Shaw an actual performance of their version of the play, in order to counter the “malicious, dishonest reviews of the English press,” as well as their photomontages which showed their “prejudices about art and the truth.”³⁷⁸

“This was not eclecticism”

Art and truth were always subject to manipulation. At a gathering held at Dom Pechati in January of 1934, Tairov reminisced about his late friend and occasional antagonist. Lunacharskii was often criticized, he said, for being a “needlessly soft person,” but when it came to important and difficult questions, “he displayed the true determination and implacability of a genuine Bolshevik.” Tairov recalled that when Sovnarkom had proposed closing all the Moscow theaters due to a lack of heating oil, or “breaking up the artistic collectives,” Lunacharskii stood in their

³⁷⁷ Koonen, Stranitsy zhizni, under, “Koonen AG”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Koonen/Stranitsi_Zhizni/#_Toc192914007 [accessed November 5, 2014].

³⁷⁸ Tairov, *Zapiski rezhissera, stat'i, besedy, rechi, pis'ma*, 486. The question of the payment royalties to foreign authors whose works were published or produced in the USSR had always been an indirect process, “at the discretion of the system.” In 1949, the Soviet government made an exception, and paid Shaw 750,000 rubles for the production of his plays in Soviet theaters.

way. He repelled these “surprise attacks, understanding that this would be a fatal blow to fledgling Soviet culture.” This “good and charming person” could become inflexible, and fought for the working class “to the end.” Using a term of approbation that Lunacharskii had directed against Shaw, Tairov argued that the assumption “about Anatolii Vasil’evich that he was eclectic is incorrect.” Yes, he could take in performance at the Maly one day, and one at MKhAT the next, and then “come with us to the Kamernyi...this was not eclecticism, but the breadth of a great artist and revolutionary.” Lunacharskii was always looking to the future, and cultivated diversity within the theater for the purpose of creating “the great art of the new man.” Tairov described one of his first encounters with Lunacharskii:

Several representatives from various Moscow theaters, including Stanislavskii, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Iuzhin [of the Maly Theater], and myself, had gathered in the Narkom’s office to discuss some serious matters. It was early, ten in the morning, and Anatolii Vasil’evich was not there yet. We grew tired of waiting, and one of the directors sat down at the piano that was in the room and began singing Italian songs. Suddenly, we heard someone faintly, playfully, singing along. We all turned around and there was Lunacharskii. It was a remarkable moment – all “officialness” vanished, and everyone engaged in hearty handshaking, and the discussion went smoothly and amiably, in short – á la Lunacharskii. He was often late to meetings, and early only once – to his own death.³⁷⁹

After *St. Joan* in 1924, Tairov and the Kamernyi continued to stage mostly plays by non-Russian playwrights. During the 1926-27 season, they produced three plays by Eugene O’Neill in succession: *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, with Koonen performing the main roles in the last two. The Stenberg brothers’ geometrically spare and precise set designs for the O’Neill plays were created according to Tairov’s aesthetic principle of “structural realism.” The 1926 repertoire also included Charles Lecocq’s *Day and*

³⁷⁹ A.B. Khalatova ed., *Pamiati A.V. Lunacharskogo 1875-1933: Vospominaniia na traurnykh vecherom v Moskovskom Dome pechati*, 1.1 / 3.4, 1934 (Moscow: Dom Pechati, 1935), 95-97.

Night, a musical comedy staged, also with the Stenbergs, as a “sunny...athletic-dance spectacle.”³⁸⁰ On December 11, 1928, MKT premiered Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Bagrovyi Ostrov* (The Crimson Island), which enjoyed a successful run until Repertkom shut it down. The fact that the censors had approved it all was a “miracle,” as Bulgakov had written a work – involving a play within the play – about “censorship and the artist’s need for complete freedom.”³⁸¹ Most astonishing was the fact that when the play’s “evil hero...appeared on stage the whole audience recognized that he was made-up precisely as [Vladimir] Blium,” the head of Repertkom.³⁸² In spite of criticism in the press, and from Blium himself, *The Crimson Island* was performed sixty-two times, until the summer of 1929. In 1933, the Kamernyi staged Vsevolod Vishnevskii’s *An Optimistic Tragedy*, a play based on the events of the Civil War, with Koonen in the role of the Commissar-heroine. While most “of the vicious opponents of the Kamernyi had to bite their tongues” after its premiere, Sovnarkom chairman Viacheslav Molotov (1890-1986) condemned the play as a “slander of Russian History.”³⁸³

In the face of attacks from Stalin, Blium, and others at the pinnacle of Soviet power, Tairov scrambled to defend his theater. He argued that theaters should be maintained and supported as research institutes, latter-day academic theaters: “Pavlov had one, Stanislavskii should too.” In the late 1930s, MKT was dispatched to tour and perform in Siberia, a punishment which, ironically, may have saved Tairov from a worse fate. In 1949, the Soviet Committee for Arts accused MKT of “aestheticism and formalism,” and ordered it shut down.³⁸⁴ Tairov, ill with

³⁸⁰ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 238.

³⁸¹ “*The Crimson Island: Portrait of a Performance*”, under, “Retrospective Exhibitions,” http://www.bulgakovmuseum.ru/en/exhibitions/page261/crimson_island [accessed February 23, 2015].

³⁸² M.O Chudakova, *Zhizneopisanie M.A. Bulgakova* (A Biography of M.A. Bulgakov) (Moscow: Kniga, 1988), 279. Cited in Richmond, “The Conditions of the Contemporary: The Censors and the Censorship of the Soviet Theater, 1923-1927,” 8.

³⁸³ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 268.

³⁸⁴ A.Ia. Tairov, *Zapisiki rezhissera, stat'i, besedy, rechi, pis'ma*, 491.

cancer, retired and died in Moscow on September 5, 1950. The Kamernyi was not “liquidated” but instead renamed the Pushkin Theater, which exists, on Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow, to this day. The repertoire for April, 2015 includes Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, Tolstoi’s *Kreutzer Sonata*, Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*, O’Henry’s *Christmas*, and Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechwan*.



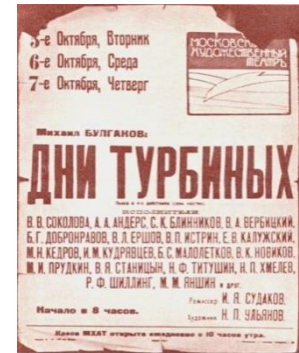
Mikhail Bulgakov (arms folded) and the company from Days of the Turbins



Bulgakov, ca. 1926



Nemirovich-Danchenko & Stanislavskii



Poster for premiere of Days

Chapter 4: *The crushing force of Bolshevism: MKhAT's Days of the Turbins*

An unnamed observer describes the following scene at a closed performance of *Days of the Turbins*, where Stalin shared a box in the Moscow Art Theater with Konstantin Stanislavskii and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko:

After the first act, as the lights came up, the audience, consisting mostly of Party apparatchiks, turned to the box in order to gauge Stalin's reaction; should they applaud or whistle? Understanding what the people expected, he cleared his throat, and – from the coldness of his heart – only fashioned a majestic smile. When Nemirovich-Danchenko inquired good-naturedly whether he was enjoying the play, Stalin merely shrugged his shoulders. After the performance, this pantomime repeated itself in reverse, and as the people gazed at Stalin, he slowly stood up and, with studied self-control, walked up to the railing of the balcony. He cast a look around the auditorium, so quiet one could hear a pin drop, apprehending the looks of confusion, anticipation, agitation, and anger on the spectators' faces. Who had liked the play? Who was infuriated? There is nothing as dangerous as secrecy. Stalin paused, and then put his small palms together several times. The auditorium erupted in applause. Stalin abruptly dropped his hands and the applause ceased. Then, unable to conceal a smile, he began to clap again. An ovation ensued and the actors took several curtain calls. While Stalin turned to Stanislavskii to thank him for the production, Nemirovich-Danchenko stroked his beard and said: "I knew at once that Iosif Vissarionovich [Stalin] was delighted, I felt it immediately! Like every great politician, Stalin has the gift of a great actor."³⁸⁵ Stalin was not amused.

This episode encapsulates several aspects of the controversy over the Moscow Art Theater's (MKhAT) production of Mikhail Bulgakov's *Days of the Turbins* in 1926. While politically suspect due to its sympathetic portrayal of the losing, White, side in the Civil War, the play was nonetheless enduringly popular and a commercial success. Audiences welcomed *Days of the Turbins* as a new, homegrown drama with a more or less contemporary theme, a respite from a repertoire consisting mostly of Russian and foreign classics, crude *agitki*, or hybrid

³⁸⁵ Under, "Stalin", http://www.erlib.com/Эдвард_Радзинский/Сталин/16/ [accessed March 2, 2015]. Unfortunately, the author of this book does not say who this witness was, whom they were relating the incident to, or the date of the performance.

productions in the form of the provocative, bewildering experiments of Meierkhol'd and other innovators in the loosely defined futurist camp. On the other hand, the official censors, members of Agitprop, and many others in the government – the Party apparatchiks of the vignette – were mostly united in opposition to *Days of the Turbins*. Repertkom, the entity within Narkompros tasked with censoring the theatrical repertoire, condemned Bulgakov's play as an apology for the White Army, retrograde, anti-Soviet, politically harmful and ultimately unsuitable for public consumption. Several months after the play's premiere, Agitprop convened a conference on "theatrical issues," a forum where the participants accused one another of bearing responsibility for allowing the production, scolding Lunacharskii in particular.

But, contrary to the assumptions embedded in the previous rhetoric of Lunacharskii and other cultural arbiters, there was no singular, monolithic, Soviet audience.³⁸⁶ While *Days of the Turbins* was popular and successful, people liked – or disliked – it for different reasons. Similarly, the various governmental bodies themselves did not present a united front. While by 1926, Repertkom was better organized – and increasingly shrill – there was disagreement in its ranks over the permissibility of individual plays, or aspects of those plays. Agitprop was at odds with the Politburo over Bulgakov's play, and Lunacharskii, whether by habit or design is unclear, took multiple, often conflicting positions as the saga over the production unraveled. For all this polyvocality, however, and as the vignette above shows in dramatic fashion, Stalin's opinion alone is what really mattered in the end. Stalin's approval or disapproval, as the episode in the theater demonstrates, could often seem capricious and whimsical, causing otherwise disordered, argumentative apparatchiks to be, at the very least, united in fear.

³⁸⁶ "The crisis in the political 'total' theater was a fact that could not be avoided by even the most elaborate devices for controlling audience reactions. The notion of the homogenous audience and the uniform impact of the performance had been shown to be untenable [by the conditions of NEP]." Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-garde Aesthetics* (London: MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1993), 94.

The debates about the content, and fate, of *Days of the Turbins* are distinguished by the extent of Stalin's personal involvement. What is remarkable about the amount of attention he devoted to Bulgakov's play – and to Bulgakov himself – is that it occurred during a period of intense intra-party struggles and economic re-alignment in the USSR. By 1926, the socialist economy was somewhat revived, and the government began to roll back some of the concessions of NEP, although a full repeal was not complete until 1929. The years when the Politburo renewed its permission for MKhAT's *Days of Turbins* on a year-by-year basis coincided with the “great turning point,” and the beginning of the Soviet Union's first five-year plan. Implemented between 1928 and 1932, the central features of first five-year plan were rapid industrialization and agricultural collectivization, for which the peasantry paid the highest price.³⁸⁷ Within the Communist Party, Stalin and his – ever shifting – coalition of allies, consolidated his power in 1927, and proceeded to purge the left, or “United,” opposition, including Trotskii. In 1929, Stalin did the same to Nikolai Bukharin and the so-called “right” opposition.

In this chapter, I argue that, in light of the pressing social transformations in the Soviet Union, Stalin's embrace of Bulgakov and his public displays of affection for *Days of the Turbins* were not as incongruous as they might seem. I will show that Bulgakov's play appealed to Stalin on a pragmatic, political level, as much as an emotional, aesthetic one. Stalin, like Lunacharskii, understood that the dearth of new, Soviet playwrights throughout the 1920s meant accepting

³⁸⁷ On the “great turning point” (Stalin's own catchphrase) and the first five-year plan see: Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990), pp. 69-119; Vladimir Popov and Nikolai Shmelev, *The Turning Point: Revitalizing the Soviet Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1990), pp. 247-295; Mieke Meurs, ed., *Many Shades of Red: State Policy and Collective Agriculture* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 62-73; Peter Kenez, *The History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 90-100; Evan Mawdsley, *The Stalin Years: The Soviet Union, 1929-1953* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 14-51; Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov eds., *Stalinism as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 27-83; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 120-148. Biographies of Stalin in English include: Robert Service, *Stalin: a Biography* (London: MacMillan, 2004); Sarah Davies and James Harris eds., *Stalin: A New History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, Vol. 1: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

approximations, like Bulgakov, of the idealized form. One of the tactics in Stalin's repertoire of terror was the element of surprise, of keeping his enemies guessing. On the surface, Stalin's personal approval of *Days of the Turbins*, a play denounced as "rightist," conflicted with the thrust of his political attacks. As part of a broader strategy, however, his open acceptance of the play served as a demonstration that the ongoing political struggles were ultimately less a matter of left versus right. Instead, in a country where people had declared since before the revolution that "everybody is acting," and where everything was now political, the worth of all things cultural and political was determined by their relative position within a Stalin-centric universe.

In this chapter I also, as part of the larger argument about his "relative toleration and moderation," show Lunacharskii, seemingly devoid or unaware of any inner conflict, taking a series of contradictory positions. When he first assumed control of Narkompros, a colleague had spoken approvingly of having "an intellectual among politicians, and a politician among intellectuals." Historian Richard Stites, in his study of the cultural experiments of the 1920s, described Lunacharskii as positioned "bestride the duality," a location, presumably, from which to wisely and benevolently administer.³⁸⁸ Lunacharskii lacked Stalin's ruthlessness, shrewdness, and pre-mediation, and his own changing opinions about Bulgakov's play, or MKhAT for that matter, kept no one guessing but himself. Although I do not focus on it here in great detail, the 1927 Agitprop conference, prompted by the "scandal" of *Days of the Turbins*, was the beginning of the end of Lunacharskii's tenure at Narkompros. But the permutations of his stance on *Days of the Turbins* reflect a capacity, if not a talent, for Stalinesque adaptability, the dark side, perhaps, of Lunacharskii's authentic open-mindedness and erudition. I argue that during the disputes over Bulgakov's play, in spite of this aptitude for self-manipulation, Lunacharskii remained true to his wholesome doctrine of ultimately trusting the audience to make up their own minds about a play.

³⁸⁸ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 87.

For Stalin, by contrast, the only personal conscience that mattered was his own, such as it was.

“A Magical Golden Megaphone”

As a guardian and purveyor of traditional Russian theatrical culture, the Moscow Art Theater was the prototypical academic theater, as conceived by Lunacharskii and the theater department of Narkompros. Founded in 1898 by Konstantin Stanislavskii (1863-1938) and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943), the theater was originally intended as a venue accessible, in terms of price and repertoire, to a broad, working-class public. Soon, however, economic necessity required an adjustment in its commercial and artistic approach, and the theater subsequently catered to – and reflected – the tastes of the middle-class intelligentsia. During the first season, a revival of *The Seagull* rescued MKhAT from bankruptcy, and Anton Chekhov’s plays became a staple of the theater, whose innovations were mostly in the realm of directorial and acting technique rather than repertoire or stage design. Between 1904 and 1918, not a single play by a new author premiered at the Moscow Art Theater.³⁸⁹ After 1917, MKhAT tried and failed to remain above and beyond the turmoil of the Revolution and Civil War. While on tour in Southern Russia in 1919, the company became cut off from Moscow by the advance of General Denikin’s White Army. When the Bolsheviks thwarted Denikin’s offensive, a core group of MKhAT’s original troupe retreated with the White Army, after which many left Russia altogether. The theater returned to Moscow and re-grouped, where it became the target of the political and artistic left, as a vestige of pre-revolutionary, bourgeois Russia.

In celebration of Stanislavskii’s seventieth birthday on January 17, 1933, Lunacharskii wrote an article for a Berlin newspaper, in which he gave his own account – in German – of MKhAT’s creation and political evolution. The theater had not been founded to express some “profound political and philosophical outlook.” Instead, according to Lunacharskii, Stanislavskii

³⁸⁹ Laurence Senelick, *A Historical Dictionary of Russian Theater* (Toronto, The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 255.

had turned his theater into a kind of “magical golden megaphone” available to every creative spirit, an instrument for the purpose of “transcendence, agitation, and enlightenment.” Considering MKhAT’s precarious position after 1917, perched between ideological indifference and financial insecurity, Lunacharskii remembered that the “question had been posed: could the Revolution make peace with such a theater? Could it even find a helper in it?”

The questions were resolved, Lunacharskii implied, when the state nationalized MKhAT and made it one of the academic theaters. Both of MKhAT’s founders were afraid that, as a state theater, they would be forced to stage “half-hearted, raw, artistically-insipid, though from a revolutionary perspective, respectable plays.” Lunacharskii recalled that Stanislavskii had told him at the time that he was “not opposed to the revolution.” Indeed, he saw something great in it, but Stanislavskii had cautioned that, if “this greatness is expressed with little artistry, we will be powerless to make its ideas resound; we will be of little use to you, and at the same time our art will be debased.”³⁹⁰

A week before his article appeared in Berlin, Lunacharskii had written at greater length about Stanislavskii in *Izvestiia*, where his tone was more defensive. Lunacharskii characterized MKhAT’s lack of revolutionary zeal as an aspect of its essential “timelessness.” Lunacharskii wrote that people had charged him with protecting MKhAT from the “accusation of ‘narrow realism’, of devotion to ‘little old men’ and ‘idols’ and the sin of eclecticism.” Lunacharskii acknowledged that MKhAT had staged foreign plays, Russian classics, historical and “fantastical” plays, and for each had found a “new and different body.” Yet this “timeless” theater had eventually transformed itself into a collaborator with the state in revolution, and both had evolved to become sufficiently mature and flexible so that, in Lunacharskii’s vaguely

³⁹⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Stanislavskii: teatr v sovetskoi Rossii” (Stanislavskii: The Theater in Soviet Russia), *Der Welt am Abend* (Berlin, January 24, 1933) Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materiialy/velicajsij-teatralnyj-celovek-rossi> [accessed November 17, 2014].

religious formulation, “we are the creators of a theatrical body that corresponds to a literary text.” Justifying MKhAT’s “eclecticism” as well as its function and status as an academic theater, Lunacharskii argued that, after the revolution, it had assumed the character of a “great institution for the protection of cultural, aesthetic, and artistic values.” If Stanislavskii had been concerned about his theater’s debasement in the aftermath of nationalization, Lunacharskii wrote reassuringly and colorfully that the theater had “with its velvety voice sung elegantly about Russia.” While these “songs” had been mainly about the intelligentsia, they nonetheless celebrated “the fact that life is essentially wonderful, that some kind of solutions will be found... These songs say: do not yield to the vulgar or commonplace. *Sursum Corda!*”³⁹¹

In the same article, Lunacharskii refuted the notion that Stanislavskii and MKhAT had been too aloof, too apathetic about Bolshevik ideals. He observed that, after the revolution, some theaters had been frightened, and “some had wagged their tails and said: ‘We are always ready’.” Extending his melodic metaphor, Lunacharskii argued that many theaters had “been in error,” while others “closely followed the tasks of the revolution, hurriedly building new instruments for the new music.” According to Lunacharskii, MKhAT and its “genius leaders” listened to this call. He recognized that some had looked at this theater with suspicion, wondering if it were not a bourgeois, aesthetic, intellectual one, full of the “weary tears of weakness,” or one that had “utterly lost its zest.” The fundamental and persistent problem for MKhAT was not its aesthetic or political agnosticism, not eclecticism, not any pernicious hollowness lurking beneath the Bolshevized flesh of multiple “theatrical bodies.” The more acute affliction of it, and every other Russian theater during the first decade after the Bolshevik Revolution, was instead the creative

³⁹¹ The name for a Catholic prayer: “Lift up the heart!” Not only does Lunacharskii invoke Christianity, but his suggestion that life was “essentially wonderful” anticipated by two years Stalin’s eerily enigmatic declaration that “living has become more joyful” (*Zhit’ stalo veselee*) in a speech at the Conference of Stakhanovites on November 17, 1935. Stakhanovites were those who followed the example of miner Aleksei Stakhanov (1906-1977) in efficiency and over-achievement at work.

void formed by the deficit of “Soviet” playwrights. As an attribute proper to a still unrealized socialist millennium, the anachronistic MKhAT’s “timeless” quality was itself premature. Lunacharskii urged patience with regard to a purely proletarian-imagined repertoire, and pointed out that Engels himself had understood, and hoped, that while playwrights should be “Marxists and revolutionaries, they would be artistic all the same.” Under normal conditions, these elements could – and should – combine, but these conditions, Lunacharskii reminded his readers, “when the proletariat is victorious, will happen not suddenly, but gradually, as we have seen from our own example.”³⁹²

To his credit, Stanislavskii was not content, according to Lunacharskii, with MKhAT’s eclectic blend of Chekhov and foreign classics. In 1924, writing in *The Red Cornfield*, an illustrated literary journal published by *Izvestiia*, Lunacharskii said that he knew that “Konstantin Sergeevich absolutely longs for a revolutionary playwright and his play.” Lunacharskii complained that the dilemma for him, and Stanislavskii, was that, as a great artist, the director demanded a play with “great formal concreteness, great objectivity – in a word, the transformation of life in some pearl of creativity.” Lunacharskii was aware that Stanislavskii had expected the Soviet Union to yield creative, artistic fruit before the tenth anniversary of the revolution, and now despaired of any “pure representations” of it. Yet he thought the director of the Art Theater was much too pessimistic, and Lunacharskii proposed that a playwriting messiah would “soon provide MKhAT with new material, which will be, at the very least, no worse than above average.” Echoing his critique of Tairov’s over-indulgence in beauty – for which he “had not received an allocation” – and commenting on the “average” repertoire of MKhAT, Lunacharskii wrote that the theater had produced plays that were wonderfully talented,

³⁹² A.V. Lunacharskii, “Stanislavskii, teatr i revoliutsiia”, *Izvestiia*, No. 18 (January 18, 1933) Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/stanislavski-teatr-i-revolutsia> [accessed December 10, 2014].

profoundly timely, but “too beautiful, too good-natured.” In a familiar refrain, he declared that “we require that the revolutionary theater burn with inner fire,” that satirical plays have “real bite.” MKhAT had been on tour in the United States for almost two years between 1922 and 1924, and in closing, Lunacharskii said that “we will see what the troupe does when it returns from America, whether it can maintain the pace of our epoch.”³⁹³

“Do you consider him an unaware infant?”

The Moscow to which the Art Theater returned in 1924 was “maintaining the pace” of NEP, an epoch of economic, but not necessarily political, liberalization and toleration. After such a prolonged absence and foray into enemy territory, some looked askance at the MkhAT troupe as apostates or malingerers in the revolutionary struggle. Trotskii described them as the most “indisputable ‘insulars’” who do not know “what to do with their high-faluting technique, or with themselves.” He claimed, with some justification, that they looked at everything going on in Russia at that time as something “hostile, or at any rate, alien.” Writing about the theater’s tour abroad, Trotskii criticized it for “discussing to blasé Europeans and all-paying Americans how beautiful was the *Cherry Orchard* of old, feudal Russia, how subtle and languid were its theaters.”³⁹⁴

Before his departure, Stanislavskii had been optimistic about the effects of economic liberalization on the arts. Surveilling Moscow’s theatrical scene upon his return, however, he came to deplore many of what he considered its purely superficial innovations. According to Stanislavskii, the highly imaginative but one-dimensional scenic revolution was an act of

³⁹³ A.V. Lunacharskii, “K vozvrashcheniiu ‘starshego’ khudozhestvennogo teatra” (On the return of the ‘old’ Art Theater), *Krasnaia niva*, No.39 (September 28, 1924) Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/k-vosvrasheni-u-starshego-mht> [accessed November 23, 2014].

³⁹⁴ L. Trotskii, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (New York: International, 1925), 32. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 201.

creative desperation, compensation for the deficit of new plays in the Russian repertoire.³⁹⁵ In his memoirs, Stanislavskii wrote that the collective work of the theater “begins with the playwright.” Should a play be written that “brilliantly reflected the spirit of contemporary man and his life,” directors would “jump on it” so as to “incarnate its spiritual essence.” Brushing aside any notion of “timelessness,” he emphasized the distinctive “spiritual essence” of Russia in the early 1920s, forged by “suffering, struggle, exploits, and the most unprecedented and cruel catastrophes, including hunger and revolutionary struggle.”³⁹⁶

How the appetite for a new, Soviet repertoire was to be satisfied, largely defined the highly contested theatrical front after the Revolution. Evoking the notion of spiritual hunger in explicating his “Back to Ostrovskii!” slogan, Lunacharskii had argued that classical realism was needed, “like bread.” For Stanislavskii, the deliberate distortion of Lunacharskii’s call to arms by Meierkhol’d in his – enormously popular – production of Ostrovskii’s *The Forest*, was an example of “innovators [who] have mistaken the new external form for a renewal of internal substance.”³⁹⁷ This insistence on the insubstantiality of form helps explain why Stanislavskii and MKhAT were ideologically assimilated by his former enemies on the artistic left at the end of the 1920s. The Art Theater’s bourgeois origins could be forgiven, obscured by the greater danger of insipid, politically useless “formalism,” and its repertoire was hailed as the apotheosis of state-sanctioned Socialist Realism in the decades to follow.

³⁹⁵ Nikolai Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 236.

³⁹⁶ K.S. Stanislavskii, *Moia zhizn' v iskusstve* (My Life in Art) in *Collected Works, Vol.1* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1954), 695.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 696. Speaking of this “internal substance” at MKhAT’s thirtieth anniversary in 1928, Stanislavskii, in a bit of Lunacharskiiian circumlocution, declared: “Art is the creation of the life of the human soul. We bring to the stage the life and ideas of the modern man. The theater should not imitate its audience, however, but lift them up along the steps of a grand staircase. Art should open the eyes to the ideals created by the people themselves.” A.Ia. Trabskii, ed., *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: Dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932* (Leningrad, Iskusstvo, 1982), 163.

For the 1925-1926 season, Stanislavskii responded to Lunacharskii's appeal by staging Ostrovskii's *Burning Heart* (*Goriachee serdtse*, 1869). The well-received production was meant as a rebuke to Meierkhol'd's eccentric approach to the classics by demonstrating that a new, imaginative interpretation of a play was possible without transforming the text and characters into the stuff of crude Bolshevik propaganda.³⁹⁸ *Burning Heart*, along with Gorkii's *Lower Depths* (1902), Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1898), and Aleksandr Griboedov's *Woe From Wit* (1824) were among the plays in MKhAT's repertoire continued into the following year. The 1926-1927 season also saw several premieres at the theater, including Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* (1778), staged in an "upsurge of comic and revolutionary flair."³⁹⁹ In the original text, which may have been included in MKhAT's version of the play, the title character says about the society in which he lives that it has, like Moscow during NEP, a system of partially free trade and a nominally free press. But Figaro's own speech is only free provided he does "not speak about the government, or about religion, or politics, or ethics, or people in power, or about anybody connected with anything, and then I can print anything I like, under the supervision of two or three censors."⁴⁰⁰

Multiple, sometimes conflicting censors, were the rule in the Soviet Union during NEP. Glavlit, the body within Narkompros tasked with censoring printed materials, had, in 1923, spawned Repertkom for the purpose of monitoring the theatrical repertoire. In a letter written in

³⁹⁸ Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, 238.

³⁹⁹ Sergei Ostrovsky and Laurence Senelick, eds., *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 272. Lunacharskii wrote about this ostensibly subversive play that, "From time to time, rumors run wild about some allegedly odd prohibitive measures by our Soviet theater censorship...You can meet people who start telling you excitedly about how Repertkom tried to ban *The Marriage of Figaro*, whereas the fact is, the next year in Moscow, we will have three productions of *The Marriage of Figaro* at different academic theaters. Of course, one has to give a moment's thought to the expediency of such a phenomenon." A.V. Lunacharskii, "On Glavrepertkom censorship", *Rabochii i teatr*, No. 41 (October 12, 1926), 9. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 226.

⁴⁰⁰ Quoted in Arlen Viktorovich Blium and Donna M. Farina, "Forbidden Topics: Early Soviet Censorship Directives", *Book History*, Vol. 1 (1998), 271.

1923, while MKhAT was on tour overseas, Nemirovich-Danchenko complained that in Moscow “we are at war with Repertkom,” adding that it wanted to impose on the theaters a “censorship as never before.” Among the prohibitions were plays that were “counterrevolutionary or insufficiently soviet...and whatever bothers it, or is useful for it to flex its muscles.”⁴⁰¹ In a 1925 article in the journal *Soviet Art*, the organ of Glavpolitprosvet, Lunacharskii made many of the same criticisms. He accused Repertkom of taking an “incorrect line,” where, rather than protecting the theater from “counterrevolution, pornography, incitement of national hatred, or religious prejudice, it has started down the path of prohibiting anything that can in any way be faulted.”⁴⁰²

In 1923, Repertkom promulgated the notion of segregating the repertoire according to a theater’s clientele. While some plays might be suitable for an audience of cultural sophisticates and Nepmen, an artistic and political prophylaxis was required for the protection of presumably vulnerable worker-peasant groups. In a letter to the first head of Repertkom, Il’ia Trainin (1887-1949), Lunacharskii expressed his dismay about what he felt was this blatant condescension toward the working classes. He wondered if this meant a worker “did not have the right” to enter a theater and attend a performance of a play that had not been pre-approved for him. “Do you consider him an unaware infant? Someone who needs to be protected against obscenities?”⁴⁰³

Writing to the head of Glavpolitprosvet, Robert Andreevich Pel’she (1880-1955) in 1926,

⁴⁰¹ V. Nemirovich-Danchenko, “Letter to O.L Bokshanskaia, November 18, 1923.” In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 202.

⁴⁰² A.V. Lunacharskii, “O politike Narkomprosa v teatral’nom dele” (On Narkompros’ policy in the theater), *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, No.3 (June 6, 1925), 408. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 225. As Repertkom “started down the path” of total control over the repertoire, Glavlit endeavored to regulate information about the theaters. Under the category of “Kremlin Secrets,” Glavlit specified information about “scheduled stops and places where speeches would be made.” In 1925, they included a provision to include the Bol’shoi Theater, as a place frequented by Soviet leaders. While the theater was undergoing repairs the following year, Glavlit issued a secret directive stating that until the work was completed, “information on its progress should not be published.” Blium and Farina, “Forbidden Topics: Early Soviet Censorship Directives”, 274.

⁴⁰³ Steve Richmond, “‘The Conditions of the Contemporary’: The Censors and the Censoring of Soviet Theater, 1923-1927”, *Russian History*, Vol. 27, No.1 (Spring, 2000), 45.

Lunacharskii argued that the official Party line on art and literature circulated by the Central Committee actually “coincided completely” with the “political line in art” he had followed for the past eight years, and would continue to follow “as long as it suits the Party.” But Lunacharskii complained that he “had yet to feel the full support of the Party” even though its policies were his own: “the increased tempo in the renewal of the repertoire of the academic theaters, making use of formal corrections – bringing them nearer to social realism – of the ‘left’ front, of Tairov, Meierkhol’d, etc.” Lunacharskii assumed that Pel’she was aware of Comrade Zinov’ev’s proposition before the Central Committee, calling for the “complete destruction of Repertkom.”⁴⁰⁴ Members of the Central Committee had made clear to him, Lunacharskii told Pel’she, that a total re-organization of Repertkom was in order, as “the policy which has guided this body, and against which I have argued, was the wrong policy.” He conceded that while there was less confusion than before within Repertkom, nonetheless many personalities remained who were “pursuing aims completely contradictory to that of the Soviet government.”

As part of this “renewal of the repertoire of the academic theaters” and the quest for a Soviet play, in 1925 MKhAT commissioned Mikhail Bulgakov to adapt his novel *White Guard* for the theater. *The Days of the Turbins*, the play’s eventual title, alarmed, angered and confounded the censors. As a result of Stalin’s personal approval of the play, the production also added to the confusion, within and without Repertkom, about what was suitable for Soviet audiences, and what constituted a Soviet repertoire. Over the course of its long denouement, Lunacharskii’s contribution to the controversy was a typical mix of condemnation and

⁴⁰⁴ Grigory Zinov’ev (1883-1936), along with Lev Kamenev (1883-1936) and Stalin formed a ruling triumvirate during Lenin’s long illness. By 1926, this collation had disintegrated, and during the intra-party struggles, Zinov’ev and Kamenev allied themselves with Trotskii, who had been denounced at the Party Conference in 1924; Trotskii was expelled from the Party in 1927. After a Central Committee meeting in July 1926, Stalin and his supporters dismissed Zinov’ev from the Politburo. Zinov’ev and Kamenev were arrested in 1934, convicted at the Moscow Show trials, and executed.

commendation, where he ultimately found himself more inextricably than ever “ensnared in a tangle of contradictions.”

“Utterly uninteresting philistinism”

Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) and his novel were unlikely materials with which to build the foundations of a new repertoire for the Soviet theater. Over the course of several days, *The White Guard* tells the story, from the perspective of the losing side, of the fall of Kiev to the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. Bulgakov was born to a middle-class family in Kiev where, in 1916, he graduated from medical school, first serving as a physician in the provinces before returning to the city in 1918. There he endured the Civil War, before being mobilized into the Ukrainian People’s Army and assigned to the North Caucasus in 1919. Almost immediately, he became seriously ill with typhus, and he abandoned his medical career for one as a writer. That same year, Bulgakov moved to the city of Vladikavkaz, where he worked in the government’s arts’ department while writing stories and plays, among them *The Turbin Brothers*, which enjoyed a successful, if brief, run in one of the local theaters.⁴⁰⁵ In 1921, Bulgakov moved to Moscow and applied for a job in Narkompros’ literary department, LITO. While still in Vladikavkaz, he had submitted three plays, including *The Turbin Brothers*, to TEO, then led by Meierkhol’d, who was also part of its repertoire committee. All three plays were rejected for reasons of political deficiency or deviance.⁴⁰⁶

By taste and temperament, Bulgakov had little appetite for the revolutionary in politics or the theater. In 1922, he and a friend attended a performance of the Belgian playwright Fernand Crommelynck’s *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1921), staged by Meierkhol’d according to the

⁴⁰⁵ M.A. Bulgakov, “Avtobiografii” In E.S. Bulgakova and S.A. Liandres, eds., *Vospominaniia o Bulgakove* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1988), 39.

⁴⁰⁶ Julie Curtis, “A Theatrical Battle of Wits: Bulgakov, Maiakovskii, and Meierkhol’d”, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 108, No.3 (July, 2013), 927. *The Turbin Brothers* was set in 1905, during Russia’s proto-revolution, and Curtis writes that Bulgakov burned the manuscript in 1923.

sparest of Constructivist and Biomechanical principles. Bulgakov told his companion that he usually went to the theater for the sake of “pleasure, relaxation, and entertainment.” Yet here he was, confronted with a bare wood set and windmill blades on an otherwise unadorned stage. His “futurist friend” responded that Bulgakov was simply behind the times, “born too soon,” and that “Meierkhol’d was a genius.” Asserting some oddly proletarian-privileged perspective, Bulgakov replied: “So he is a genius...But you should not forget that geniuses are lone individuals, and I am the mass. I am the audience, the theater is me.”⁴⁰⁷ Lacking proper working-class credentials, Bulgakov’s assertion of membership in “the mass” was questionable. His attitude toward the theater was similarly ambiguous, and Bulgakov’s third wife, Elena Bulgakova (1893-1970) recalled that he “hated the theater and therefore loved it – his relationship to it was like that toward a beloved wife who has left him.”⁴⁰⁸

Bulgakov had begun dramatizing his novel on his own initiative several months before MKhAT asked him to do so for them. In 1925 *The White Guard* was being serialized in the journal *Russia*, but it closed, and the remainder of the novel was left unpublished. Nonetheless, it had come to the attention of some “alert readers,” and in May of that year Pavel Markov, the literary director of MKhAT, invited Bulgakov to write a play for the theater based on *The White Guard*.⁴⁰⁹ According to Anatoly Smeliansky, who held Markov’s position at MKhAT between 1980 and 1986, the literary director was then under considerable pressure “to consider every approach to a renewal of the repertoire.”⁴¹⁰ That same year, MKhAT had reorganized its administrative structure according to quasi-parliamentary principles, and it now consisted of two “chambers:” an upper representing the theater’s elders, including Stanislavskii, the director Ivan

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 929.

⁴⁰⁸ Under, “Istoriia”, <http://taganka.Theatre.ru/history/authors.bulgakov>

⁴⁰⁹ E. Mindlin, “Molodoi Bulgakov”. In Bulgakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Bulgakove*, 150.

⁴¹⁰ Anatoly Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?: Mikhail Bulgakov at the Moscow Art Theatre*, trans. Arch Tait (New York: Routledge, 1993), 46.

Moskvin (1874-1946), and Nemirovich-Danchenko, and a lower one consisting of the theater's majority youth faction.⁴¹¹

The staging of *Days of the Turbins* was ultimately mostly in the hands of MKhAT's younger generation. Stanislavskii viewed this as the arrival of "young reinforcements," all trained within the Art Theater and "indissolubly linked with the New Life."⁴¹² After Bulgakov read the first draft of his play, originally bearing the same title as the novel, in front of MKhAT's actors and directors on August 15, 1925, the production was assigned to the young director Il'ia Sudakov (1890-1969).⁴¹³ According to Markov, the original casting had been divided between "the young and the old, but the 'old' gradually fell away, and the production acquired an ever more youthful character, and the theater needed, as always, a youthful play."⁴¹⁴ The lower chamber declared: "The theater has embarked on a reworking of Bulgakov's *The White Guard*, which will be the first major contemporary play since *The Pugachev Uprising*."⁴¹⁵ Markov writes

⁴¹¹ This youth faction included Nikolai Gorchakov, the author of *The Theater in Soviet Russia*. On page 238 he writes that the most important feature of the production was "that it was done by the young people of the theater," and with it, MKhAT presented the Soviet Theater with "new and expert actors completely trained by the Stanislavskii system."

⁴¹² Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 187.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 48. The first draft consisted of sixteen scenes in five acts. Markov writes that "Sudakov had a fiery temperament: he felt the theater, the laws of the stage, which Bulgakov, with his help, was able to assimilate." Pavel Markov, *Kniga vospominanii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982), 231. In his memoirs, *A Parting Glance at My Life and its Struggles*, Sudakov argued that "the kernel of the play was a storm, a hurricane and people who had lost their way. I portrayed 'wind, wind, all over God's earth' using musical sounds. I got all the wind machines going." Cited in Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 72. As "Sudakov's direction sometime lacked subtlety or psychological refinement and imagination," Stanislavskii himself helped correct, "clarify and enrich" the production. Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 187.

⁴¹⁴ Pavel Markov, *Kniga vospominanii* (Book of Remembrances) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982), 231.

⁴¹⁵ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 49. The play (*Pugachevshchina*) written by Konstantin Andreevich Trenev (1876-1945) in 1924, was staged by MKhAT the following year under the direction of Moskvin. The story is based on the historical events surrounding the eighteenth-century rebellion led by ex-army lieutenant Emelian Pugachev after Catherine II came to power in 1762. The rebellion achieved some early, alarming, and widespread success before it was crushed and Pugachev executed in Moscow in 1775. The critics reacted negatively to the play, claiming that it failed to sufficiently valorize Pugachev, showing him as a kind of sadist, or to adequately represent "the working masses." Under, "Konstantin Andreevich Trenev", http://www.hrono.ru/biograf/bio_t/trenevka.php [accessed March 16, 2015]. In Bulgakov's *The White Guard*, no

the he “cannot hide the fact that the theater really decided to go on the attack.” MKhAT’s younger generation wanted to “demonstrate their right to art, to destroy what was outside the theater, and uproot all the prejudices against the capabilities of the young actors and directors.” Outwardly, the play seemed to be “crying out for the traditional,” but in fact was profoundly contemporary.⁴¹⁶

The notion of the “contemporary” as a guiding aesthetic, political, and moral principle would become a central issue in the clashes over the play carried on in the press and public debates in 1926 and 1927. Markov felt that *Days of the Turbins* could be perceived as “sharply contemporary,” as the Civil War was only six years past, and still fresh in the minds of many in the Art Theater. But if the contemporary nature of the play was determined by “chronological factors,” equally important was how the revolutionary epoch manifested itself, and whether, in the course of the dramatic action, the “problem was extinguished as to whether the revolution was ‘welcome’ or ‘unwelcome’.” According to Markov, while some saw in *Days of the Turbins* the opportunity for an openly propagandistic play, the majority in MKhAT thought that “the time for obvious, direct agitation had passed.” *Days of the Turbins* was therefore not conceived as a “war” play, but one primarily about the intelligentsia, who by the end of the play had “fallen in love with the revolution by themselves.”⁴¹⁷ Previously, Gorchakov writes, Soviet theaters had “appropriated the Civil War with propagandistic stereotypes.” According to him, this is what

monarch remains to suppress the revolution menacing the Turbin family and “Russia as they know it. This implicit patriarchal view of Russia, founded upon the notion that national harmony is attainable only within traditional hierarchical structures, elucidates the words of [a character in the novel, quoting from the play *Paul I*]: ‘In Rus only one thing is possible: the Orthodox Church and autocratic rule!’.” Edythe C. Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 82.

⁴¹⁶ Markov, *Kniga vospominanii*, 232-3.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

distinguished MKhAT, whose “principles consisted of not judging, not sentencing people or phenomena in life.”⁴¹⁸

Beyond his writing – and re-writing – duties, Bulgakov was engaged with the production as an unofficial assistant director. Markov recalled that the young author came to MKhAT with a great deal of “life experience,” bringing to the theater “passion and resourcefulness.” Bulgakov approached life with a “kind of inexhaustible hunger,” and at the same time, a measure of self-consciousness, reflecting the fact that he was smart, “almost diabolically so.” His sense of humor was both apparent and “not always inoffensive,” where his jokes often “took on the character of unmasking (*razoblachitel’nyi*), a sort of philosophical sarcasm.”⁴¹⁹ In the spring of 1926, Bulgakov was splitting his time between MKhAT and the Evgenii Vakhtangov State Academic Theater, where his play *Zoikina kvartira* (usually translated as *Zoya’s Apartment*) was being rehearsed. The play, directed by A.D. Popov, opened on October 28, 1926, three weeks after the premiere of *Days of the Turbins*.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁸ Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, 239.

⁴¹⁹ Markov, *Kniga vospominanii*, 229.

⁴²⁰ In the play, a melodrama that satirized the dissolution and corruption in the age of NEP, the heroine, Zoya Peltz, manages to keep her six-room apartment in Moscow, in spite of the housing shortages, by bribing the corrupt chairman of the Housing-Block Committee with the help of her aristocratic, drug-addicted husband, and other NEP scoundrels. The play was popular with the public, but was condemned by critics, who labeled it “pornography.” Pel’she described it as an “adventurist-criminal play involving thieves chasing thieves...knitting, alcoholism, half-naked bodies, debauchery, murder.” R. Pel’she, “Problemy sovremenii dramaturgii” (The problems of contemporary playwrights”, *Repertuarnyi biulletin*, No.2 (Jan-Feb., 1927), 9. The play ran through the fall of 1927 before being removed from the repertoire by the newly appointed head of Repertkom, the playwright Fedor Raskol’nikov (1892-1939; Raskol’nikov, while serving in Bulgaria in 1939 as a diplomat, was found guilty in absentia of being an “enemy of the people.” He and his family remained in Western Europe, where he died of pneumonia in Nice.) A resolution issued by the Politburo on February 23, 1928 re-authorized *Zoya’s Apartment*, and it returned to the stage in April of that year. On March 17, 1929, the play was removed once and for all, condemned by Repertkom and Narkompros’ board as a “distortion of Soviet reality.” Robert Russell, *Russian Drama of the Revolutionary Period* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1988), 99-101. Evgenii Vakhtangov (1883-1922), worked as an actor and director at MKhAT in the years leading up to the Revolution, before founding his own theater. The theme of housing shortages – and housing authorities – is found in Bulgakov’s novella *Heart of a Dog*, written, and rejected for publication, in 1925. On May 7, 1926, Bulgakov’s apartment was searched, and his diaries and the manuscript for *Heart of a Dog* were confiscated. The novella had been read to MKhAT, and an agreement was reached that Bulgakov would dramatize it. Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 79.

Much of Bulgakov's work during rehearsals at MKhAT consisted of acting out virtually every role for the benefit of the individual actors. According to Markov, Bulgakov was "quite a wonderful actor," whose curiosity and "hunger" left him unsatisfied with one role. "He needed to be not just one character but many; not one form, but many."⁴²¹ Stanislavskii, who had been somewhat skeptical of the play at first, observed some of these rehearsals where, according to Markov, he was one of the "most spontaneous spectators. He would openly laugh, cry, taking off his pince-nez and wiping away the tears; he lived the play."⁴²² The actor Mark Prudkin (1898-1994) recalled Bulgakov's excitement as he read his play at MKhAT for the first time: "His first play! The Art Theater!" According to Prudkin, a very pale and chain-smoking Bulgakov read "relentlessly as one after another of the characters came to life." Everyone laughed at the "sharp wit of the play," and, although it needed re-working, it was clear that the theater was getting "dramatic material with highly developed subject matter, and freshly, not schematically, written roles."⁴²³

Outside of MKhAT, in the year between its inception and premiere, the style and substance of the *Days of the Turbins* was being adjudicated by the various factions within Narkompros. Smeliansky writes that, in the autumn of 1925 and spring of 1926, "all around MKhAT the theatrical life of Moscow was reaching dizzying heights," or what the head of Repertkom, Vladimir Blium, criticized as a "Thermidor in the theater." What constituted a step backwards, in revolutionary terms, was not always clear, and while Blium had been alarmed by

⁴²¹ Ibid., 230.

⁴²² Ibid., 233. Stanislavskii later recalled that "we set great store by Bulgakov. He may yet develop into a producer. He is not only a writer, but an actor too...At rehearsals of *Turbins* really he was the director." Stanislavskii, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, 269. Cited in Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 68.

⁴²³ M.I Prudkin, "My vmeste rodilis' na stsene" (We grew up together on the stage) In Bulgakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Bulgakove*, 264. Prudkin, who portrayed a White Army officer in the play, continued to act into his 90s, and played the role of Pontius Pilate in a 1983 stage adaptation of the novel *The Master and Margarita*. That novel was first produced for theater by Iurii Liubimov (1917-2014) in 1977; Liubimov got his start in the theater as an actor in an NKVD song and dance troupe during World War II.

Meierkhol'd's variations on Ostrovskii, he welcomed Stanislavskii's traditional staging of *The Burning Heart*.⁴²⁴ Lunacharskii had read one of Bulgakov's early versions of the play and, in a letter to the actor Vasilii Luzhskii (1869-1931) – who had played in MKhAT's production of *The Pugachev Uprising* in 1925 – he wrote that he had found nothing “unacceptable, from a political point of view, in the play.” Lunacharskii said that while he held Bulgakov in high esteem as a writer, he found the play “exceptionally dull,” too full of “military subject-matter” and “utterly uninteresting philistinism.” The ending of the play was ineffective for its “open-endedness” Lunacharskii concluded, and if many theaters had turned their noses up at “this or that revolutionary play” out of artistic conviction, then certainly none would accept this one. Its feebleness emerged, “surely, from the total dramatic impotence and inexperience of the author.”⁴²⁵

The following summer, Repertkom met to discuss the ongoing development of *Days of the Turbins* with several representatives from MKhAT, including Markov, Luzhskii, and Sudakov. In addition to Pel'she, Aleksandr Orlinskii (1892-1938), who would become one of Bulgakov's fiercest critics, was present as an agent of Repertkom.⁴²⁶ According to the censors, who had just attended a full dress rehearsal of the play, it represented a “complete apology for the White Guard, was totally unacceptable” and could not be presented to the public. The members of the Art Theater understood that the play might create an “unfavorable impression,” but it was the work of the “youth of the theater, and they are ready to re-work the play under the guidance of concrete instructions from Repertkom.” Specifying and summarizing the necessary

⁴²⁴ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 52. While he and Blium might see eye to eye on Meierkhol'd, Lunacharskii, in his letter to Pel'she in 1925, had written that: “in fact, between me and Blium there are practically no points of agreement. We see everything in the theater in radically different ways.”

⁴²⁵ A.V. Lunacharskii, *Pis'mo k V.V. Luzhskomu*, October 12, 1925. In Ellendea Proffer, ed., *Neizdannyi Bulgakov: Teksty i materialy* (The Unpublished Bulgakov: Texts and materials) (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 76.

⁴²⁶ Orlinskii was arrested in 1937, shot in 1938, and rehabilitated in 1956.

alterations, Orlinskii said that basically the production should not “display White Guard heroics, but discredit all their actions.” The MKhAT representatives replied that the season was coming to a close, the theater would be on hiatus over the summer, but a new version of the play would be ready for review by the third week of September, 1926.⁴²⁷ In a letter dated June 4 to the directorate of MKhAT, Bulgakov argued that he could not cut certain scenes showing the brutality of the Bolsheviks, arguing that they were “organically linked to the play.” He also did not agree with the latest title of the play, *Before the End* and, “in the event that the theater’s council is not in agreement with this statement, I request you remove *The White Guard* from the repertoire.”⁴²⁸

The play acquired its final title only shortly before the premiere. According to the MKhAT journal entries for *The White Guard*, by August 26 Bulgakov had written a third version of the play. On September 17, there was another full dress rehearsal for the public, including Repertkom, who “considered that the play in its current form still could not be performed. The question about ultimate permission remains an open one.” On September 27, after several scenes had been removed, another dress rehearsal took place, attended by members of the press, in addition to the censors and, “in the end, Lunacharskii gave his personal opinion, that the play can – and will – run.”⁴²⁹

⁴²⁷ “Vypiska iz protokola soversheniia glavnogo repertuarnogo komiteta s predstaviteliami MKhAT” (Abstract from the minutes of the meeting of Repertkom with representatives of MKhAT), June 25, 1926. In Proffer, *Neizdannyi Bulgakov*, 80-81. In a letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko, who was on tour with a contingent of MKhAT actors at the time, the actor D. Iustinov reported that the Art Theater was “completely ready to stage *The White Guard*,” but that Repertkom had misgivings about the play “ever seeing the light of day.” The directors and actors were “sweating, just like the public, who show up in large numbers” at the rehearsals. “Iz Pis'ma D.I. Iustinova k V.I. Nemirovichu-Danchenko ob itogakh sezona 1925-26” (From a letter from D.I. Iustinov to Nemirovich-Danchenko summarizing the 1925-26 season), not earlier than June 26, 1926. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 168.

⁴²⁸ “Pis'mo M.A. Bulgakova k MKhAT”, June 4, 1926. *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: Dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 168.

⁴²⁹ “Iz zhurnala repetetsii p'esy *Belaia gvardiia*” *Ibid.*, 77.

The fate of the play was ultimately decided at the uppermost level of the Soviet government. That same day, Lunacharskii sent a telegram to Soviet Premier and Chairman of Sovnarkom Aleksei Rykov (1881-1938), in which he reported on a meeting between representatives from Narkompros, Repertkom, and the GPU (State Political Directorate, i.e. intelligence service and secret police) concerning *Days of the Turbins*.⁴³⁰ Lunacharskii said that while “at Repertkom’s insistence” several parts of the play had been eliminated, the GPU had nonetheless informed Narkompros that it was “banning the play.”⁴³¹ He insisted that this matter must be “considered at the highest level...rescission of the Narkompros decision [to stage the play] by the GPU is undesirable, and even scandalous.” Three days later, the Politburo approved a resolution “not to rescind the decision of Narkompros’ board concerning Bulgakov’s play.” The resolution permitted *Days of the Turbins* to be staged by MkhAT alone, only in Moscow, and for just one season.⁴³²

“There reigned the atmosphere of a dogs’ wedding”

Days of the Turbins premiered on October 5, 1926. The play was immediately and enormously successful and renewed on a yearly basis until the censors succeeded in removing it from the repertoire on April 2, 1929. Thanks mostly to the intervention of Stalin, MKhAT was able to revive the play in 1932, and it was performed continuously until 1941. During its first season, it played one hundred and eight times, more than any other play on the Moscow stage. In

⁴³⁰ In 1926-27, Rykov, along with Bukharin, supported Stalin against the group formed by Trotskii, Zinoviev, and Kamenev; among this group’s demands were greater freedom of expression in the Party and less bureaucracy. In 1937, at the height of Stalin’s purges, Rykov and Bukharin were arrested, found guilty of treason, and executed.

⁴³¹ In his roman a clef, *Black Snow (A Theatrical Novel or Dead Man’s Memoir* in Russian), Bulgakov writes: “Something else had to be thrown out – but what? It all seemed to me equally vital and I felt, too, that as soon as I condemned some part to extinction, the whole laboriously constructed edifice would start to totter.” Cited in Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 54.

⁴³² Postal Telegram from Lunacharskii to A.I Rykov on the GPU Prohibition of M.A. Bulgakov’s *Days of the Turbins*. AP RF, f.3, op.34, d.240, 1.2, September 27, 1926. In Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko with Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 91.

a speech on the eve of the premiere, Lunacharskii acknowledged that the play was “ideologically unsound,” but that the public could make up its own mind about it.⁴³³ At the first performance, the audience “seethed,” many applauding enthusiastically, while others whistled and stamped their feet, “a first at MKhAT.” The theater had always been perceived by those on the ‘left’ as a stronghold of bourgeois ideology, and the play’s representation of members of the White “movement” as decent people, “whose historical defeat deserves close analysis,” rather than as cartoonish monsters, reinforced this notion.⁴³⁴ For the majority of the spectators, however, weary perhaps of simplistic propaganda and perplexing scenic innovations, a drama populated by vivid characters with psychological depth offered an intriguing and entertaining change, a partial fulfillment of Lunacharskii’s prescribed “classical realism.”⁴³⁵

Though *Days of the Turbins* was an artistic and box-office success, most of the critics denounced it. Elena Bulgakova describes the situation as a “struggle which did not subside after the premiere, but since the true barometer of the theater is the cash register, it played on.”⁴³⁶ Markov remembered, with dry understatement, that the play’s very success “provoked an unusually stormy reaction from society.” All the heated discussions and articles

⁴³³ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 100.

⁴³⁴ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 187. “We need to remember that the forces ranged against Bulgakov and MKhAT were not a monolith composed of RAPP and the ‘left’, but a motley crew who were at daggers drawn among themselves.” Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 92.

⁴³⁵ Ironically, the audience’s enthusiasm could echo the revolutionary exuberance – programmed or spontaneous – witnessed during Meierkhol’d’s production of *The Dawns* six years earlier, during the actual Civil War. Bulgakov’s second wife, Liubov Belozherskaia (1895-1987), writes in her memoirs about an early performance of *Days of the Turbins*: “In the third act, the [White] Battalion has been routed, and the city has fallen, and there is a tense moment as Elena Turbin and her nephew wait at the window of the family home. As the two of them strain to listen to a faint sound coming from off-stage, suddenly from the audience came a rowdy woman’s voice: ‘Open the window! They are with you!’ This interaction of life and theater is something a playwright can only dream about.” Liubov Belozherskaia-Bulgakova, *O, med vospominanii* (O, the honey of remembrances) She and Bulgakov were married from 1925 until 1932. Cited under, “DniTurbinykh”, [http: www.bulgakov.ru/d/dniturbinykh](http://www.bulgakov.ru/d/dniturbinykh) [accessed February 25, 2015]. In the novel, the city (Kiev) is never named, but remains merely “The City.”

⁴³⁶ Under, “Istoriia”, [http: taganka_theatre.ru/history/authors.bulgakov](http://taganka_theatre.ru/history/authors.bulgakov) [accessed March 5, 2015]. The newspaper *Evening Moscow* reported that Lunacharskii had said that the production was indeed a “thorny matter,” but much time and money had been invested in it, and “our stomachs is healthy enough to digest strong meat.” Cited in Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 100.

were “proof of the explosive power of the play.”⁴³⁷ In an article in *Izvestiia* on October 8, Lunacharskii, who had personally approved the final version two weeks before the play’s premiere, now said that in the production there “reigned the atmosphere of a dogs’ wedding,” that it was a “semi-apology for the White Guards.”⁴³⁸ The idea that Bulgakov was an apologist was, according to Markov, one of the many mortal sins he was accused of, and “the most monstrous distortion of the essence of the play. In our opinion, the downfall [of Aleksei Turbin, a doctor pressed into military service] was a personal and social catastrophe...the demise of the worldview of an honorable man.”⁴³⁹

A public debate entitled “A Tribunal on The White Guard” took place on October 11 in a packed Print House. The next day’s *Evening Moscow* reported: “The trial begins! A veritable bath-house lashing!”⁴⁴⁰ For the play’s harshest critics, only the total unmasking and destruction of the Turbins’ worldview would suffice. In an article in *Pravda* on October 8, Repertkom’s Orlinskii laid the foundation for his case against the production by citing the Central Committee’s resolution on literature from July, 1925. This document, whose “absolute truth perfectly describes” *Days of the Turbins*, recognized that, in the process whereby a new society and its art forms were “coming onto being, the strengthening of the new bourgeoisie is unavoidable.” The danger was that this class is “not always recognizable,” drawing in parts of the old and new intelligentsia, who would become like “chemical secretions in the social depths,” bubbling up to become “ideological agents of the bourgeoisie,” producing a negative effect on the “literary surface of social life.” For Orlinskii, the only authentically revolutionary moments in the production were the sounds of artillery fire, and the singing of “The

⁴³⁷ Markov, *Kniga vospominanii*, 234.

⁴³⁸ Under, “Istoriia”, http://taganka_theatre.ru/history/authors.bulgakov [accessed March 5, 2015].

⁴³⁹ Markov, *Kniga vospominanii*, 234.

⁴⁴⁰ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 102-3.

Internationale” in the final scenes.⁴⁴¹ Expanding the metaphor of subsurface secretions, Orlinskii wrote that in heroes’ actions, there “lays a dense layer of oily philistinism.” This petty-bourgeois spirit, which achieved its “apotheosis” in the final act, emanated from “author’s being in a, sadly, undiluted form.”

In the end, Orlinskii’s critique expressed regret as much as anger. It was a pity, he wrote, that MKhAT’s resources were “squandered on such a play,” that the theater had imagined it would “lead them on the path to the contemporary.” Much of the blame for this had to be borne by the “young and able” director Sudakov, who could have “bravely and strictly” interpreted this “Bulgakovian creation” in the spirit of “authentic historical realism.” Instead, Orlinskii proclaimed, using the jargon of the bygone “Theatrical October,” this “most reactionary” play would resonate only with that “strata of cultural philistines and the new bourgeoisie, the ‘chemical secretions’ on the theatrical front.” According to Orlinskii’s variation on Lunacharskii’s doctrine of trusting the audience, it was up to the spectators and critics to “rebuff the Bulgakovism oppressing the theater,” to struggle against its “false influences.” Exhorting the “revolutionary masses” to go “forward in the task of genuine contemporaneity (*sovremennost*),” he urged audiences to insist upon serious, “educational” fare in the theater, which would, “with great mastery,” celebrate the Soviet epoch.⁴⁴²

For some critics, the production represented a shaky step forward for a fossilized, moribund MKhAT, newly invigorated by a young director and actors. Focusing on the

⁴⁴¹ Artillery fire, in abundance, and singing of “The Internationale” were parts of the novel, as were instances where various characters would strike up with “God Save the Tsar,” all of which were preserved in the play’s final version.

⁴⁴² A. Orlinskii, “Grazhdanskaia voina na stsene MKhAT” (The Civil War on the stage at MKhAT), *Pravda*, October 8, 1926. Under, “Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat_v_kritike/1919-1930/#_Toc272450585 [accessed February 16, 2015]. The future head of Repertkom, O.S. Litovskii (1892-1971) christened Bulgakov’s play a “*Cherry Orchard* for the White movement.” Just as the Soviet spectator was indifferent to plight of Chekhov’s characters, “what did it matter to them about the internal or external emigrants” of the vanishing White order? Under, “Dni Turbinykh”, <http://www.bulgakov.ru/d/dniturbinih> [accessed March 5, 2015].

revolutionary lethargy of the academic theaters, rather than the “Bulgakovian creation” itself, the playwright and pedagogue Adrian Piotrovskii (1898-1937), in an article in *The Red Newspaper* on October 9, simply asked: “What happened?”⁴⁴³ “Old and honored” MKhAT, long devoted to revivals and retrospectives, had finally, according to Piotrovskii, “with great caution” decided to become a “force on the theatrical front, from which there is no turning back.” The fact that this most respectable of contemporary theaters was engaging with “authentically Soviet themes and tasks” was proof that MKhAT was returning to the “ranks of living theaters.” For Piotrovskii, these developments, the exploitation of resources for “serious” ends and the involvement of a new generation in the theater, were pleasingly organic, insofar as Sudakov, and the cast of *Days of the Turbins*, were the “offspring of the Stanislavskiiian school.” Piotrovskii saw in the production a creative advance, assessing it as “merely a transitional form” toward the development of a “fully Soviet play.”⁴⁴⁴

Most critics were much less sanguine, and felt it was their duty to alert the public to the ideological toxicity pervading MKhAT’s production of Bulgakov’s play. In a very long piece in the journal *The Life of Art*, theater critic Emmanuil Beskin (1877-1940) denounced the ideology of *Days of the Turbins* as “typically Chekhovian and petit-bourgeois.” Focusing on a scenic leitmotif in the novel and play, the “cream-colored curtains” in the Turbins’ home, Beskin identified them as symbols of an “entire system of belief.” Beskin denounced the play as a defense of “cream-colored curtains,” something the petit-bourgeoisie ought to be sickened by,

⁴⁴³ Piotrovskii had been a student and colleague of Meierkhol’d, working with him in TEO in the early 1920s. At the end of the decade, he helped create TRAM (*Teatr Rabochei Molodezhi*, or Young Workers’ Theater), which had its heyday in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Piotrovskii was arrested and shot in 1937. An excellent source on TRAM and similar theatrical phenomena is Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴⁴ A. Piotrovskii, “*Molodoi Khudozhestvennyi teatr*” (The Young Art Theater), *Krasnaia Gazeta*, October 9, 1926. Under, “*Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr*”, [http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat v kritike/1919-1930/#Toc_272450585](http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat_v_kritike/1919-1930/#Toc_272450585) [accessed February 16, 2015].

but instead “he ‘cocainizes’ them into a picture of total corruption.” He warned these “one-hundred percent philistines” that a new, completely different life was being built in spite of them, “these Turbins and Turbinists, vulgar, superfluous people, Chekhovian imitations.”

Like Orlinskii, Beskin saw the play as an opportunity squandered. While the author had taken his characters down “twisting paths,” there remained material in the drama the “banality and emptiness” of the Turbins, which “objectively” offered the possibility of useful social satire and critique. The production’s failure to take the correct ideological stance was, according to Beskin, “incomprehensible” as the play had been advertised as “youthful.” While it oozed, not with “chemical secretions,” but youthful vigor, *Days of the Turbins* was, in the end, “hopelessly old” and burdened with a paradoxical sort of “film-studio naturalism of antiquity.” Beskin referred to a recent report by “someone in MKhAT,” who had commented on the resistance of old form to new content. This play confirmed that, in fact, old form “had not been overcome,” and in this lay the tragedy of the Art Theater. In Beskin’s opinion, MKhAT was not only not “reflecting the contemporary” but was retrograde, in that “he who does not go forward, goes backward.”⁴⁴⁵

Like Orlinskii and Beskin, the theater critic, historian, and playwright Mikhail Zagorskii (1885-1951), writing in the journal *The New Spectator*, the organ of Repertkom, thought that Bulgakov’s novel had the raw material for a revolutionary, Soviet play. Zagorskii had read *The White Guard* in serial form in the journal *Russia*, and had detected the “not very secret tendencies” of Bulgakov and a small group of “stupid people” who had dedicated their lives to “the triumph of White ideals.” Yet, he felt that these could have been overcome, and the

⁴⁴⁵ E. Beskin, “Kremovye shtory” (Cream-colored curtains), *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, No.41 (1926). Under, “Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat_v_kritike/#Toc_272450585 [accessed February 16, 2015]. In issue number 44 (1926) of the same journal, the writer Lidia Seifullina (1889-1954) came to Bulgakov’s defense: “The author of *Days* is someone who has honestly undertaken to describe the enemy without misrepresentation.” Cited in Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 103.

production of *Days of the Turbins* should have been “the first swimming lesson for MKhAT on the sea of the contemporary.” Invoking the collective lament over the absence of new, Soviet playwrights, Zagorskii, echoing Stanislavskii’s earlier critique of Meierkhol’d’s perceived excesses, argued that the theater had chosen Bulgakov’s play out of desperation. Having long searched for a “contemporary play,” MKhAT seemed not have noticed that what they got from Bulgakov was not a “playwright’s material, but pencil stumps and leftovers from the table of a novelist.” Yet even this literary jetsam could have been presented differently, Zagorskii maintained, had the director “elevated the comedic elements and diminished the roles of the ‘heroes’.” He objected to the young actors playing not the villains of the Civil War, but themselves, and doing so with a “maximum of spirituality and kindness, á la Chekhov.” A “brutal” theme like war should not, Zagorskii summarized, be presented with such lyricism, as “a staged watercolor.”⁴⁴⁶

One critic who praised the play found it necessary to do so anonymously. Writing under the pseudonym *Starik* (old man) in the newspaper *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* on December 4, the author wrote that anyone looking for an “apology for counterrevolution” in *Days of the Turbins* would be disappointed.⁴⁴⁷ The novel and play had not been made by a “stranger’s hands,” and thus, *Starik* admitted, the White characters and their milieu had been rendered with “wonderful artistry,” while the Reds were portrayed as malevolent, which was “artificial and far-fetched.” Yet there was much in the production that was “useful for Russian art:” the mass scenes and their quick pace were all, according to *Starik*, “to art’s gain.” He asserted that the first and last acts

⁴⁴⁶ M. Zagorskii, “Neudachnaia instsenitovka” (An unsuccessful production), *Novyi zritel’*, No.42 (1926). Under, “Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr”, [http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat v kritike/#Toc_272450585](http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat_v_kritike/#Toc_272450585) [accessed February 16, 2015].

⁴⁴⁷ The newspaper, which remains in publication, is the organ of the Young Communist League.

were of little value, involving “guitars and libations,” all of which recalled Chekhov.⁴⁴⁸ But the remaining scenes managed to “subvert Chekhov” and little remained of the “academic Art Theater,” which was undoubtedly, “from the perspective of the contemporary, a plus for the dramatic arts.” In MKhAT’s *Days of the Turbins*, *Starik* proclaimed that form had triumphed over content, which gave the theater “the right of citizenship on the stage.” The struggle was not over, and it remained necessary to “fill this form with content;” not with Nepmen or the “latest incarnation of the gentry,” but those people who, “in the words of [Aleksei] Turbin,” turn away from White ideology, “or a green or yellow one, in order to return to the Reds.”⁴⁴⁹

Oddly, one non-Soviet critic also found *Days of the Turbins* lacking on ideological, rather than aesthetic, grounds. Walter Benjamin, who spent two months in Moscow in the winter of 1926-27, wrote about the play in his diary entry for December 14, 1926. He praised the sets and actors, describing them as quite good, “without particular flaws or merits.” But Bulgakov’s play itself was a “revolting provocation,” and the final scene, in which the some of the defeated Whites “convert” to Bolshevism, was both “dramatically insipid and intellectually mendacious.” Benjamin thought that the communist critics were “justified in their opposition.”⁴⁵⁰ According to Gorchakov, the changes to the final scene were the work of Stanislavskii, who “demanded” that

⁴⁴⁸ Nikolai Khmelev, who played Aleksei Turbin, wrote: “For *Turbins* I read a great deal of Dostoevskii and Chekhov; together, they became Bulgakov.” Cited in Smeliarsky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 91. As Aleksei, Khmelev wore his uniform with “debonair ease, spoke calmly and with an air of command...When such a person is compelled to publicly admit defeat, it meant that the ‘White’ idea had outlived its time.” Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 188.

⁴⁴⁹ *Starik*, “Teatr Dni Turbinykh (v poriadke obsuzhdeniia) (The theater of Days of the Turbins (by way of discussion)), *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, December 4, 1926. Under, “Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi teatr”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat_v_kritike/#Toc_272450585 [accessed February 16, 2015]. Several weeks later, in the same newspaper, a certain Nikolai Rukavishnikov wrote: “On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the revolution, it is perfectly safe now to show an audience real people. They have had more than enough of the shaggy-haired priests of the agitka plays and pot-bellied capitalists in top hats.” Cited in Smeliarsky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 103. In a letter to the paper that same month, the poet Aleksandr Bezymenskii (1898-1973) called Bulgakov a “neo-bourgeois monster.” Under, “Dni Turbinykh”, <http://www.bulgakov.ru/d/dniturbinih> [accessed March 5, 2015].

⁴⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11. Benjamin’s primary reason for being in Moscow was his infatuation with Asja Lacia, a Latvian Bolshevik he had met on Capri in 1924.

Bulgakov have [Aleksi Turbin, who was mortally wounded] assert before his death, the “uselessness and senselessness” of the struggle against Bolshevism. And [an army officer and Turbin family friend] is shown to abjure the White Army in which he served, acknowledge his mistakes, and “is prepared to work honestly for the future of the new, socialist homeland.”⁴⁵¹

Several days later, Lunacharskii came to the defense, not of Bulgakov, but Repertkom. In an article in the journal *The Worker and the Theater*, he asserted that the occasional rumors about some “allegedly odd prohibitive measures” about theater censorship were based on “misunderstandings, and easy to clear up.” Describing the de jure, but surely not de facto, censorship protocols, he urged people to bear in mind that, independent of the “great political and artistic competence of Glavrepertkom,” Narkompros had the authority to adjudicate any disputes between it and theater management, “examining [them] attentively and judiciously.” Lunacharskii called for an end to the “maliciously disingenuous assertions” about Repertkom’s “alleged” rigidity and refusal to listen to opposing views.⁴⁵²

The following year, in the journal *Theater Today*, Lunacharskii apologized for censorship and the censors in general, and insisted that he was not in lock step with Repertkom. He mocked “the philistine who dabbles in liberalism,” fond of comparing Glavlit, Repertkom and the GPU to their tsarist antecedents. According to Lunacharskii, this was unfair, as everyone, except the philistine, “understood how hard it is to be a ‘censor’,” and recognized the abuse and “animosity usually directed at censorship.” While Lunacharskii urged compassion for “our comrades who have been charged with this job,” he wanted to make it clear that not everything Repertkom did “merits our full approval.” Quite the opposite: Lunacharskii boasted that he had often

⁴⁵¹ Nikolai Gorachakov, *Rezhissierie uroki K.S. Stanislavskogo* (The directorial lessons of Stanislavskii) (Moscow; Iskusstvo, 1950), 309.

⁴⁵² A.V. Lunacharskii, “On Glavrepertkom Censorship”, *Rabochi i teatr*, No. 101 (October 12, 1926), 9. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 236.

“intervened in all sort of conflicts” concerning censorship in the theater, and had “pointed out the mistakes” of Repertkom. Blunders, subject to correction by a benevolent and impartial Narkom, were part of a wholesome, dialectical process, and understandable in “something so difficult” as censorship of the arts.⁴⁵³

In spite of his patronizing, soothing tone, in 1927 the political atmosphere in the Soviet theater was especially tense and divisive, and Lunacharskii himself was accused of committing numerous “mistakes.” With MKhAT and Bulgakov at war with Repertkom and the left critics, Lunacharskii sought to diminish, or at least diffuse, the acrimony by proposing a series of Monday evening public debates, under the auspices of Narkompros, on the current and future state of the theater. From February through April, eight such meetings took place, with three more under the aegis of Agitprop in May of 1927.

“Sociologically speaking, a slippery play”

The first public debate took place on February 7, 1927 in the Meierkhol’d Theater, attended by Orlinskii, Lunacharskii, Maiakovskii, Markov, and Bulgakov among others.⁴⁵⁴ Meierkhol’d rose to defend a certain “playwright who was so worn out by Repertkom, that he could not recognize himself.” This playwright, “a decent person and talented master,” had been

⁴⁵³ A.V. Lunacharskii, “On Theater Censorship”, *Teatr segodniia* (1927), 53. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 251-2. “The word ‘censorship’ itself slowly disappeared from print during the Soviet period, even when it referred to censorship under the tsars.” Blum and Farina, “Forbidden Topics: Early Soviet Censorship Directives”, 270.

⁴⁵⁴ Maiakovskii had denounced *Days of the Turbins* even though, according to the playwright Valentin Kachaev (1897-1986), the poet had not yet seen it. V. Kachaev, “Vstrechi s Bulgakovym” (Meetings with Bulgakov), in Bulgakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 126. The actor M. Iashin, who played in *Turbins*, recalls that Maiakovskii and Bulgakov “stood on opposite side of the literary struggle, with Maiakovskii on the left flank, and Bulgakov on the right.” The mood of the struggle was “most war-like and inhospitable,” yet both men were bon-vivants, and “passionate about billiards” which, on occasion, they played together. Iashin writes that Maiakovskii’s style was more violent, while Bulgakov played more tactically, more politely. Iashin recalls that it seemed to him that “both men admired each other,” though Bulgakov had described Maiakovskii’s work as “primitive agitation.” M. Iashin, “Dni molodost – Dni Turbinykh” (Days of youth – Days of the Turbins), in Bulgakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 269. Markov remembered that when Maiakovskii did finally come and see *Turbins*, he was asked, before it was over, what his reaction to it was. “I don’t know. I need to see the tail, whether it is a crocodile or a lizard.” Markov, *Kniga vospominanii*, 266.

savaged and “reduced to shreds” by a critical army of “little Bliums.”⁴⁵⁵ Blum, who had been the editor of *Vestnik teatra* when he worked under Meierkhol’d at TEO, had organized and was now the editor-in chief of *The New Spectator* at Repertkom. Just prior to the public debates, as part of a “proto-cult of personality,” Blum’s own journal exalted him as a “truly substantial figure...an example of a critic-statesman, endowed with a fine artistic sense, enormous erudition, and a purely youthful vigor.”⁴⁵⁶

Bulgakov himself made a dramatic appearance at the February 7 gathering. Mindolin recalls how these public debates “over the production of *Days of the Turbins* were like theatrical diversions in their own right.” At one of the February debates, Mindolin writes, the participants had “scolded MKhAT” as much as they had Bulgakov, and the “well-known newspaperman Grandov” described MKhAT as “a snake, which the Soviet government has in vain warmed on its breast!” According to Mindolin, Bulgakov, though he was often invited, usually declined to participate in this sort of gathering. But one day, “sick of hearing about and from Orlinskii,” he did not hesitate and, “nattily dressed as always,” Bulgakov arrived at the debate, where his nemesis was holding forth from the stage. The appearance of the playwright in the auditorium, “where the majority was hostile to him,” created a sensation. Not waiting for Bulgakov to take a seat, people began shouting “On the stage!” Mindolin writes that it seemed as if most of

⁴⁵⁵ Richmond, “‘The Conditions of the Contemporary’: The Censors and the Censorship of Soviet Theater, 1923-1927”, 12. “Meierkhol’d said that he should have been the one to stage *Turbins*, because he ‘would have staged the play in the way the Soviet public, rather than Bulgakov, required’.” Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 104.

⁴⁵⁶ *Novyi zritel’*. January 25, 1927. *Ibid.*, 7. Mikhail Chekhov (1891-1955), Anton’s nephew, was the artistic director of MKhAT’s second studio from 1924 to 1927. In 1928, after a warrant was issued for his arrest, he fled the Soviet Union. In New York in 1935, working with the Moscow Art Players, a group formed in Paris the year before, he staged *Days of the Turbins*. In 1928, he wrote a letter to Lunacharskii in which he claimed that, the “essence of Soviet censorship is that it forces playwrights to insert into the mouths of their dramatic characters phrases that are in the style of Blum and [the critic] Beskin.” Cited in Richmond, “‘The Conditions of the Contemporary’: The Censors and the Censorship of Soviet Theaters”, 3.

spectators were expecting some sort of act of repentance on Bulgakov's part, but those who expected him to "cry and beat his chest, did not know Mikhail Afanas'evich."

As a "theatrical diversion," Bulgakov's surprising star turn on stage was brief but powerful. Mindolin describes him slowly "climbing the gangplank" to the stage where the other participants, including Orlinskii, were seated around a table. When it came Bulgakov's turn to speak, he directly confronted the Repertkom critic. He said that while Orlinskii wrote about the "epoch of the Turbins," he actually knew nothing about it, unlike Bulgakov, who had lived in Kiev during the Civil War. Bulgakov thanked Lunacharskii and Repertkom for "the opportunity to participate," although he had only come to observe and see "who this Orlinskii is who attacks my modest person with such malice." At last, he had "beheld the living Orlinskii," and was satisfied, "after months of persecution." Mindolin writes that Bulgakov left the stage and auditorium as he had come in, "with his head held high, amid a stunned silence."⁴⁵⁷

Another memoirist gives an equally vivid, if chronologically confused, account of Bulgakov's appearance at the public debate. The screenwriter Sergei Ermolinskii (1900-1984) writes that sometime in 1927, "I can't remember precisely," he saw Bulgakov at a public debate where the participants discussed the relative merits of *Days of the Turbins* and *Spring Love* by Konstantin Trenev, the author of *The Pugachev Uprising*.⁴⁵⁸ *Spring Love* was held up as a quintessentially revolutionary play, while Bulgakov's was denounced as a "hostile attack" on the

⁴⁵⁷ Mindolin, "Molodoi Bulgakov", in Bulgakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 151-2. "At the February 7 debate, Bulgakov said (probably falsely) that he had never read Orlinskii's reviews. 'I maintain the critic Orlinskii knows absolutely nothing about the epoch of 1918 which is described in my play and novel.'" Ellendea Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984) 244. Bulgkov said; "In Kiev, in that terrible year of 1919, I witnessed a wholly unique situation which is quite impossible to convey and of which, I suspect, Muscovites know very little, and Mr. Orlinskii nothing whatsoever." Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 110.

⁴⁵⁸ *Spring Love (Liubov' Iarovaia)* was made into a movie in 1973. The plot revolves around a city as it switches between White and Red control during the Civil War. In the film version at least, the Bolsheviks are shown to be capable of brutality, and the Whites of redemption. Ultimately, the new, Bolshevik order is gradually established as various commissars set about building schools and libraries, while the tension persists between "new ideals and old love." <http://megogo.net/ru/view/7610-lyubov-yarovaya.html> [accessed April 5, 2015].

Soviet state. Ermolinskii recalls that Orlinskii, “without challenges,” called Bulgakov an “internal emigrant” and accused him of sympathy for the White Guards. Bulgakov, after listening patiently, responded with anger: “Aha! At last I see you! Tell me, why should I have to listen to who the hell knows what about me and my play, without the opportunity to respond?” Ermolinskii was uncertain whether this counterattack was premeditated or not, but felt it must have been “very difficult” for Bulgakov to be on stage, “alone and out of place.”⁴⁵⁹

At the third public debate, on February 21, 1927, several speakers challenged the personal qualifications of Repertkom’s members, as well the political and artistic standards they used to pass judgment on different plays. Out of a conviction that was at odds with his published justification of Repertkom, Lunacharskii declared that the censors “did not have the right” to give any directives, as they lacked “sufficient education, preparation, or talent.” Turning the shortage of Soviet playwrights into a weapon with which to bludgeon the censors, he argued that if they had “sufficient talent” they would have not become censors but written dramas, “because we lack dramatists.” The head of the Moscow Directorate of Performance Institutions, V.I. Markichev, complained that Repertkom offered little guidance or clarification on what constituted “counterrevolution, pornography, or mysticism.” This lack of a precise prescription was “the root of the problem with the censorship organs,” and the source of confusion for everybody else.

Although he was critical of MKhAT’s production of *Days of the Turbins* on artistic and even ideological grounds, Tairov joined the fray on the side of those aligned against Repertkom.⁴⁶⁰ He interrogated the censors’ notion of the “contemporary” and how they used it as

⁴⁵⁹ S. Ermolinskii, “Iz zapisei raznykh let” (Memories of different times) In Bulgakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 437-8.

⁴⁶⁰ “Tairov took MKhAT to task in the name of ‘the truly revolutionary theater of our days.’ He pointed out the ‘philistine character of the dramatic devices used by Bulgakov...*The White Guard* is counterrevolutionary not

a template to determine the ideological worth of all plays, including Bulgakov's.⁴⁶¹ Tairov asked: "What does it mean? First of all, absolutely nothing." Tairov rejected the idea that the contemporary could be used to define or confine "a way of life" of which there were many "aspects besides our own." Where Repertkom used the notion of the contemporary as a fixed, albeit murky, ideal, Tairov conceived it as a sort of algorithm consisting of "great and important problems which must be considered one way or another" by the theater. He warned that if Repertkom itself was not censored, its activities would lead "not to the development of contemporary theater, but to its strangulation and destruction."⁴⁶²

Stanislavskii spoke at considerable length at the February 21, 1927 meeting. He remarked on the fact that a large group of people had gathered to discuss the theater "with great passion," which was something to "rejoice about." Stanislavskii claimed the "manifold power" inherent in the theater was itself something to celebrate, and if this potential was understood and exploited by the government, "we bow down to it." But, confronting a perennial problem, he said it was time to decide "how this important weapon" should be used, and toward what ends. Referring to Narkompros' reforms and designation of a contingent of academic theaters, Stanislavskii observed that "from the very start, they began to prohibit plays." Stanislavskii echoed Tairov's defense of the Kamernyi Theater's *St. Joan*, complaining that even when plays were re-worked, "they found other reasons to forbid them;" since then, permission had become "haphazard."

because of its politically saccharine attitude toward our class enemies, but because of the specific vulgarization it leaves behind in the manner of Chekhov'." Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 104.

⁴⁶¹ Contemporary, as formulated by Repertkom and its ilk, was part of a Bolshevik lexicon of words whose covert meanings were as supple as they were vacuous. In the hands of Repertkom, contemporary did not necessarily mean actual, abrupt, unadulterated modernity. Like Lunacharskii's earlier use of "classical realism" and its various "neo-realistic" offspring, contemporary was an aspirational term, one that did not really correspond to current conditions in the Soviet Union, where previously the moral and economic license of NEP, and now a leadership struggle at the pinnacle of power, menaced the revolution. While Repertkom, and the ideology that guided it, publicly celebrated the new and modern, contemporary signified resistance to modernity and filtration of it according to narrow – what Lunacharskii called "puritanical" – political principles.

⁴⁶² Richmond, "The Conditions of the Contemporary': The Censors and the Censorship of Soviet Theater", 53.

Stanislavskii did not invoke, or explicitly argue against, the ambiguous concept of the contemporary in describing his own efforts to invigorate the repertoire. Addressing the tension between old form and new content, he argued that MKhAT had tried to instill into existing plays the “new tendencies,” thereby replacing “the old spirit with the new.” But, “as you can see,” this transposition and transformation had not been successful. As soon as the spirit which “gave birth to a work of art” is removed, that work dies – “so it always goes.” Stanislavskii described how “they” had then ordered and specified the “new tendencies,” though it was “impossible to write plays on command” or for a specific purpose. Finally, MKhAT had attempted to put, à la Meierkhol’d, old content into new forms, using “every variety of futurism and other –isms,” with very mixed results. Stanislavskii said it was precisely because all these “experiments came to nothing” that people were eagerly attending these public debates.

According to Stanislavskii, the ever-shifting demands of the censors challenged not only MKhAT, but the fundamental aesthetic principles of the theater, of all the arts. Repertkom’s criticism and new mandates were all “quite difficult,” and in considering their practicality, it was also necessary to contemplate “the very nature of art, the very art of the actor.” Juxtaposing dialectical materialism with art, he argued that “creativity has its own laws,” against which it would be “pointless to struggle.” Stanislavskii declared that revolutionary power could conquer human nature, even nature itself, but it was powerless against the “physiological principle” of human creativity. Addressing the dramatic arts specifically, Stanislavskii insisted that “our art is a difficult one,” that it could not develop along “militant lines or militant orders,” which in the end would only succeed in killing the theater. In closing, he appealed to Repertkom that in all its

“future policies, let it be as brutal as you want, but not so as to contradict the very nature of the actor; in so doing you kill him.”⁴⁶³

At the March 14 conference, as some of its allies backed away from the most punitive criticism of *Days of the Turbins*, Repertkom defended itself. Orinskii, in a show of Bolshevik self-criticism, conceded that the censors “had many defects,” which several comrades had been “right to protest.” Public debates and the press were not the only forums for such objections, he asserted, nor did the censors form an indivisible, undifferentiated bloc. He claimed that “inside Repertkom itself a permanent battle” was being fought about what, and how, to censor. Pel’she tried to turn the tables on Lunacharskii, arguing that the latter’s four prescriptions for censorship – counterrevolution, pornography, mysticism, and hackwork – were themselves too simplistic, that Repertkom was taking the more nuanced approach. Presenting an epistemologically nihilistic defense, he said that “life is more complicated” than Lunacharskii’s terms implied; who, in the end, could really say what constituted pornography or counterrevolution? Pel’she claimed that Repertkom’s practical experience demonstrated “how sensitively we relate to artistic works.” As part of this “demonstration,” he declared that, with regard to *Days of the Turbins*, there had already been plenty of depictions of the White Guards as “drunks and wild animals.” The play represented an aspect of the class struggle, of “two worlds colliding,” but the time had passed for showing only one side as “pure and ideal,” while “our class enemies were only scoundrels, murderers, and villains.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ K.S. Stanislavskii, “Vystuplenie na soveshchannii v Narkomprose po voprosam teatral’nogo iskusstva” (Appearance at Narkompros’ meeting on the questions in the dramatic arts), February 21, 1927. Under, “Stanislavskii KS”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Stani-slavsky/T_6/#_Toc158921050 [accessed January 15, 2015].

⁴⁶⁴ Richmond, “The Conditions of the Contemporary: Censors and the Censorship of Soviet Theater, 1923-1927”, 14.

In an article in the March 6 edition of the journal *Dawn of the East*, Lunacharskii provided a summation of the debates thus far.⁴⁶⁵ While *Days of the Turbins* was, “sociologically speaking, a slippery play,” he hoped the remainder of the season would be as exciting as the first part had been. Lunacharskii described the play as being, at first, “incompatible with the Soviet point of view,” but ultimately proved itself “a loyal co-worker in establishing the new order.” While summoning, “albeit formally, superficially,” the new revolutionary order, at the same time *Days of the Turbins* insisted on the “devotion and nobility” of those serving in the White Army. Lunacharskii claimed that showing the enemy as educated people acting out conscience, rather than fear, only partially accounted for the success of the production. The play’s greater significance lay in its portrayal of the “petit-bourgeois love of luxury,” the devotion to “forgotten trivialities” that clashed with concerns of “people in our current circumstances” who looked instead to the “long-term building” of a new society.

Lunacharskii’s article struck a conciliatory note with Repertkom. In spite of the fact that he had “argued with the harshest critics of the play” – not to mention calling them unqualified, uneducated hacks – Lunacharskii wrote that he was closer to their position than to those who liked the play “unconditionally.” The important thing was that the whole production and its aftermath would be “useful to us.” Theater should be a reflection of life, he argued, something spectators and critics should not recoil from. Thus, it was “a source of delight” that *Days of the Turbins* portrayed “sharp social distinctions” and the “struggle of the elements” within society. Lunacharskii described himself as part of a cohort of “theater optimists” who had been correct to say that “our society will be perfectly capable” of perceiving all the elements which, “at first glance,” appear to be destructive in Bulgakov’s play. According to Lunacharskii, this

⁴⁶⁵ Bulgakov summarized the whole *Turbins’* saga in his play *The Crimson Island*, produced at Tairov’s Kamernyi Theater.

enlightened discrimination, censorship minus the censor, was proof that the public was ready for, and wanted, revolutionary plays. Naturally, spectators opposed “boring or childishly-produced plays,” or ones that were too “complicated or filled with exaggerated stereotypes,” but Moscow had a “superb instrument – our theater,” along with “maturing playwrights.”⁴⁶⁶

In the aftermath of the public debates centered on *Days of the Turbins*, Agitprop, the Department of Agitation and Propaganda within the Central Committee of the Communist Party, organized a series of conferences on “theatrical issues” in May of 1927. At a discussion entitled “Audience resistance to bad drama,” a certain Lisovskii, identified only as a “communist critic,” declared in a thinly veiled swipe at Bulgakov that, “obviously, the theaters are not accepting revolutionary playwrights.” Lisovskii assumed that such playwrights existed, and were not merely figments of Repertkom’s or Lunacharskii’s imaginations. The reason for their exclusion, he added, was that “anything that smacks of class struggle is not accepted.” At the conference, Pel’she offered proof of the existence of “revolutionary playwrights,” saying he had “a whole portfolio of complaints from them.” The playwrights protested that, even though they had written plays that were “ideologically useful and even sufficiently artistic,” these works were not being staged. Pel’she argued that these plays had been reviewed favorably by “official organs and communist authorities,” yet the majority of Moscow’s theaters still declined to present them because of their aversion to works “whose class nature is expressed clearly.”

At the Agitprop conference, Lunacharskii first addressed, and chastised, Repertkom. He reminded Blium and Orlinskii that they themselves had “signed the permit [for *Days of the Turbins* past censorship]...and altered and amended the play in collaboration with Bulgakov.”⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁶ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Dva spektaklia” (Two Plays), *Zaria vostoka*, Tiflis, March 6, 1927. Under, “Moskovskii Khudozestvennyi teatr”, [http: teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat v kritike/#_Toc272450585](http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mat%20v%20kritike/#_Toc272450585) [accessed February 16, 2015].

⁴⁶⁷ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 112. Lunacharskii also declared that “for [Blium and Kerzhentsev] the academic theaters are simply incorrigible class enemies. They are enemy strongholds that are still holding out, and

“You let it happen,” Lunacharskii declared, and then, after MKhAT had spent “thousands” on the production, the censors changed their minds. Under attack himself, Lunacharskii admitted that Narkompros had, of course, also “agreed that, under the circumstances, the play should be allowed,” and certainly the production was a “feast for the eyes.” Repertkom’s reluctance to admit any mistakes on its part was, according to Lunacharskii, “linked to the general atmosphere of caution here when it comes to openly revealing one’s opinions.”⁴⁶⁸

Lunacharskii’s response to Pel’she was pragmatic. To be sure, he said, “no loyal theater” would openly declare that it was declining a Repertkom-approved play on ideological grounds. Lunacharskii acknowledged that the theaters’ excuse, that certain works were “insufficiently artistic,” was somewhat hypocritical. The dilemma for the theaters, from a financial point of view, was that “one-hundred percent ideologically useful” plays had very short, unprofitable runs because only “twenty or twenty-five people” came to see them. Lunacharskii argued that it was all very well and good to tell theaters, “support our ideology,” but in the end, they needed an income, and “we fail to help them.” Under current circumstances, he concluded, insisting that theaters be “ideologically useful” would result in them closing down.⁴⁶⁹ In the meantime, the ideologically suspect *Days of the Turbins* was ending its highly successful, very turbulent, first season. The production’s future was murky, as the eleventh hour reprieve the play had received from the Politburo stipulated that it run for only one season, only at MKhAT, and only in Moscow.

to which we need to send political commissars to subjugate. On the one hand, this shows them as pessimists who have little faith in the proletariat, on the other, a return to War Communism.”

⁴⁶⁸ Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 273-74. In light of Lunacharskii’s earlier critique of Repertkom’s members as lacking “sufficient education and talent,” a resolution at the Agitprop conference “On repertoire control” read: “It is necessary to raise the qualifications of workers of Repertkom.” Richmond, “‘The Conditions of the Contemporary’: The Censors and the Censorship of Soviet Theater, 1923-1927”, 13.

⁴⁶⁹ Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 226-27.

“A drama of restrained, reserved, and even, shall we say, cunning surrender”

In light of the mandate to remove *Days of the Turbins* from the repertoire after the 1926-1927 season, that fall, Commissar of Agriculture Aleksandr Smirnov (1877-1938) wrote to the Politburo concerning lifting the ban on the play. Experience had shown, he wrote, that *Days of the Turbins* was “one of the few theatrical productions providing an opportunity for young artistic forces to develop.” Echoing the language of the Agitprop theater conference, Smirnov argued that, furthermore, the play was “artistically restrained and useful,” and any suggestion that it was “counterrevolutionary, is absolutely wrong.” He requested a “survey of the members of the Politburo” in the hopes of extending the production “into the future.” Two days later, on October 10, 1927, the Politburo issued a proclamation that “repealed immediately the ban on *Days of the Turbins* at the Art Theater.”⁴⁷⁰ The next day, Lunacharskii wrote to Stanislavskii; “You already know, of course, that you have permission to stage *Turbins* for this year, at least.”⁴⁷¹ In another letter later that month, Lunacharskii assured Stanislavskii that he was “always ready to support MKhAT in every way in overcoming all its obstacles.”⁴⁷²

MKhAT’s missteps were overlooked, and the “obstacles” overcome, in part because of a new addition to the repertoire for the 1927-1928 season. To commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the theater had commissioned Vsevolod Ivanov (1895-1963) to adapt his short story, *Armored Train 14 69*, for the stage. The play, directed by Sudakov and Stanislavskii, was set during the Civil War and dramatized the capture of ammunition from a

⁴⁷⁰ “Memorandum from People’s Commissar of Agriculture A.P. Smirnov to the Politburo concerning lifting the ban on *Days of the Turbins*”, October 8, 1927. In Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 91. Below the memorandum was a handwritten note: “I concur with Comrade Smirnov’s proposal,” signed by [Kliment] Voroshilov (1881-1969). Smirnov was arrested and shot in 1938; Voroshilov, the Commissar of the army and navy from 1925, served in the Politburo until 1961.

⁴⁷¹ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 112.

⁴⁷² *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: Dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 162. On April 19, 1928, MKhAT officially terminated any plans for dramatizing Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog*, and asked the author to return the advance he had received for this.

White Army armored train. Unlike Bulgakov's play, *Armored Train 14 69* was ideologically unambiguous, focusing on the exposition and glorification of proletarian ideals. Writing in *The Red Newspaper*, Lunacharskii could – hyperbolically – claim that with this play, MKhAT “is able to make resound the ideas and feelings of the revolution more loudly and clearly, more patriotically and sincerely, than perhaps anybody before.”⁴⁷³

A week after the premiere of *Armored Train 14 69*, on November 8, 1927, the American author Theodore Dreiser interviewed Stanislavskii in Moscow. The director reiterated his contention that most of the innovations in the theater since the revolution had been superficial ones. “Decorations and settings have been enriched,” Stanislavskii said, but the “inner art of the actor” was left untransformed by the revolution. Dreiser asked if communism had produced any “really good plays.” No, replied Stanislavskii, but “as chronicles, *Days of the Turbins* and *Armored Train 14 69* are good.” Echoing Lunacharskii's admonition to government officials and audiences to be patient about the development of “authentically Soviet plays,” Stanislavskii observed that “art is organic, and therefore slow to change.” But he was encouraged by the “educational and political role” the theater was playing in Soviet Russia, where “every factory has a theater, and every workers' club, a theatrical circle.”⁴⁷⁴

The success of *Armored Train 14 69* only granted Bulgakov and *Days of the Turbins* a temporary reprieve. Bulgakov, who in 1928 had three works in production at three different theaters, had seen his play *Flight*, also set in the Civil War, rejected by Repertkom earlier that

⁴⁷³ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Bronspoezd 14 69 v MKhATe”, *Krasnaia gazeta*, No.318 (November 26, 1927). In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: Dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 162. In 1929, Stalin said of Vsevolod Ivanov: “He is not a Communist, although perhaps he considers himself one. Well, let's just say he is a make-believe Communist. But that didn't stop him from writing a good thing, which had the greatest revolutionary significance, the greatest instructional significance.” Leonid Maximenkov and Leonid Heretz, “Stalin's Meeting with a Delegation of Ukrainian Writers on February 12, 1929”, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, Vol.16, No.3/4 (December, 1992), 406.

⁴⁷⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *Dreiser's Russian Diary*, ed. T.P. Riggio and J.L. W. West III (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 113-117; 130. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 278.

year.⁴⁷⁵ But *Turbins* had been renewed for the 1928-1929 season, and in December of 1928, the Proletarian Theater Association complained in a letter to Stalin about the quantity and quality of Bulgakov's plays. Why, the association asked, wasn't MKhAT being "pushed toward revolutionary themes?" Even a "revolutionary interpretation of the classics" would be preferable to this "slip to the right and intellectual disorganization," represented, for example, by *Flight*, which [Repertkom had condemned] as a "weakly masked apology for the Whites." The association wondered about the treatment of the "most reactionary authors, like Bulgakov, who has got [several] blatantly anti-Soviet plays currently in production..."⁴⁷⁶

In January of 1929, Platon Kerzhentsev, now the deputy head of Agitprop, wrote to the Politburo to complain about Bulgakov and *Flight*. He argued that the prospect of staging *Flight* at MKhAT, while *Days of the Turbins* was already playing – not to mention *The Crimson Island* at the Kamernyi – merely strengthened those "at the Art Theater who are fighting the revolutionary repertoire." Why should MKhAT, or any theater, "surrender the positions won" by staging *Armored Train 14 69*? Kerzhentsev asked the members of the Politburo if they were aware that the trade unions had "refused to buy performances of *The Crimson Island*, as a play hostile to the proletariat."⁴⁷⁷

After seeing *Days of the Turbins* fifteen times – according to Smeliansky – Stalin took the time to share his personal observations about the Soviet theater and Bulgakov.⁴⁷⁸ In a February 1, 1929 letter to the playwright Vladimir Bill'-Belotserkovskii (1885-1970), Stalin

⁴⁷⁵ The censors felt that *Flight* (*Beg*, subtitled *Eight Farcical Dreams*), glorified the White cause. The play was rehearsed at MKhAT, but not performed until 1957. The three plays in production were: *Days of the Turbins* at MKhAT, *The Crimson Island* at the Kamernyi, and *Zoya's Apartment* at the Vakhtangov Theater.

⁴⁷⁶ "Proletarian Theater Association letter to Stalin", December 1928. Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 294.

⁴⁷⁷ "Report from P.M. Kerzhentsev to the Politburo on M.A. Bulgakov's *Flight*", (no later than January 6, 1929) In Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 98.

⁴⁷⁸ Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead?*, 113.

argued that the notion of “right or left” artists simply referred to people who “deviated from the party line” in different ways. In the arts, he maintained, it would be “most correct” to conceive of any “deviations in class terms.” Stalin said that Bulgakov’s *Flight* was an “anti-Soviet phenomenon,” but could be re-worked to show that the Whites were “chucked out of Russia, not due to Bolshevik caprice, but because they were living off the people.” He was disappointed that there were so many Bulgakov plays currently on the Moscow stage, probably because “we do not have enough of our own plays.” Invoking Lunacharskii’s alimentary metaphors, as well as Stanislavskii’s sense of desperation in the theater, Stalin postulated that “in a “land without fish, *Days of the Turbins* is a fish.” Bulgakov’s play, in spite of the author, had the virtue of “demonstrating the crushing force of Bolshevism.”⁴⁷⁹

Meeting with a delegation of Ukrainian writers on February 12, Stalin answered questions about theater censorship and the contemporary repertoire. Almost any play, he asserted, was more “harmful than useful,” including “all the works of Ostrovskii.” He cited two works by Bill’-Belotserkovskii, *The Storm* and *The Voice of the Depths*, as rare examples of plays that were “absolutely useful.” Stalin had not yet seen *Armored Train 14 69*, but he was told that “not everything is quite right there.” But Stalin pointed out that a few “useful” plays did not constitute a repertoire, and furthermore, they were written by “ordinary people who cannot become artists overnight.” Referring to *Days of the Turbins*, he argued that it was easy enough to cancel “this or that thing,” but audiences wanted plays, wanted entertainment. Furthermore, Stalin claimed, there were in fact multiple audiences: a “White Guardist” would be disappointed with Bulgakov’s play; workers would see the power of Bolshevism in it, and say, “there is

⁴⁷⁹ “I.V. Stalin letter to Bill’-Belotserkovskii”, February 1, 1929. From Stalin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1949) In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 295-96. Before the Revolution, Bill’-Belotserkovskii had worked in the United States as an iron-worker and merchant seaman, when he added the “Bill’-” to his last name.

nothing you can do to stop it;” “refined people” would notice, and be disturbed by, all the “changing signposts;” the writers at this conference would be appalled by the play’s “disgraceful depiction of Ukrainians.”

The subject of Repertkom, and its ability to correct deficiencies and deviations in the repertoire, was brought up by a member of the audience. Stalin responded that he did not consider Repertkom “to be the center of artistic creativity.” He added that the censors “often made mistakes,” and, given the paucity of plays, “we cannot cast aside certain works which contain a whole series of positive aspects.” One of the writers complained that in Bulgakov’s *Days of the Turbins* there was “no Bolshevism; Bolshevism is in a fog there.” Stalin answered that, expecting Bulgakov to “portray a true Bolshevik” was unreasonable, as was the “demand that Bulgakov be a Communist.” For all its faults, he maintained that *Days of the Turbins* was superior to the rest of MKhAT’s current repertoire, including *Uncle Vanya*, *Burning Heart*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*, which Stalin described as “an empty-headed, meaningless thing, full of the jokes of parasitical aristocrats and their lackeys.” Repeating what he had told Bill’-Belotserkovskii earlier, Stalin said that Bulgakov’s play, while in “no way a Soviet one,” nonetheless was a “magnificent demonstration of the invincible power of Bolshevism!”⁴⁸⁰

On the same day Stalin was meeting with the Ukrainian delegation, Lunacharskii wrote him a letter about the Politburo’s recent decision to renew *Days of the Turbins* for the second time, through the 1928-1929 season. He told Stalin that Narkompros had “diligently” followed the Politburo’s and Repertkom’s instructions to halt further productions of the play at the end of the last two seasons. But “you, Iosif Vissarionovich, telephoned me personally” to say that the ban should be lifted altogether. Lunacharskii of course did not mind Stalin’s “gentle reproaches,”

⁴⁸⁰ Leonid Maximenkov and Leonid Hertz, “Stalin’s Meeting with a Delegation of Ukrainian Writers on February 12, 1929”, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, Vol.16, No.3/4 (December, 1992), 422-23.

but Agitprop, “taking advantage of the circumstances,” was publicly accusing Narkompros of “permissiveness,” which itself was “impermissible.” Lunacharskii cited an article in *Pravda* by Kerzhentsev, in which his old foe wrote that MKhAT “continues to produce a play that distorts the Ukrainian revolutionary movement and insults Ukrainians.” Lunacharskii complained that this was one more example of Agitprop and its allies falsely accusing Narkompros of “right-wing bias and inadequate sensitivity.”⁴⁸¹

Stalin’s and Lunacharskii’s tolerance of the play notwithstanding, permission to stage *Days of the Turbins* was not renewed for the following season.⁴⁸² The summer of 1929 also saw the end of *The Crimson Island’s* brief – and improbable – run, as well as the termination in March of *Zoya’s Apartment* after two years. In July of that year, Bulgakov wrote Stalin a strongly-worded letter bearing the heading “Application.” Bulgakov observed that, after hundreds of performances, “by the end of the present season, all my plays appear to have been prohibited.” While these plays had been popular, he complained that “all my works received monstrous, unfavorable criticism, and mud was thrown on my name.” He had requested, and

⁴⁸¹ “Letter from A.V. Lunacharskii to I.V. Stalin”, February 12, 1929, RGASPI, f.142, op.1, d.462, 11, 8-8v. In Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 93.

⁴⁸² While the play was on hiatus, *Turbins* and “Turbinism” persisted as terms of opprobrium. At a meeting of the Artistic-Political Council of the Bol’shoi Theater, one member described the characters in one opera as “thinly-disguised noblemen, the sort of Turbinism that does not exist in the [Bol’shoi].” “Protocol No.4 of the Artistic-Political Council of the Bol’shoi”, January 11, 1930. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: Dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 120. In a speech by the actor and director Evsei Liubimov-Lanskoi (1883-1943) at Moscow State Academic Theater in 1931, he said that Stanislavskii had formulated the notion of “interpenetrating contradictions: the search for good in evil, and evil in good.” This was, according to Liubimov-Lanskoi “dialectical,” but he had a “different kind of penetration in mind: aesthetic, moral, and not social.” He said that Stanislavskii taught how to “objectively approach a person and forgive his worst qualities.” Liubimov-Lanskoi wondered “who of us does not suffer from this? Quite openly we frequently move away from an ideological worldview, we try to forgive a person’s worst qualities, approach them individually, objectively. But in Russia today, when it is seething with class warfare, this is impossible. Stanislavskii’s dialectic is idealistic.” This was, he continued, the problem with MKhAT’S *Days of the Turbins*, which preached the “forgiveness of sins, and that we should not treat the Turbins as class enemies.” “Iz doklada E.O. Liubimova-Lanskii ‘Ustanovka, mirovozzrenie, i metod teatra im. MOSPS, pročitannogo truppia teatra” (From E.O. Liubimov-Lanskoi’s report on the staging, worldview, and methods of the Moscow State Academic Theater, read in front of the theater’s company), December 9, 1931. *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: Dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 376. Liubimov-Lanskoi performed in Lunacharskii’s *Herzog* in 1924, and Bill’-Belotserkovskii’s *Storm* in 1925.

been denied, to have his seized manuscripts and diaries returned, and now his strength was “overtaxed,” he was “unable to survive any longer, hounded, on the verge of a nervous breakdown,” and aware that his works would never be published or staged again. Therefore, Bulgakov said the he was asking Stalin to “persuade the Government of the USSR to banish me beyond the boundaries of the USSR, along with my wife L.E. Bulgakova, who joins me in this request.”⁴⁸³

In a letter to Aleksandr Smirnov from July of 1929, the head of Glaviskusstvo, A.I. Sviderskii wrote that he had had an “extended conversation with Bulgakov.” According to Sviderskii, Bulgakov seemed like a “persecuted and doomed man,” and, more ominously, that “his nerves are not in order.” Sviderskii said that from his “general impression,” Bulgakov wanted to “work with us, but they are not letting, or helping, him do so.”⁴⁸⁴ Smirnov had sent a note to the Politburo about Bulgakov’s “application.” He wrote that, in his opinion, by persecuting, rather trying to “correct” Bulgakov, the press had “taken the wrong stand.” Smirnov argued against granting Bulgakov’s request to go abroad, which would only “increase the number of our enemies.” Instead, the government should try to pull this “talented writer back to our side,” and have the GPU return his diaries.⁴⁸⁵

Bulgakov, at much greater length, wrote to Stalin again in March of 1930, repeating his request that he and his wife be allowed, “ordered,” to emigrate. If this was not possible,

⁴⁸³ M.A. Bulgakov, “Letter to Stalin”, July, 1929. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 343.

⁴⁸⁴ “Note from RSFSR Glaviskusstvo head A.I. Sviderksy to A.P. Smirnov on his meeting with M.A. Bulgakov”, July 30, 1929. In Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 104. Glavisskustvo was created in 1928 as part of Narkompros, and had Repertkom under its direct authority. The Politburo had removed Sviderskii from the Commissariat of Agriculture in 1928, and as part of Narkompros arts administration “he had no real line because he had no expertise; he was convicted in advance of cultural ‘rightism’ because he had been a rightist in agriculture.” Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 122.

⁴⁸⁵ “Note from A.P. Smirnov to Politburo concerning Bulgakov’s petition” (no date). In Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 105.

Bulgakov asked that, given his “brilliant knowledge of the stage,” he be appointed to a position in the theater, preferably the one “headed by the masters K.S. Stanislavskii and V.I. Nemirovch-Danchenko.”⁴⁸⁶ On April 18, 1930, Stalin called Bulgakov, asking him if he would like to work in the Art Theater. Bulgakov responded that he would like to, but that his application had been turned down. Stalin told him to try again, “I feel they will agree.” From July of that year until ill health forced him to quit in the late 1930s, Bulgakov worked at MKhAT as an assistant director and playwright. In 1932, Stalin expressed a desire to see *Day of the Turbins* again, and the play “was taken out of mothballs.”⁴⁸⁷ In a letter to the critic and historian Pavel Popov (1892-1964) dated January 25, 1932, Bulgakov wrote that, as a result of “reasons unknown” to him, the government had sent MKhAT a “directive to revive *Turbins*. For the author of this play, this means that he has been given back part of his life.”⁴⁸⁸

The director Fedor Mikhal'skii (1896-1968) recalls visiting Stanislavskii at his home when Avel Enukidze, the chairman of the Central Control Commission of the Communist Party, called to ask whether MKhAT would be able to revive *Days of the Turbins*.⁴⁸⁹ Mikhal'skii writes that he quickly phoned Bulgakov, who, after a few moments of silence, asked him to come over. “There, in the front room,” Mikhal'skii found Bulgakov on the couch, “with his feet in a basin of hot water, and cold compresses on his head and heart.” Bulgakov demanded Mikhal'skii “tell him everything,” then invited him to the Writers' Union for a celebratory feast. From then on, Mikhal'skii says, *Days of the Turbins* was part of MKhAT's repertoire, “included on its tours of

⁴⁸⁶ M.A. Bulgakov, “Letter to the USSR Government, March 28, 1930. In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 345.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁴⁸⁹ The Commission oversaw party discipline, and administered punishments of its members, including expulsion from the party. In 1937, Enukidze was arrested, tried, and shot.

Kiev and Leningrad, where Mikhail Afanas'evich often accompanied us.”⁴⁹⁰ The actor Mark Prudkin also remembered Bulgakov's joining the *Days of the Turbins*' troupe on a trip to Kiev. There, he writes, Bulgakov would “with delight lead us around the city, showing us the places, the streets and houses, connected to events in the play.”⁴⁹¹ Ermolinskii depicts a much gloomier Bulgakov circa 1935. Ermolinskii writes that he and Il'ia Il'f (1897-1937), who had just returned from the United States, listened to Bulgakov tell them one evening that, “I get no joy from the fact that a butchered version of *The White Guard* is being issued, that *Days of the Turbins* is playing somewhere. Let it play, to hell with them! But what are they writing about me?”⁴⁹²

Lunacharskii was writing about Bulgakov's play, if not him personally. In his 1933 homage to Stanislavskii published in *Izvestiia*, Lunacharskii wrote that *Days of the Turbins* was part of MKhAT's quest, “not departing from its basic beliefs,” to be included in the building of a new Russia, even if “for a long time it had to do so separately.” Bulgakov's play he described as “a drama of restrained, reserved, even, if you like, cunning surrender.” Lunacharskii observed that while the author had “given all positions, he demanded broad amnesty and sympathy for the nobility and fighters who lost their way, standing on the other side of the barricades.” While the play had been harshly criticized, the Party had been able to “carefully decipher its positive

⁴⁹⁰ F. Mikhal'skii, “Gody molodye” (The young years), Bugakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 257. While serving as a diplomat in Leningrad in 1933, Reader Bullard describes an evening at the theater: “On June 22 I took [an Englishwoman and their Intourist guide and translator] to see *Days of the Turbins*, a play that was banned for some years, but has been put on again recently because, it is said, Stalin likes it. It is not a great play, but it is of poignant interest...[The guide] was much moved. I offered to lend her the book on which it was based, but when she saw that it was published in Paris, she did not dare.” Julian and Margaret Bullard, eds., *Inside Stalin's Russia: The Diaries of Reader Bullard 1930-1934* (Oxfordshire: Day Books, 2000). In Ostrovsky and Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, 358-59.

⁴⁹¹ Prudkin, “My vmeste rodilis' na stsene”, Bugakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 267.

⁴⁹² Ermolinskii, “Iz zapisei raznykh let”, Bugakova and Liandres, *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Bulgakove*, 462. The satirist Il'f and his collaborator, Evgenii Petrov are perhaps most famous for the novels *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Little Golden Calf* (1931). In 1935, the two travelled around the United States, where they journeyed from New York to California and back by car. The experience is documented in their book, *One-storied America* (1937). A version of their adventures, including photographs omitted from the original editions, is contained in: Erika Wolf, ed., *Ilf and Petrov's American Road Trip: The 1935 Travelogue of Two Soviet Writers*, trans. Anne O. Fisher (New York: Cabinet Books, 2007).

aspects,” of which, according to him, there were two: the enemy’s “capitulation, not without significance,” and the fact that MKhAT had “without artistic reservation” rendered the play in a way that was “profoundly contemporary, reflecting revolutionary reality.” Now that it bore Stalin’s stamp of approval, Lunacharskii could claim that MKhAT’s production of *Days of the Turbins* served as a model for “the majority of our playwrights, following the revolutionary path.’ These authors, in the process of learning how to express their ideas artistically, could now “dream about how Stanislavskii, with his mastery, matched literary-artistic fruits to stage clothing.”⁴⁹³

The confusion over the staging of *Days of the Turbins* reveals the fact that within the Soviet leadership, Narkompros, and the various censorship agencies, there was no real clarity about what constituted proper proletarian-revolutionary fare in the theater. Inconsistencies over the repertoire reflected the irregularities in the Party line during a period of political upheaval. Possibly by design, the sometimes obscure, sometimes contradictory nature of this “line” induced a sense of uncertainty in politicians otherwise ensconced in Marxist dogma. Though an especially prolific purveyor of this dogma, Lunacharskii could not always get his ideological bearings as the political landscape transformed around him. Neither he, nor his deputy Nadezhda Krupskaiia, had been invited to the special performance of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Days of the Turbins* depicted in the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter. Like the obedient and obsequious audience, Lunacharskii looked to Stalin for approval and guidance during the power struggle after Lenin’s death in 1924.

In a letter written in 1925, strangely bearing a Top Secret classification, Lunacharskii told Stalin that he found himself in an “odd position.” While he was part of the government, he

⁴⁹³ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Stanislavskii, teatr i revoliutsiia” *Izvestiia*, No.18 (January 18, 1933) Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/ss-tom-3/stanisavkij-teatr-i-revolicia> [accessed November 2, 2014].

nonetheless knew “nothing about what is going on within the Party.” Lunacharskii appealed to Stalin to provide him with “real information” to counteract the “contradictory and heterogeneous whirlwind of rumors.” Lunacharskii wanted Stalin to understand that he was always ready to execute “whatever the Party instructs” to the best of his abilities, “however modest or outstanding.” Combining flattery with foolhardy punning, Lunacharskii wrote that “I have long had the habit of considering [Stalin] the most infallibly sensitive among our leaders, and I believe in your steely, ‘firm flexibility’.” Lunacharskii closed his short letter insisting that he “did not want to impose on the Party. It best knows how to use people, but in the big picture some things can be overlooked.”⁴⁹⁴

It is unclear if Stalin responded to Lunacharskii’s appeal. That same year, however, in a letter to a “German communist,” Stalin wrote about the anxious Commissar of Enlightenment. Stalin stated that in Russia, “we have experienced the dying off of a whole group of our old leaders. At the same time, the Lunacharskiis, Pokrovskiis, Krasins, and so on – such are the specimens of former Bolshevik leaders who first come to mind – have receded to a secondary role. This is a necessary process in the renewal of the leading cadres of a living, developing Party.”⁴⁹⁵ Stalin’s “renewal” of the party was part of a youth movement, just like both the first five-year plan and the production of *Days of the Turbins*.

⁴⁹⁴ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Pis’mo Stalinu” (Letter to Stalin), April 1, 1925. Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/raznoe/pismo-stalinu> [accessed February 23, 2015].

⁴⁹⁵ Irina Lunacharskaia, “Why Did the Commissar of Enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii Resign?” trans. Kurt S. Schultz, *Russian Review*, Vol.51, No.3 (July, 1992), 328. Leonid Krasin (1870-1926), the Commissar of Foreign Trade, would die the following year, in spite – or maybe because – of the intervention of Aleksandr Bogdanov’s strange science. Before the Revolution, Krasin had been one of the founding members of the *Vpered* faction of the Communist Party, together with Bogdanov and Lunacharskii. The historian Mikhail Pokrovskii (1868-1932) had also been close to Bogdanov before 1917. Pokorovskii, like Lunacharskii, joined the Bolshevik Party upon his return to Russia after the Revolution.



Clockwise from top left: Aleksandr Griboedov; Meierkho'ld, Maiakovskii & Shostakovich; Lunacharskii ca. 1928; Chatskii is presumed mad and ostricized during the banquet scene from Meierkhol'd's production of Woe to Wit

Chapter 5: I am poorly constructed for our savage times: Woe to Wit and the decline of the Soviet theater

In his memoirs, the Russian poet, novelist and playwright Anatolii Mariengof (1897-1962) describes receiving a five-ruble fine for jaywalking on Leningrad's Nevskii Prospect. To the surprise of the policeman, Mariengof began to smile as he recalled how Lunacharskii had been cited for the same offense, at the same place, not long after his resignation from Narkompros in the summer of 1929:

The Commissar had received a stiffer, ten-ruble fine, since in those days portraits of Anatolii Vasil'evich were no longer hanging in all the windows. For a young person in the worker-peasant police force, Lunacharskii was, judging by the fur trim on his coat, his pince-nez and goatee, simply an old grandee. Lunacharskii later exclaimed, "What the hell do they know?! These annoying people need to think things over, but they are without any consideration!" Speaking of "them," Anatolii Vasil'evich did not have policemen in mind but, for this Bolshevik since 1903 [sic], "they" referred to Stalin and his government, the so-called "comrades in arms." The leaders of October Revolution were part of the idealist-intelligentsia, with the beards of the second half of the nineteenth century – Lenin, Trotskii, Lunacharskii, Bukharin, and others. The end of the bearded ones meant the end of the revolution (*konchilis' borodki – konchilas' revoliutsiia*).⁴⁹⁶

This short anecdote encapsulates many of the elements in Lunacharskii's fall from grace in the late 1920s, after twelve years as the head of Narkompros. Although at fifty-four not an old man when he resigned his post, Lunacharskii was – by temperament, artistic taste, and appearance – one of the *byvshie liudy*: a holdover from the vanished and politically-suspect, pre-revolutionary world. Ironically, though a conservative in many ways, it was his liberalism with respect to the theater repertoire and his advocacy of a liberal, as opposed to narrowly technical, education that put him at odds with Stalin and his "comrades in arms." In his encounter on Nevskii Prospect, Lunacharskii was annoyed with his fine, but in his political life he seemed to

⁴⁹⁶ A. Mariengof, *Bessmertnaia trilogiia* (The Immortal Trilogy) (Moscow: Bagrius, 1998) Under, "Biografiia", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/mariengof-o-lunacharskom> [accessed July 15, 2014].

mostly get a pass, lasting as Commissar a surprisingly long time, a testament perhaps to his intelligence, good nature, or adaptability. In contrast to many of the other “bearded ones,” Lunacharskii was allowed to resign and was never severely punished, though one can speculate that only his early death, at age 58, spared him from a crueler fate.

Vsevolod Meierkhol'd did live long enough to be humiliated and murdered. In 1939 his outspokenness, speaking the truth about the desecration of art in the age of socialist realism, displayed a boldness – or recklessness – that Lunacharskii was apparently incapable of. Meierkhol'd was both a member of the Party and an iconoclast, by conviction and in practice very much the revolutionary destroyer of “old worlds” in the theater. He and Lunacharskii were often at odds, going back to Meierkhol'd's brief stint in the Theater Department of Narkompros, and his agitation for “Theatrical October.” But, like Lunacharskii, he had a talent for self-transformation, the ability to rationalize his artistic evolution in politically expedient terms. When critics reproached him for distorting classics like Aleksandr Gribiedov's *Woe to Wit*, he responded that it was all part an experimental process that was national – if not cosmic – in scope. In a country ostensibly guided by “scientific socialism,” Meierkhol'd consistently asserted that the dialectic of trial and much more error was the only way to move forward.

In this chapter, I argue that the controversy surrounding Meierkhol'd's production of Griboedov's play in 1928, though more subdued than the earlier debates over *The Dawns*, displays a shift in the tone and content of the public disputes about the theater. In attacking the perceived aesthetic excesses and muted social content in his re-working of *Woe to Wit*, Meierkhol'd's critics begin to formulate the notion of so-called “formalism,” a charge that would soon become a mortal artistic and political sin. I argue that in this respect, while the period of theatrical experimentation was coming to an abrupt end, theater critics were probing new

arguments, just as the ideological underpinnings beneath them were shifting. One of the critics remarked on the “nervousness” and uncertainty of the debate’s participants – pro and contra Meierkhol’d - a manifestation, I argue, of the shifting political terrain. The lack of proletarian playwrights, and their immanent arrival, is a thread that runs through the preceding chapters. Here, I show that even while the political world was in upheaval, while brutal tactics were deployed in the process of industrialization and collectivization, Stalin’s government was relatively patient when it came to the theater. The Bolsheviks recognized the continuing utility of the theater in the age of the movie, and thus the utility of directors like Meierkhol’d to produce plays with the artistry that the incipient proletarian playwrights lacked.

Although Meierkol’d made no explicit reference to this, and by setting the comedy in verse to music did not show this, I maintain that his choice of the play’s original title *Woe to Wit*, perfectly describes the essence of the cultural battles in the late 1920s. Meierkhol’d, though he continued to work into the next decade, was on the losing side of this struggle, just as Lunacharskii was rebuffed when he challenged the impoverishment of workers’ education. I begin this chapter with a synopsis of Meierkhol’d’s accomplishments between *The Dawns* and *Woe to Wit*. After a discussion of Griboedov and the origins and basic plot of his comedy, I describe Meierkhol’d’s extensive preparations of the production. A section on the critical reception of the play, and its subsequent denouement, is followed by a description of Meierkhol’d’s career and murder in the 1930s. The conclusion of this chapter, and the thesis, covers the events leading up to Lunacharskii’s resignation in 1929, and a sketch of his activities after that, until his death in 1933.

“Our new, much redder and active blood”

Meierkhol'd remained busy after the RSFSR Theater 1, where he had staged Emile Verhaeren's *Dawns* in 1920, closed the following summer. In 1922, Meierkhol'd established the Actors' Studio, which he renamed the Meierkhol'd Theater the following year. That theater staged a highly stylized, modernized version of Ostrovskii's *The Forest* in 1923, a spectacle that enjoyed enormous success into the early 1930s. Between 1922 and 1924, parallel with the duties in his own theater, Meierkhol'd directed the Revolutionary Theater, where his productions included the German Expressionist playwright Ernst Toller's (1893-1939) *Masses Man* and *The Machine Wreckers*, as well as older works like Ostrovskii's *A Profitable Position*.⁴⁹⁷ In 1926, the Soviet government included Meierkhol'd's theater in the network of State Theaters. Although it did not become one of the officially-designated academic theaters, inclusion in the public system made the Vsevolod Meierkhol'd State Theater eligible for government subsidies, and thereby the freedom and opportunity to "make more interesting work."⁴⁹⁸

One of the first productions of Meierkhol'd's newly-designated theater for the 1926-1927 season was Nikolai Gogol's (1809-1852) *The Government Inspector*.⁴⁹⁹ Calling himself the "author of the production" on placards and programs, Meierkhol'd reconstituted the venerable play's canonical text by incorporating elements from earlier drafts, passages purged by the tsarist censors, and even parts from other works by Gogol. In order to expunge any of the play's

⁴⁹⁷ Ostrovskii's play, about official bribery and corruption, was one of the few of his plays to be prohibited by the government from appearing on the stages of the imperial theaters. Published in 1857, the play had to wait six years for its premiere. In 1919, Toller served for six days as President of the very short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic, after which he was imprisoned for five years, during which time he wrote, like Lunacharskii, numerous plays and poems. A recent biography of Toller in English is Robert Ellis' *Ernst Toller and German Society: Intellectuals as Leaders and Critics* (Florham, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013).

⁴⁹⁸ A.Ia. Trabskii ed., *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1982), 266.

⁴⁹⁹ Gogol's play, (*Revizor*, Russian for inspector) was first published in 1836. It is a comedy of errors set in motion by the terror corrupt officials of a small Russian town feel when they get the news that a government inspector is coming to investigate them, incognito.

lingering provincial, pre-revolutionary atmosphere, Meierkhol'd set the action in a capital city.⁵⁰⁰ Explaining the contemporary relevance of this drama from the 1830s, while justifying his transformation of it, he argued that Gogol's play was originally "not the culmination of a tradition, but the beginning of a new one."⁵⁰¹ In the December 16, 1926 edition of *The Red Newspaper*, Lunacharskii wrote that Meierkhol'd had rendered *The Government Inspector* into a cogent critique of contemporary reality. According to Lunacharskii, Meierkhol'd, with his "directorial genius," was able to demonstrate that the horrifying "automatism and appalling lifelessness" of Gogol's time was still alive in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, that "you are dead, your movement is lifeless."⁵⁰² Lunacharskii defended Meierkhol'd against criticisms that his reworking of the play had gone too far, saying that "of course he had the right to change Gogol with absolute freedom." He maintained that *The Government Inspector* represented a "healthy turning point" in the director's career, a move toward a tantalizing, elusive, "new realism."⁵⁰³

Two years later, Lunacharskii expounded at greater length on Meierkhol'd's "new path." In the September 14, 1928 issue of *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, he wrote approvingly of the Meierkhol'd Theater's blended repertoire of classics and contemporary plays.⁵⁰⁴ These productions represented a "significant evolution," from abstract "mechanical formalism" to theater that explored social themes. Lunacharskii recognized that Meierkhol'd had previously

⁵⁰⁰ Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 191.

⁵⁰¹ V.E. Meierkhol'd, *On Theater*, trans. Edward Braun (Reading, UK: Methuen Drama, 1998), 81.

⁵⁰² In Meierkhol'd's production, this lifelessness is represented in the play's finale, where all the actors are replaced by dolls.

⁵⁰³ A.V. Lunacharskii, "Kratko o Revizore" (Briefly about *The Government Inspector*), *Krasnaia gazeta*, No. 300 (December 16, 1926) Under, "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/kratko-o-revizore> [accessed March 17, 2015]. Later, in the journal *Novyi mir* (New World), Lunacharskii wrote that "*The Government Inspector* is Meierkhol'd's most successful play, although we find mysticism in it." A.V. Lunacharskii, "Revizor Gogolia-Meierkhol'da", *Novyi mir*, February, 1927. Under, "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-3/revizor-gogolia-meierholda> [accessed April 15, 2015].

⁵⁰⁴ The 1926-1927 season included: Aleksei Faiko's (1893-1978) *Bubus' Teacher*, Nikolai Erdman's (1900-1970) *Mandate*, and Sergei Tret'iakov's (1892-1937) *Roar, China!* Tret'iakov was arrested and shot in 1937.

demonstrated that he, “with great sensitivity,” was able to go forward under any circumstances, though not always able to “completely satisfy the revolutionary-everyday.” But, by mid-decade, Lunacharskii surmised, Meierkhol’d felt himself a “mature artist,” capable of more complicated productions, of undertaking the task of “activating the classics.” In light of *The Forest’s* enduring popularity, his praise omitted the fact that Meierkhol’d’s version of Ostrovskii’s play was intended in part as a rebuke to Lunacharskii and his call for a return to the form of “classical realism.”

A more “evolved” Meierkhol’d was now able to temper his wholesome revolutionary zeal with greater artistry. “Activating the classics” meant identifying – or inventing, if need be – in them “the ferment of revolution in the society of the past.” In the same article, Lunacharskii celebrated Meierkhol’d’s efforts in this regard, contrasting them with other productions where “quite often, past society was disfigured or debased,” and the appearance of great classical works was “routinely soiled.”⁵⁰⁵ It was incumbent on contemporary directors, Lunacharskii insisted, not to turn away from the culture of the past – “there is no longer any argument about this” – and to shine a “new light” on it. In so doing, the trick consisted in “liberating” this culture from the “bourgeois mire” in which it was embedded. If one’s creativity or strength was insufficient for

⁵⁰⁵ The Hungarian journalist Rene Fülöp-Miller wrote more ominously about Meierkhol’d’s methods: “First they tear off the masks, then affirmation; the first premise of the avant-garde is the destruction of time and space. Both the avant-garde and the Bolsheviks allege access to the consciousness, either aesthetic or political. Meierkhol’d’s biomechanics are a means of transcending the natural order.” R. Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and face of Bolshevism* (London: Chiswick Press, 1927), 178. The critic, pedagogue Boris Alpers (1894-1974) said about Meierkhol’d’s technique of biomechanics that it was “Taylorization for actors,” and “based on the obscurity of the mask, requiring not that the actor gradually reveal an inner form, but learn how to juggle ready-made, plastic ones...The wax museum of *Mandate* and *The Government Inspector*, and even *Woe to Wit*, display with amazing mastery extinct human forms, to the wonder and disbelief of contemporary audiences.” B. Alpers, *Teatral’nye ocherki, tom. 1: Teatral’nye monografii* (Theatrical sketches, volume 1: Theatrical monographs) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977) Under, “Alpers BV”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Alpers/ocherki1/#_Toc377638916 [accessed April 3, 2015].

this task, Lunacharskii declared, then the dramatic works of the past should be renewed, their “circulatory systems infused with our new, much redder and active blood.”⁵⁰⁶

Basking in the critical and popular success of *The Government Inspector*, Meierkhol’d chose Aleksandr Griboedov’s (1795-1829) *Woe from Wit* for the upcoming season, changing the title to *Woe to Wit*.⁵⁰⁷ In 1924, he had been almost begun work on this play, but chose to stage Gogol’s instead. Before they began work on the *Woe to Wit*, Meierkhol’d acknowledged that this would be his theater’s first attempt at staging a play in verse. But, without invoking Lunacharskii’s notions of “evolution” or “maturity,” he claimed that “very difficult plays” were now within the theater’s grasp, that, “like young children learning French,” they could train themselves with “good verse.” Just as he had transformed Gogol’s play, Meierkhol’d argued that the “schematic, conventional” version of Griboedov’s play would require reinterpretation. This meant “giving a new dynamic to an old thing, the continuation of the theatrical struggle.” Subtly expressing his disdain for most of the current Soviet repertoire, Meierkhol’d said that staging *Woe to Wit* would be as much a pedagogical endeavor as a creative one, where the use of classical dramas served as “a school for actors, and every actor needs to be raised on good material.”⁵⁰⁸

“Revulsion for the slavishness of his epoch”

⁵⁰⁶ A.V. Lunacharskii, “O teatre Meierkhol’da” (On the Meierkhol’d Theater), *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, September 14, 1928. Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/raznoe/o-teatre-mejerholda> [accessed march 30, 2015].

⁵⁰⁷ There was an intermediate variant of the title in 1824: *Woe and no Wit*. In his hometown of Penza, Meierkhol’d’s first role as an actor had been in *Woe from Wit*, playing the part of Repetilov, an especially odious – but self-aware – specimen of the play’s decadent aristocracy, who complains that he is “pitiful, laughable, uneducated, a fool.”

⁵⁰⁸ “Pervaia beseda o spektakle *Gore umu*” (The first discussion about *Woe to Wit*), January 7, 1927. In M.M Sitkovestkaia ed., *Meierkhol’d repetiruet*, tom.1 (Meierkhol’d rehearses, vol.1) (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1993). Under, Meierkhol’d VE”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/Reh_1/#_Toc227412530 [accessed March 23, 2015].

Aleksandr Griboedov's literary reputation is based on this work alone. Born in Moscow, he attended university there before entering the civil service in 1818. In 1822, while serving as part of the diplomatic corps in Tbilisi, Georgia, Griboedov began working on *Woe to Wit*. Writing from Tbilisi, Griboedov told a friend that "nothing in Moscow is to my taste: there is every idleness, luxury, unconnected with the slightest feeling for anything good. People used to love music there, now they hold it in contempt." He explained that he was working on a play, and that he had found inspiration for it in the first five chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Specifically, he mentioned chapter five, verse twenty one: "Woe to them that are wise to their own eyes and prudent in their own sight!...Woe to them that call evil good, and good evil, that put darkness for light, light for darkness, that put sweet for bitter, and bitter for sweet."⁵⁰⁹ Seven years later, as a member of the consular mission to Persia, Griboedov was killed by an angry mob that attacked the Russian embassy in Teheran.

The material for the play was also derived from current events. Griboedov finished the play in Moscow in 1823, originally choosing *Woe to Wit* as the title, before changing it to *Woe from Wit* just before publication. A censored version of the play had its premiere in 1825, the year of the failed Decembrist revolt in Saint Petersburg, and several years before the circulation of Petr Chaadaev's (1794-1856) banned *Philosophical Letters*. In the *Letters*, Chaadaev criticized Russia for both its insularity and imitation of the West, and when the work was finally published by a Russian magazine in 1836, its editor was exiled to Siberia and Chaadaev was declared criminally insane, and sentenced to house arrest. Aleksandr Chatskii, the hero of *Woe to Wit*, is an amalgamation of the stock "angry young man," Chaadaev, and the doomed Decembrists. Returning to Moscow after a lengthy absence, Chatskii finds an alien, hostile

⁵⁰⁹ Mary Hobson, *Aleksandr Griboedov's Woe from Wit: A Commentary and Translation* (New York: Edward Mellon Press, 2005), 486-492.

world. After attempting to rekindle a romance with his former love, Sofia, Chatskii ends up denouncing everyone, including her wealthy father, Famusov, and his entourage of aristocrats and government servitors. By play's end he is rumored to be mad and is banished from Moscow.⁵¹⁰ The play in verse was given its first full performance in 1831 by the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg. The comedy was staged in this form only sporadically until 1861, when the uncensored version was tolerated during a period of cultural and social reforms.

In an article in the February, 1929 issue of the journal *The Russian Language in the Soviet School*, Lunacharskii offered his own insights on the author of *Woe from Wit*. Bringing to mind his description of Bernard Shaw, Lunacharskii explained that Griboedov had written a comedy and reveled in the “laughter of the audiences,” but only because he understood the value of satire as a weapon, the better to “express his revulsion for the slavishness of his epoch.” According to Lunacharskii, the drama was about the “downfall of individual reason” in Russia, and about the grief experienced by “representatives of reason.” In order for Griboedov to show his indignation and disgust, Lunacharskii argued, he had to adopt a tone and manner of speaking that was “beneath the Tsar, in order to speak the truth to the Tsar.” For this, Lunacharskii wrote, Griboedov needed to use the “joking form,” even though he was not a writer of comedies, but “a

⁵¹⁰ In 1823, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), also sympathetic to, but not a part of the Decembrist revolt, wrote to the poet and literary critic P.A. Viazemskii (1792-1878) about Griboedov's work in progress: “What kind of man is Griboedov? I am told he is writing a comedy about Chaadaev, in the present circumstances, that is very noble of him.” Hobson, *Aleksandr Griboedov's Woe from Wit*, 513. Meierkhol'd said of Chatskii: “I consider it our mission in the theater to show that people should not be divided into negative and positive, you have to demonstrate that people are very complex. When one reads *Woe from Wit*, every page seems to reflect some aspect of modern life.” V.E. Meierkhol'd, *On Theater*, trans. Edward Braun (Reading, UK: Methuen Drama, 1998), 97. The events in chapter five of Bulgakov's novel *Master and Margarita*, “The Incident at Griboedov,” recapitulate the trajectory of the play's plot. In the novel, the poet Ivan Bezdomnyi arrives at the Writers' Union in Moscow – “the former home of Griboedov's aunt” – naked and carrying a religious icon. Bezdomnyi's incursion coincides with a night of wild dancing and debauchery at the Union; he is declared insane and carted off to a psychiatric hospital.

prophet, like Jeremiah, who goes onto the public square to enunciate the awful truth about his love, and about his hatred for those who are ruining his country.”⁵¹¹

A cautious, or at least meticulous, prophet, Meierkhol'd took his time to speak “the awful truth.” Unlike RSFSR Theater 1's hasty production of *Dawns* in 1920, the V.E. Meierkhol'd State Theater devoted over a year to the preparation of *Woe to Wit*. The work began in January, 1927, right after the premiere of *The Government Inspector*. The rehearsal period was divided into three, almost independent stages: casting calls between January 7 and 20; in the spring the text was re-worked by Meierkhol'd and M.M. Korenev (1889-1980), and the sets and musical elements of the play were prepared; full rehearsal began in the fall. The musical part of the production, one of Meierkhol'd's innovations, grew to such proportions that a full orchestra and professional conductor had to be brought in. During early rehearsals, however, a very young Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) filled in as the piano accompanist. In addition to the introduction of music throughout the play, Meierkhol'd converted Griboedov's four-act drama into one consisting of seventeen episodes, each with its own epigraph.⁵¹²

As preparations on *Woe to Wit* began, Meierkhol'd addressed the theater's company on January 17, 1927. He declared that if contemporary playwrights had “given us brilliant works,” it would not be necessary to turn to plays from the past. But, according to Meierkhol'd, the contemporary plays currently on Moscow's stages were “harmful to the actor.” He claimed that the principal defect of these plays was the lack of “polished dialogue. We have forgotten how to talk. These plays are not written in Russian, their wit and witticism are cheap.” Meierkhol'd complained that while the directorate of the journal *LEF* was scolding his theater for its devotion

⁵¹¹ A.V. Lunacharskii, “A.S. Griboedov”, *Russkii iazik v sovetskoj shkole*, No.1 (February, 1929). Under, “Biblioteka”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-1/a-s-griboedov> [accessed September 25, 2013].

⁵¹² M.M. Sitkovestkaia ed., *Meierkhol'd repetiruet*, tom.1 (Meierkhol'd rehearses, vol.1) (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1993). Under, Meierkhol'd VE”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/Reh_1/#_Toc227412530 [accessed March 23, 2015].

to the classics, for the time being there simply were no suitable plays, and he did not want to go down the path of the Revolutionary Theater, which had recently staged a version of Fedor Gladkov's (1883-1958) novel *Cement*.⁵¹³ His was a young theater, Meierkhol'd concluded, and "not just a touring theater in the service of the population of the USSR, but an experimental one."⁵¹⁴

On November 19, 1927, Meierkhol'd and Korenev discussed the preparations of *Woe to Wit* with the cast and other members of the production. Meierkhold and Kornenv's re-working of the play included the use of *chronometrage*, a facet of "biomechanics" that involved precisely timed acting sequences. *Chronometrage* was also connected to the music that played throughout their version of *Woe to Wit*, in which the Decembrist theme was emphasized. Korenev addressed the main challenge in staging this "specifically Russian comedy," saying it involved avoiding "stylization, or presenting the play in a worn-out way." The basic element of Griboedov's play, according to Korenev, was "cheerfulness," in contrast to the character of Chatskii, who is a "natural-born destroyer of all etiquette in the Famusov home." Korenev spoke about using the three different manuscripts of the play, re-combining them in order to "freshen up and Moscow-ize (*omoskvichit*)" the text. Meierkhol'd adopted a conspiratorial tone, saying that he

⁵¹³ "For the time being" meant that in "two to three years we will endeavor to stage contemporary plays." The directorate of LEF included Maiakovskii, who in his speech Meierkhol'd described as busy "working away on his own plays." In a speech to the theater's company on November 19, 1927, Meierkhol'd, explicating the character of Liza, the maid in *Woe to Wit*, said that she was an example of two people in one: "You will notice that the cruelest people love cats, animals, and children. Maiakovskii worships cats. When you show him a kitten, he almost sheds tears. Yet, at the same time he is free to appear at the Writers' Union and participate in the condemnation of [Sergei] Esenin...This shows remarkable cruelty, yet he loves cats. A person can appear attractive and charming on the outside, while inside they are bitter." Esenin (1895-1925) was a popular lyric poet who committed suicide; Maiakovskii would kill himself in 1930. *Cement*, published in 1925, is a proto-Soviet socialist realist novel whose hero returns from duty in the Civil War to work in a cement factory, only to find it, and the Revolution, in shambles.

⁵¹⁴ "Pervaia beseda o spektakle *Gore umu*" (The first discussion about *Woe to Wit*), January 7, 1927. In M.M Sitkovestkaia ed., *Meierkhol'd repetiruet*, tom.1 (Meierkhol'd rehearses, vol.1) (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1993). Under, Meierkhol'd VE", http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Meierhold/Reh_1/#_Toc227412530 [accessed March 23, 2015].

recommended that future rehearsals be closed ones: “Comrades, we need to keep secret all our ingenuity!” He warned the theater’s company that, in the “camps of our competitors,” rumors were always percolating. The reason for the secrecy, or modesty, was perhaps due to Meierkhol’d’s suggestion that this production of *Woe to Wit* should be “saturated with an erotic element.” In a departure from the authoritarian bluster that characterized his “Theatrical October” pronouncements – and instructions for *The Dawns* – Meierkhol’d also insisted that in staging this play, ultimately very little depended on the director, as “everywhere [the actors] should improvise.” Meierkhol’d compared the production’s seventeen episodes to a box of candies which contained “a mirror, an atlas, and music – the play is suffused with music.”⁵¹⁵

Four days before the premiere of Meierkhol’d’s version of *Woe to Wit*, the complex, grandiose production was still a work in progress. Meierkhol’d addressed the troupe on March 8, 1928, telling them that “the cultural front” was itself “still developing.” He explained that while another six months of work on the play would be useful, the theater was not wealthy, and neither the public nor the state’s cultural specialists appreciated its dawdling or experimental nature. Meierkhol’d compared his theater to Dr. Ivan Pavlov’s (1849-1936) laboratory. There, “when with a whistle he gets a dog to stand on its hind legs and drool,” people told Pavlov that he should get the animal to perform tricks at the circus. “So it is with us,” he observed, “when people tell us we are wasting rubles on experiments, and that we should get the dog to drool and jump through hoops at the same time [laughter].” Unlike the sciences, or pseudo-sciences, money for the theater was in short supply, though Meierkhol’d said he understood that “the reserve fund had [a large sum], and if Sovnarkom were to release it to us, I would call that a

⁵¹⁵ “Iz stenogrammy besedy V.E. Meierkhol’da i M.M. Koreneva s uchastnikami spektaklia *Gore Umu*” (From the stenograph of the V.E. Meierkhol’d’s and M.M. Korenev’s discussion with the participants of the production of *Woe to Wit*), November 19, 1927. TsGALI, f.998, op.1, ed khr. 2016, 1-22. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 281-87.

quite noble act.”⁵¹⁶ *Woe to Wit* premiered on March 8, 1928, with the text re-worked by Meierkhol’d and Korenev, and sets by V.A Shestakov and N.P. Ul’ianov. The play ran for three seasons, and was later revived by the Meierkhol’d Theater for the 1937-1937 season, when the title reverted to the traditional *Woe from Wit*.

“Skirmishes over new trends”

While Meierkhol’d’s productions always provoked controversy, in the case of *Woe to Wit*, the critics were less shrill than usual, the criticisms less overtly political or ideological. Instead, any censure was mostly presented – or disguised – as a philosophical difference of opinion over Meierkhol’d’s artistic conception of the play, his incipient “formalism.” In a review entitled “*Woe to Wit*, or Meierkhol’dian Whimsies,” N. Osinskii – the pseudonym of the economist Valerian Obolenskii (1887-1938) – wrote that the play was a “new phase along the path begun with *The Government Inspector*.”⁵¹⁷ But Osinskii worried that Meierkhol’d had “emasculated” the play’s traditional title, something that revealed the director’s typically “aestheticized” approach. Meierkhol’d transformation of Griboedov’s play into seventeen episodes included the addition of scenes of billiards, trap-shooting, and debauchery in a public drinking-house, all which Osinskii felt distracted the spectator from the play’s social satire. Comparing the sets to “something a child constructs with building blocks,” Osinskii advised the V.E. Meierkhol’d State Theater to “sharply change course,” and take a line more “resonant with the contemporary, more dynamic in outward form.”⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ M.M. Sitkovestkaia ed., *Meierkhol’d repetiruet*, tom.1 (Meierkhol’d rehearses, vol.1) (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1993). Under, Meierkhol’d VE”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/Reh_1/#_Toc227412530 [accessed March 23, 2015].

⁵¹⁷ In 1928, Osinskii/Obolenskii was working in the Central Statistical Directorate; he was arrested and shot in 1938.

⁵¹⁸ N. Osinskii, “*Gore Umu*, ili Meierkhol’dy prichudy.” Under, Meierkhol’d v Russkoi teatral’noi kritike: 1920-1938”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_y_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

In a review published in the March 16, 1928 edition of *Moscow Overnight*, the critic Iurii Sobolev also took issue with Meierkhol'd's misappropriation of the original, archival title. Sobolev asserted that in using *Woe to Wit*, Meierkhol'd was trying to hear the "primal scream of the comedy," which grew out of the great temptation of trying to find some "hidden, mysterious meaning in the play." Defending some notion of original intent, Sobolev cautioned against reading into the text what was not "given by the author," and asked why anyone would use what "Griboedov himself had rejected." Whereas Meierkhol'd had claimed that the inclusion of billiards, trap-shooting, and the like would somehow subvert the "refinements of the high society of the early nineteenth century," Sobolev argued that his various modifications were actually "highly eroticized refinements" in their own right. In conclusion, Sobolev alleged that *Woe to Wit*, as "activation of the classical," was inferior to the "broad range" of *The Government Inspector*, or the "bold freshness" of *The Forest*. The problem with *Woe to Wit*, he maintained, was that having jettisoned all "ideological support and formal significance," Meierkhol'd found himself "suspended in mid-air."⁵¹⁹

In the March 17, 1928 issue of *The Red Newspaper*, the literary critic David Tal'nikov (1881-1962) – whose actual last name was Shpital'nikov, and who used the pseudonym Delta – expressed similar concerns about the disappearance of social satire in Meierkhol'd's musically "suffused" production. *Woe to Wit* had come, Tal'nikov wrote, from "the hand of its creator" in part as a comedy about everyday life with a romantic subject. But, more important was Griboedov's conception of the character of Chatskii as the "herald of his Decembrism and youthful enthusiasm," a martyr who ends up "covered in dust, accused and flagellated." Tal'nikov complained that Meierkhol'd had transformed Chatskii into a "dreamer-musician," a

⁵¹⁹ Iurii Sobolev, "Gore Umu v teatre V. Meierkhol'da", *Vecherniaia Moskva*, March 16, 1928. Under, Meierkhol'd v Russkoi teatral'noi kritike: 1920-1938", http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

change that subverted the whole mood of “struggle and social satire,” and ruined the eternal theme of the conflict between a “high-minded person and the swamp of human vulgarity.”⁵²⁰

Over the course of several weeks in March and April of 1928, the debates over Meierkhol'd's *Woe to Wit* were reported on, and perpetuated, in the pages of the journal *The Life of Art*.⁵²¹ The theater critic and pedagogue Aleksei Gvozdev (1887-1939), wrote that because – or in spite – of Meierkhol'd's extensive revision of Griboedov's work, it was sometimes difficult to discern the director's intentions. Meierkhol'd's objectives were obscured in part by technical complications, and Gvozdev described one of *Woe to Wit*'s earliest performances as “far from a finished product,” where the actors were “visibly uncomfortable” amidst the many mechanical malfunctions on stage. While Griboedov's play was “antiquated,” Gvozdev argued, the “radical content will never die,” and it served as a “living link in revolutionary construction.” Re-writing the history of early nineteenth-century Russia, Gvozdev asserted that *Woe to Wit* illuminated the creative enthusiasm and “great revolutionary energy of the distant past.” In fact, the absence of any such widespread enthusiasm and energy is what doomed the Decembrist revolt. For all the muddle of this production, however, it was obvious to Gvozdev that Meierkhol'd had “plucked this old play about the nobility” in order to clarify, strengthen, and “make contemporary this poem about Griboedov and his epoch.” One of Meierkhol'd's innovations was the consolidation of the Decembrist component of *Woe to Wit*. While Chatskii improvised on the piano, he and his friends – a cohort missing from Griboedov's original play – read poems about, and by, some of the dissidents: Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), and Kondratii Ryleev (1795-1826), one of the leaders of the revolt. According to Gvozdev, Meierkhol'd's resuscitation and

⁵²⁰ D. Tal'nikov, “Gore Umu V. Meierkhol'da”, *Krasnaia gazeta*, March 17, 1928. Under, Meierkhol'd v Russkoi teatral'noi kritike: 1920-1938”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

⁵²¹ The journal began publication in 1923, at the same time as a newspaper of the same name, and ran until 1930, when it merged with the *The Worker and the Theater (Rabochii i teatr)*.

reinvigoration of the Griboedov-Chatskii-Decembrist nexus was not entirely successful, but he had effectively created a new genre, “the theater of musical drama.”⁵²²

In a subsequent issue of *The Life of Art*, the philologist, historian, and literary critic Nikolai Pksanov (1878-1969), whose edition of *Woe from Wit* had been the basis for Meierkhold’s and Korenev’s re-working of the play, declared that he was “hostile to this production.” Pksanov maintained that his aversion was not solely the result of the “unprecedented disturbances and distortions” of the text, the sort of “capriciousness” that no other theater had permitted itself. Pksanov recognized that the abridgment of Griboedov’s play was something other theaters, including the esteemed Moscow Art Theater, had done. But Meierkhol’d, in jettisoning entire passages from the play, “made no secret of his alterations, while others hush them up.” Pksanov maintained that he was not opposed “on principle” to the right of any theater to take a classical play as a “theme upon which to develop its own variations.” But, like Gvozdev, he complained about the murkiness of Meierkhol’d’s “intentions.” An originalist like Tal’nikov, Pksanov argued that Griboedov had been “correct” to cross out the first title, *Woe to Wit*, and replace it with a “far more modest one: *Woe from Wit*.” Drawing a subtle distinction that is hard to detect in the title’s non-Russian – non-Bolshevik – forms, he wrote that the second, customary name was more accurate insofar as there is “absolutely no philosophical content in the play.” Pksanov said “bluntly” that the V.E. Meierkhol’d State Theater had done everything to “ruin, degrade, and humiliate” the representation of Chatskii, and that the drama was thus deprived of any justification for the

⁵²² A. Gvozdev, “Gore Umu Meierkhol’da”, *Zhizn’ iskuustva*, No.12 (1928). Under, “Meierkhol’d v Russkoi teatral’noi kritike: 1920-1938”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

“antithesis between the Decembrists and the serf owners. In this production there is neither woe from, nor to, wit.”⁵²³

In the April 10, 1928 issue of *The Life of Art*, the Polish poet, playwright and critic Antonii Slonimskii (1895-1976) complimented Meierkhol'd for using the play's "primordial" title. According to Slonimskii, *Woe from Wit* sounded like "*Madness from Love* or *Misery of a Tender Heart* or melodramatic titles of that sort," unsuitable for what Griboedov had called his "stage poem." Slonimskii wrote approvingly that *Woe to Wit* was a title that better evoked the "socialized (*obobshchennyi*)" meaning of Griboedov's work. In this respect, Meierkhol'd's production of Griboedov's play was a continuation of his work with *The Government Inspector*, where he "used the stage to give a social interpretation of the classics." For this reason, Slonimskii asserted, while the play was still rough and "unsettled," Meierkhol'd had demonstrated that he "deserved to be taken seriously."⁵²⁴

In a different issue of *The Life of Art*, the writer Sergei Mstislavskii (1886-1943) reflecting on the dialogue and disagreement over *Woe to Wit*, claimed that "discussion is always a good sign," since what was not talked about was "usually bad." Mstislavskii observed that, in most respects, the current debate was typical of earlier ones over the "fruits of Meierkhol'd's craftsmanship," and the director himself never turned down the opportunity to participate in the public discourse. But Mstislavskii detected something new in the current debate, a noticeably "thick, unhealthy atmosphere," where attacks from "both sides became purely personal." He remarked that *Woe to Wit's* defenders and critics alike displayed a "noteworthy nervousness,"

⁵²³ N.Piksanov, "Gore Umu. Teatr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da (v poriadke obsuzhdeniia) (*Woe to Wit*. The Vs. Meierkhol'd Theater – in the course of a discussion), *Zhizn' iskusstva*, No.14 (1928). Under, "Meierkhol'd v Russkoi teatral'noi kritike: 1920-1938", http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

⁵²⁴ A. Slonimskii, "Stsenicheskaia poema o Chatskom-Dekabristsie" (A Stage Poem about Chatskii-Decembrist), *Zhizn' iskusstva*, No.15 (April 10, 1928). Under, "Meierkhol'd v Russkoi teatral'noi kritike: 1920-1938", http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

something that was always the “manifestation of uncertainty.” As an example of this “uncertainty,” Mstislavskii cited Meierkhol’d’s modification of his own arguments during the “latest duel,” where he made an “unexpected” connection between *Woe to Wit* and Ivan Turgenev’s (1818-1883) *Fathers and Children*, which “obscured the disagreement, and sent it into a hopeless impasse.”⁵²⁵ According to Mstislavskii, the primary reason for the confusion of the debate, “the root of evil,” was the fact that in Meierkhol’d’s interpretation, the play is “organically unable to come to an end.”

The director could have avoided this problem, Mstislavskii argued, if he had followed the suggestions of some of the debate’s participants and adhered to the “laws of ‘political comedy’.” Sadly, Mstislavskii wrote, there was “no trace of reality” in Meierkhol’d’s *Woe to Wit*, only the “grotesque tones” of Famusov’s world, and “the grotesque threatens only the living.” In Mstislavskii’s view, this production omitted the essence of the satire, what Griboedov called the “realm of official boorishness.” In Meierkhol’d’s version of the play, he asserted, the central theme was Chatskii’s loneliness, where he was a “solitary figure surrounded by a dream-world,” expressing himself through “musical sounds.” The tragedy of Chatskii, according to Mstislavskii, was that he was unaware that dreams rule the mind, and not the reverse: “woe to wit!” Like Sobolev, who claimed that Meierkhol’d’s own experiments had left him “suspended in mid-air,” Mstislavskii said that the introduction of music and “proto-Decembrists,” as well the play’s vague ending, left one “standing in the middle of the road.” Meierkhol’d had “liquidated” both

⁵²⁵ The plot of Turgenev’s novel, published in 1862, involves the return of a son and a friend to his father’s provincial estate after university, where they propagate the peculiar new idea of so-called “nihilism.”

the social and romantic drama in *Woe to Wit*, and all that was left was a “spectacle of passive solitude.”⁵²⁶

In the journal *New World*, Pavel Markov agreed with Mstislavskii’s assessment of the tone of the debate over *Woe to Wit*, calling them “bitter arguments.” Meierkhol’d’s work was always provocative, Markov wrote, and in this production the director had “unexpectedly and courageously” revealed the essential “slavishness, the torment and tragic desperation of free thought” during Griboedov’s time – an apt description of life in the USSR in the decades to come. The production was far from perfect, he continued, and Meierkhol’d had failed to convey all of the play’s “undoubted social significance and truth.” Markov, like Gvozdev, argued that Meierkhol’d was developing a new kind of theater, what the director himself called “musical realism,” bringing the rules of musical composition to bear on the “composition of the drama.”⁵²⁷

The Mexican artist Jose David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), who was in Moscow as part of a visiting “workers’ delegation,” was effusive in his praise of *Woe to Wit*. “Only in a country where the worker and peasants rule,” he wrote, could such a work be created, for which everyone was indebted to “Comrade Meierkhol’d.” According to Alfaro Siqueiros, the production demonstrated the “perfect synthesis” of the best qualities of “ancient” art, and the “dynamism, clarity, and revolutionary force” of contemporary art. Not only was Meierkhol’d a great artist, Alfaro Siqueiros continued, but he “generously assists in the artistic education” of workers.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ S. Mstislavskii, “Odnokii (k diskussii o *Gore Umu*)” (Alone (toward the discussion of *Woe to Wit*)), *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, No.16 (1928). Under, “Meierkhol’d v Russkoi teatral’noi kritike: 1920-1938”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

⁵²⁷ P.A. Markov, “Ocherki teatral’noi zhizni. K voprosu o stsenicheskoi prochtenii klassikov” (Notes from a life in the theater. On the question of staging re-worked versions of the classics), *Novyi mir*, No.6 (1928). Under, “Meierkhol’d v Russkoi teatral’noi kritike: 1920-1938”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold_v_kritike_1920_1938/#_Toc198443842 [accessed February 7, 2015].

⁵²⁸ “Otzyv D.-A. Siqueiros o spektakle *Gore Umu*” (D.A. Siqueiros’ critique of the play *Woe to Wit*) [no later than April 4, 1928]. In *Russkii Sovetskii teatr: dokumenty i materialy, 1926-1932*, 289. Siqueiros was a Stalinist, and participated in the unsuccessful attempt on Trotskii’s life in Mexico in May, 1940.

In an interview in the September 10, 1928 edition of *Moscow Overnight*, Lunacharskii was more restrained, and chided Meierkhol'd for the pace and quality of his work. He said that, "lately," Meierkhol'd had been "slow and sluggish," and instead of capitalizing on the "great achievement" of *The Government Inspector*, had turned out *Woe to Wit*, which was of lesser "artistry and social significance." Lunacharskii, adopting some of the tone of "personal attacks," criticized Meierkhol'd's "weak capacity for hard work," and for his inability – or unwillingness – to "define himself in the skirmishes over new trends." All this, according to Lunacharskii, had alienated Meierkhol'd from the audience. Meierkhol'd had been working in the theaters of Moscow and St. Petersburg/Leningrad for over twenty years, but Lunacharskii now claimed that he proved to be "a poor boss and organizer."⁵²⁹ Four days later, in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, Lunacharskii continued with the theme of Meierkhol'd's alleged indolence. He wrote that the director's "sins, are, as they say 'innocent'," but he now seemed to lack that "mighty energy which previously sustained him." Rather than demonstrating the "correctness of the path" begun with *The Government Inspector*, Lunacharskii accused him of "shilly-shallying and wasting time" by presenting only one new play – *Woe to Wit*.⁵³⁰

Almost a year after the premiere of *Woe to Wit*, Boris Alpers wrote in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* that while Meierkhol'd's production represented a "significant step forward," it nonetheless suffered from a certain "reticence and many contradictions." Alpers complained that Meierkhol'd first presented Chatskii as a *komsomolets* – a member of the Young Communist League – but gradually the hero of the play turned into a Decembrist, which "diminished the

⁵²⁹ Lunacharskii interview in *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 10, 1928. Under, "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/raznoe/o-teatre-mejerholda> [accessed March 17, 2015]. While perhaps an unfair criticism in this context, Meierkhol'd had proven himself to be a poor administrator during his brief stint in charge of Narkompros' Theater Department.

⁵³⁰ A.V. Lunacharskii, "O teatre Meierkhol'da", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, September 14, 1928. Under, "Biblioteka", <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/raznoe/o-teatre-mejerholda> [accessed March 17, 2015].

satirical pathos of *Woe from Wit* [sic].” The “sharply contemporary” character of Chatskii in the first act, bringing him “close to the people of our times,” disappeared over the course of the production, and he became “inactive, and a deep thinker.” According to Alpers, this was “a shame,” and Meierkhol’d should have had “the courage to follow through” and use Chatskii to survey the “morals of our present epoch. Griboedov’s brilliant work still awaits its full expression on the contemporary stage.”⁵³¹

“Children of the Revolution”

In 1928, several months after the premiere of *Woe to Wit*, Meierkhol’d attempted to clarify what his goals had been in staging Griboedov’s comedy. In choosing another play from the classical repertoire, his theater had hoped to familiarize a broad audience with the “best works of Russian playwrights,” provide material for actors to “polish their craft,” and, by “breaking through the thickness of false ‘traditions’, give these works fresh interpretations.” According to Meierkhol’d, Griboedov’s play was more than a satire of Russian society during the reign of Aleksandr I (1801-1825). *Woe to Wit*, he maintained, had “greater social significance,” and the play’s “philosophical character” involved the collision between a “vanguard of the intelligentsia” and the self-interested “boors of Famusov’s Moscow.” Meierkhol’d argued that the requirements of the nineteenth-century censors had left their mark on all previous productions of the comedy, where directors had been “seduced by the beauty and refinement” of aristocratic society. Meierkhol’d declared that, while his theater did not want to be “prisoners of beauty,” they had nonetheless “saturated” *Woe to Wit* with the music of Bach,

⁵³¹ B.V. Alpers, “Pobezhdaiushchii smekh” (Laughter is triumphant), *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, February 9, 1929. Under, “Teatral’naia kritika”, http://teatr.lib.ru/Library/Gvozdev/critic/#_Toc134087082 [accessed March 7, 2015].

Beethoven, Gluck, and Mozart. “Music overcomes Chatskii’s rationality, and brings him closer to our time.”⁵³²

In an interview on December 17, 1928, Meierkhol’d was more defensive. Previously, he had blamed contemporary Soviet playwrights for failing to provide suitable material for his theater. Underscoring the circularity – and absurdity – of Lunacharskii’s recipe for a proletarian culture made by acculturated proletarians, Meierkhol’d said that, in addition to the deficit of good, new plays, the problem was also that people made the mistake of looking at “our theater as one that gives all of its productions to poorly prepared spectators.” Just as the artistic, but authentically Soviet proletarian playwright was mostly an unfulfilled fantasy in the minds of Lunacharskii, critics, and other cultural arbiters, so was the idea of an audience comprised of politically and culturally sophisticated workers. Meierkhol’d said that while some accused his theater of being “inaccessible to this spectator,” its experiments had a different sort of audience in mind: “a worker elite, more cultured...we do not do experiments for the sake of experiments.” He acknowledged that in the course of this theatrical “research” there had been some failures, but insisted that trial and error was an element of the scientific process, and a “useful part of the overall struggle we are engaged in.” Significantly, Meierkhol’d claimed that his innovations and investigations were not, as some critics had suggested, whimsical, but the result of a great amount of thought: “We do not do experiments alienated from content, every form is the result of considerable work on the content of a play.”⁵³³

⁵³² V.E. Meierkhol’d, “O postanovke *Gore Umu*” (On staging *Woe to Wit*). Under, “V.E. Meierkhol’d, *Stat’i, rechi, besedy, tom.2* (V.E. Meierkhol’d: Essays, speeches, conversations, vol.2), ed. A.V, Fevral’skii (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968)”, http://teatr/lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/articl_2/#_Toc121070689 [accessed March 24, 2015].

⁵³³ V.E. Meierkhol’d, “Ob osobennostiakh gosudarstvennogo teatra imeni Vs. Meierkhol’da (On the features of the Vs. Meierkhol’d State Theater) Under, “V.E. Meierkhol’d, *Stat’i, rechi, besedy, tom.2* (V.E. Meierkhol’d: Essays, speeches, conversations, vol.2), ed. A.V, Fevral’skii (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), http://teatr/lib.ru/Library/Mejerhold/articl_2/#_Toc121070689 [accessed March 24, 2015].

A long article by Lunacharskii about TRAM – Workers’ Youth Theater – in the July 8, 1928 issue of *Pravda*, included an assessment of Meierkhol’d’s work since the Revolution. In that time, he wrote, every theater had followed “various paths.” Yet the professional, academic, and even the “commonplace” provincial theaters had each “in its own way and to its own level,” tried to preserve the “more or less” old dramatic traditions. Lunacharskii included Meirkhol’d in a smaller group of directors and theaters who had “wanted to be children of the Revolution, and went to greet it with open arms.” According to Lunacharskii, these theaters “involuntarily” experimented with the “agitational” form. “Many remember,” he continued, one of Meierkhol’d’s first plays in the old *Zon* Theater, where the “renovated, noble, but sentimental text of Verhaeren’s *Dawn* was shouted out in fiery declamations by the actors.” Meierkhol’d’s *Woe to Wit*, like *The Government Inspector* before it, Lunacharskii maintained, were positive developments that stood in sharp contrast to his earlier efforts at Proletkult, the Actor’s Studio, or the Revolutionary Theater, which were almost all like “variations of the agit-play.”

Parody of both the agit-play and the “professional, academic” theater, was the subject of Maiakovskii’s *The Bath House*, which Meierkhol’d staged in 1930. The year before, his theater had produced Maiakovskii’s *The Bedbug*, a satire of NEP whose fantastic plot involves accidental cryogenic preservation.⁵³⁴ The play, with a musical interlude by Shostakovich, was denounced by most critics, who said it exaggerated the menace of the petit-bourgeois. RAPP was

⁵³⁴ *The Bedbug* tells the story of how, with the coming of NEP, Ivan, a factory worker and party member decides that he has sacrificed enough for the revolution, breaks up with his communist girlfriend, and marries the daughter of a rich beautician, receiving a large dowry in exchange for his party card. A fire breaks out at the wedding, and Ivan is accidentally frozen by a fireman’s hose. He is defrosted and revived by scientists in 1979 in a world that is communist, logical, and antiseptic. His former girlfriend is now an elderly biologist, and she denounces him as bourgeois scum. Ivan is saved from being refrozen when a now extinct bedbug is discovered to have been frozen with him. Ivan is allowed to live in a zoo, nourishing the valuable bedbug with his own blood. Nancy Van Norman Baer, *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-garde Stage Design, 1913-1935* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 185.

especially fierce in its attacks, as they were “opposed to satire on principle.”⁵³⁵ In *The Bath House*, Maiakovskii mocked academic theaters like MKhAT and the leftist agitational ones equally. Unlike *The Bedbug*, which had enjoyed popular if not critical success, *The Bath House* was considered a failure, as audiences, “unlike those seven or eight years earlier, no longer thought of MKhAT as the enemy.”⁵³⁶

In a country increasingly intolerant of satire or experimentation, and perhaps also due to the dissipation of the “mighty energy” Lunacharskii had noted, Meierkhol’d’s output steadily diminished. In a 1929 article that appeared in the American journal *Parnassus*, the Soviet critic Abram Efros (1888-1954) remarked on Meierkhol’d’s apparent creative lethargy. After his “splendid experiments in theatrical nihilism,” Efros wrote, the director was “wearily dragging himself” from *The Government Inspector* to [*Woe to Wit*], haphazardly employing the “remnants of all his styles.” According to Efros, Meierkhol’d’s exhaustion was a symptom of a larger problem: the “crisis” brought on by the arrival of a new repertoire, insofar as “Soviet dramaturgy is rough, prickly, difficult, unsettled, though vigorous.” Efros argued that the Russian theaters could only assimilate this new “Soviet dramaturgy” using the experimental techniques they had applied in staging the works of the avant-garde, or modifications of the classics.

Several years later, Meierkhol’d was showing little interest in either Soviet dramaturgy or experimentation. In 1934, he staged one of his last, and most outstanding, productions, a version of Alexandre Dumas’ (1824-1895) novel *La Dame aux camélias*. The play was done without any of Meierkhol’d’s typical manipulation of the classical text, and thus represented a return of sorts to his pre-revolutionary roots in the Moscow Art Theater. The “sensuous atmosphere of

⁵³⁵ Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-garde*, 206.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

French impressionism” on stage was met with hostility from the critics.⁵³⁷ One detractor of Meierkhol’d’s unadulterated rendition of Dumas’ work wrote that the director had failed to “show the social and tragic clash of characters in its social context,” and that the production was “bare, a creative twilight in every sense.”⁵³⁸

In the years during which *Woe from Wit* was being revived by Meierkhol’d’s theater, the attacks on him grew more political-charged, and vicious. In an article in the December 17, 1937 issue of *Pravda* entitled “Alien Theater,” the author branded it a “class-alien theater,” writing that Meierkhol’d “distorted Soviet reality.”⁵³⁹ The newly formed State Committee on the Arts closed Meierkhol’d’s theater on January 3, 1938, the year that Stanislavskii died, calling it an “anti-national theater, alien to Soviet audiences and essentially hostile to them.”⁵⁴⁰ In Moscow, on June 1, 1939, Meierkhol’d addressed the first All-Union Congress of Directors. He declared that he had been “cruelly reproached” for his experiments and interpretations of Gogol, Griboedov, and Ostrovskii. Meierkhol’d acknowledged that there was truth to the charge that he had “distorted the classical heritage,” but he was puzzled by the accusation that he had forsaken content, that he was a “formalist.” Ten years earlier, he had argued that his experiments in the theater were scientific in nature and part of the “overall struggle,” that failures ultimately yielded valuable creative fruit. Now, Meierkhol’d told the Congress that “all mortals had the right to make mistakes,” and that he was “just as mortal as everyone else.” He claimed not to know what was meant by “anti-formalism” or socialist realism. Meierkhol’d said it was, however, clear that:

“What is now taking place in the theaters is frightful and pitiful. The wretched thing that pretends to the title of socialist realism has nothing in common with art. Where once there

⁵³⁷ Nikolai Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 344.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 362. The State Committee on the Arts was formed in 1936, it became the Ministry of Culture in 1953.

were the best theaters in the world, now everything is gloomily well-regulated, arithmetical, stupefying and murderous in its lack of talent. Is that your aim? If it is – you have done something monstrous! In hunting formalism, you have eliminated art!”⁵⁴¹

Having spoken the “awful truth about his love, and his hatred for those ruining his country,” Meierkhol’d was arrested by the NKVD the very next day. His wife, the actress Zinaida Reich, was found murdered in their apartment soon thereafter. Meierkhol’d, who helped stage plays with the Red Army theaters during the Civil War, who had been in charge of Narkompros’ Theater Department, who had led the charge on the theatrical front during “Theatrical October,” who had directed the Revolutionary Theater, remained in custody until 1940, when he was shot.

“When you chop wood, chips will fly”

The 1927 Agitprop conference on “theatrical questions” demonstrated that the government’s patience with “transitional ideological forms” was exhausted. Coinciding with the Bolsheviks’ call to “liquidate the class enemy in the countryside,” speeches at the conference declared a “class war in the theater.” One member of Agitprop described a “solid wall,” composed of members of the academic theaters and representatives of Narkompros, that was trying to “advance against censorship, against the Party’s interference in the theater, and even calling for freedom of speech in the theater and ‘art for art’s sake’.”⁵⁴² Lunacharskii was attacked for protecting “anti-Soviet” artists and inhibiting the censors. According to a certain Makarian of Agitprop, Repertkom was “unduly” influenced by Lunacharskii, manifested by the “mass of notes” from the Commissar suggesting how different plays should be staged. Makarian

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 363-64. Originally in Iurii Elagin, *Ukrashchenie iskusstv* (The Taming of the Arts) (Moscow: Russkii put’, 2002).

⁵⁴² S.N. Krylov, ed., *Puti razvitiia teatra: Sbornik* (The Paths of the Theater’s Development: An Anthology) (Moscow: Teakinopechat’, 1927), 164.

complained that even after Repertkom had reviewed a play and deleted offensive scenes, individual theaters always had the right to appeal to Lunacharskii, and the work was “usually permitted” in its entirety. Therefore, Makarian declared, it was necessary for Repertkom to “free itself from the self-sufficient influence of Narkompros and of [Lunacharskii] personally.”⁵⁴³

1927-28 also marked the end of NEP, the liquidation of independent enterprises, and the beginning of the collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization as part of the first five-year plan. At the same time, the Bolsheviks determined that theaters should concern themselves solely with propagating these aims, to the exclusion of any artistic considerations. At the Agitprop conference it was resolved that, in the future, more direct Party control over the theater needed to be exerted, where members of Komsomol and trade unions would assist in its “ideological reconstruction.”⁵⁴⁴ The conference also discussed the role of dramatic criticism, whose role one member of Agitprop prescribed as promoting plays that reflected the “spirit of the proletarian class struggle,” one that included the battle against “intensified attempts by agents of the new bourgeoisie to win over the stage.”⁵⁴⁵

Communism reduces everything to a material process, to aspects of the “means of production.” The theater, like all the arts, is thus construed as part of the “ideological superstructure,” entirely reliant on the economic base and deprived of any independent reality. The various “realisms” promulgated by Lunacharskii, Tairov, Meierkhol’d and others were now absolutely subsumed by the necessity of representing the “dialectical reality” of the class struggle, and the sole purpose of the theater was to help change, rather than reflect, social conditions. The elusive proletarian playwright came to replace the brilliant, charismatic directors of the Moscow Arts, Kamernyi, and Meierkhol’d Theaters, asserting his new authority according

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁴⁴ Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, 265.

⁵⁴⁵ Krylov, *Puti razvitiia teatra*, 447.

to the doctrine that “content determines form.” From the late 1920s onward, the charge of “formalism” was leveled at any production that distorted the mostly clumsy, artless works of the new Soviet playwrights, or altered the presumably immutable classics. Variability, however, from one performance or one epoch to another, is at the very core of the theater: form is its very essence.⁵⁴⁶

Lunacharskii – for all his devotion to Marx and Lenin, his vacillations, god-building, vanity, and long-windedness – consistently nurtured the spiritual, as opposed to the purely utilitarian, dimension of the theater. While valuing – and exploiting – the pedagogical function of the theater, or celebrating the theater as “a weapon,” he always recognized the fundamental autonomy of the spectator, the ultimate right and duty to judge for oneself the artistic or ideological merits of individual plays. Lunacharskii had less confidence in the changes in government policy toward education and the arts at the beginning of the first five-year plan, and Stalin’s government increasingly had less confidence in him. Though Lunacharskii himself, since the beginning of his tenure at Narkompros, was mostly preoccupied with the arts, the bulk of the Commissariat’s budget and mission was dedicated to education. In 1927, while the Soviet theater was under siege, economic organizers engaged in a parallel battle on the educational front, demanding the elimination of “theoretical and sociopolitical” instruction.⁵⁴⁷ Narkompros responded with a brochure entitled “The Struggle for Workers’ Cadres,” with a foreword by Lunacharskii, in which he reiterated some of the statements he had made earlier, at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December of 1927.

⁵⁴⁶ On the other hand, the rigidity of socialist realism and socialist ideology, “anti-formalism” in Meierkhöld’s phrase, represents a counterfeit substantiality. Marxism confidently reduces everything to the material, but matter can be endlessly reduced beyond invisibility into strange, sub-atomic worlds. The art of the theater is based on making invisible, universal, spiritual reality into a fleeting, material thing.

⁵⁴⁷ Irina Lunacharskaia, “Why did Commissar of Enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii Resign?”, trans. Kurt S. Schultz, *Russian Review*, Vol.51, No.3 (July, 1992), 320. Irina Lunacharskaia (1918-1991) was the daughter of Lunacharskii and his second wife, the actress Natal’ia Rozenel’-Lunacharskaia (1900-1962).

There, he had spoken against the “so-called ‘purely economic’, narrow approach” to education. He admitted that the questions of “natural resources, fuels, and so forth are of great importance.” But, Lunacharskii insisted, in its educational endeavors “Narkompros was preparing the most important ‘resource’ – people of varying qualifications.” He maintained that if the government deprived Narkompros of funds, if it enforced a lowering of the “cultural level of the worker youth,” then the Soviet Union would end up like “ancient Rus’, and be forced to call in the Varangians” as specialists. Lunacharskii argued that it was important, as the first five-year plan gathered steam, not to forget that “culture is a powerful weapon, dreaded by our enemies, and welcomed by our friends.”⁵⁴⁸

In an article in the June 2, 1928 issue of *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, Lunacharskii cautioned that some of the “futuristic fantasies” of industrial planners and educational reformers were “extraordinarily harmful.” He declared that, “we are on the verge of making a great mistake, for which any true Marxist would reproach us.”⁵⁴⁹ Later that year, a commission was convened by Aleksandr Dogadov (1888-1937), a member of the Party’s Central Committee, to examine the question of “the reform of workforce training and polytechnism,” where the new emphasis on “purely economic,” technical education was consolidated.⁵⁵⁰ Recognizing that he was on the losing side of the cultural debates, in the fall of 1928, Lunacharskii requested, but was denied, permission to go abroad. In a letter to his wife, Lunacharskii wrote that he had appealed to Stalin personally, and “he took my side, but said he was unable to get a majority. I suspect there is another reason: there are big changes coming to government officials, including Narkompros and perhaps even me.”⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 321-22.

⁵⁴⁹ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Trevozhnyi fakt” (A troublesome fact), *Komsmol'skaia Pravda*, June 2, 1928. Ibid., 323.

⁵⁵⁰ Dogadov was arrested and shot in 1937.

⁵⁵¹ Lunacharskaia, “Why did Commissar of Enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii Resign?”, 331.

Lunacharskii went from appealing to Stalin to provoking him. On January 21, 1929, as the Moscow Party Committee gathered in front of a group of journalists to mark the fifth anniversary of Lenin's death, he said that "no one person in the Party can replace Lenin. There is no second Lenin, and therefore we can only replace him with a collective."⁵⁵² That summer, Lunacharskii wrote to Stalin, protesting the decision to destroy the fourteenth-century Chudov Monastery located inside the Kremlin walls, and replace it with barracks for a new technical school. He argued that the monastery was an "unparalleled monument to ancient Russia." On July 4, 1929 Stalin responded publicly to Lunacharskii's request at a session of the Politburo in the form of resolution "to point out to Comrade Lunacharskii his un-communist behavior."⁵⁵³ That same day, at a meeting of the Collegium of Narkompros, the entire board of the Commissariat decided to resign, ostensibly in protest of the recent changes in the policy of workers' education. The resignations, including Lunacharskii's, were all accepted, with the exception of that of Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya.

In an article in the December 23, 1929 issue of *The Literary Gazette*, Lunacharskii observed that "times have changed, and so has the intelligentsia." The intelligentsia, he wrote, could be proud of its accomplishments, "before and after the revolution," in fact, they were the "genuine salt of the earth." He acknowledged that one attribute of the intelligentsia was its "exaggerated respect for personality, originality, and maximum independence." But now, Lunacharskii concluded, the "free personality stumbles on many sorts of obstacles of a material and spiritual character."⁵⁵⁴ In diary entries from 1930, Lunacharskii lamented that "I am poorly constructed for our savage times." He wrote that he was a revolutionary who had always worked

⁵⁵² Ibid., 330.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 334. The monastery was demolished in 1929.

⁵⁵⁴ A.V. Lunacharskii, "O sud'be, nasilii, i svobode" (On fate, force, and freedom), *Literaturnaia gazeta*, December 23, 1939. Ibid., 339-40.

for a “just culture. But when you chop wood, chips will fly.” Lunacharskii understood that without a revolution, it would have been impossible to “improve this terrible society. But at what price is victory?” He confessed that what he had done personally was necessary, but nonetheless “disagreeable. I must answer for everything I have done.”⁵⁵⁵

Although Lunacharskii suffered from a variety of physical ailments, including congestive heart failure, after his departure from Narkompros he continued to write essays and articles, and give speeches.⁵⁵⁶ He also traveled abroad and, after the Soviet Academy of Sciences made Lunacharskii one of its members in February of 1930, that summer he participated in a philosophy seminar in Oxford. In April of 1932, Lunacharskii was part of the Soviet delegation to a disarmament conference in Geneva, and that summer took part in a history symposium in The Hague, before going to Germany for medical treatment. In 1933, he published an article on “Baruch Spinoza and the Bourgeoisie” in the journal *New World*, and at the second plenum of the Committee of Soviet Writers in February, 1933, Lunacharskii gave a lecture “On Socialist Realism.” In August, 1933, Stalin appointed Lunacharskii ambassador to Spain in 1933. After

⁵⁵⁵ Lunacharskaia, “Why did Commissar of Enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii Resign?”, 334.

⁵⁵⁶ In her memoirs, Lunacharskii’s wife recalls how the close friends of the seriously ill – and soon to be dead – former Commissar came to the couple’s home to urge him to put himself in the care of a certain Dr. N. Kozakov, doctor to many high-level apparatchiks and military officers, and a supposed miracle worker. Lunacharskii’s friends, including Commissar of Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov (1876-1951), all testified to Kozakov’s “medical craftsmanship.” His technique, *lizototerapia*, involved the treatment/manipulation of glandular – particularly the sex glands – secretions. Kozakov’s devotees in the upper echelons of the Soviet government all swore by his methods, and the doctor was a “figure beyond the reproach of normal scientific criticism.” Though the regular attending physicians did not want Kozakov anywhere near their patient, Lunacharskii took his friends’ recommendations and *lizototerapia* became part of his treatment. After Lunacharskii’s condition failed to improve, and in fact took a turn for the worse, Kozakov was exposed as a fraud. Ia. L. Rapoport, “O vrache N.N. Kozakove neudachno lechivshem Lunacharskogo” (On Dr. N.N. Kozakov unsuccessfully treating Lunacharskii), under “Issledovaniia”, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/issledovaniia/o-vrache-n-n-kozakove-neudachno-lechivshem-lunacharskogo> [accessed October 14, 2014]. The “hero” of Bulgakov’s novella *Heart of a Dog*, Dr. Preobrazhenskii (Doctor Transformer) is a doctor who, during NEP, offers prosperous clients rejuvenation treatments using monkey glands, in order to subsidize more sinister experiments.

spending time at a clinic in Paris that fall, Lunacharskii died on December 26, 1933 in Menton, in southern France, on his way to his post in Madrid.⁵⁵⁷

In concluding remarks at the 1927 Agitprop conference, Lunacharskii had argued that it was very important that “our general political line be confirmed and unified, that there be less discord and fuss over the theater, that all our social pressure should be brought to bear on it.” Doing so, Lunacharskii hoped, would guarantee “future successes,” though not in the “artistic or formal” realms, where the theater had already gone “to the limit.” Instead, he declared that the theaters needed to progress in an ideological sense, in terms of making their repertoire “contemporary.”⁵⁵⁸ In the ten years since the Revolution, until the end of the 1920s, the “general political line” had been neither confirmed nor unified. During the USSR’s first decade, this “line” could be as broad and twisting as the path to socialism, as arbitrary and relative as the notion of the “contemporary.”

As my thesis has shown, the same was true in the theater. In the 1920 debate over *The Dawns*, while Meierkhol’d was congratulated for his revolutionary enthusiasm, he was also chastised for the oddly Spartan extravagance and the incomprehensibility of his production, staged in haste and unfathomable to Russia’s new worker-peasant masters. At the public debates over *The Dawns*, Meierkhol’d’s eccentricities and excesses were not denounced as deviant even

⁵⁵⁷ The Soviet political cartoonist Boris Efimov (1899-2008) recalls visiting Lunacharskii in Paris in the company of the writer Evgenii Petrov (1902-1942). Efimov writes that Lunacharskii was very ill and spoke with great difficulty, “often gasping for breath.” Instead of a conversation, however, Efimov and Petrov mostly listened to Lunacharskii, who grew “more animated and excited, and going on a brilliant half-hour monologue.” Lunacharskii recounted how, over the years, he had written a large number of books, including many plays and other works that were diversions from his “propagandistic-administrative duties.” In fact, in Paris he was currently writing an introduction to a Russian translation of the collected works of Marcel Proust. As a result of his illness, Lunacharskii said that he had “become completely convinced that the words of Dostoevskii: ‘A sick person is closest of all to his soul’ were absolutely not true. On the contrary, he concluded, “a sick person is closest of all to his body.”

⁵⁵⁸ A.V. Lunacharskii, “Itogi teatral’nogo stroitel’stva i zadachi partii v oblasti teatral’noi politike” (Summaries of theatrical construction and the tasks of the Party in the area of theatrical policy) Krylov, *Puti razvitiia teatra*, 41.

as charges – and counter-charges – of being “counterrevolutionary” or “bourgeois” were exchanged by the participants.

In those early, Civil War days, while a socialist state was the commonly recognized goal, there was no unanimity on who would build it, or how. Similarly, in the arts during this period, Meierkhol'd and other “futurists” provocatively transformed the same classics that Lunacharskii proclaimed as the foundation of an incipient proletarian culture. The proletarian, socialist theater was both a means and an end, while the new, Soviet playwright tasked with constructing it was mostly a mirage. Whereas Meierkhol'd and Tairov had turned to non-Russian socialist playwrights for their material in 1920 and 1924, the promotion of Bulgakov as a native, Soviet author backfired, notwithstanding the ultimate success of *Days of the Turbins*. Lunacharskii, and others, had consistently asserted that revolutionary-proletarian consciousness could only be induced by means of theater that met a certain specified – albeit murkily – standard of artistry. But, by the end of the 1920s, the Bolsheviks were impatient with “intermediate” ideological and cultural forms, and determined that brute force was the path to political and artistic conformity. The allegation of “formalism,” indicated an abnormal, criminal overindulgence in purely aesthetic practices. Whatever tension had existed between the political and artistic realms during the 1920s collapsed when the Party line, confirmed and united under Stalin, assimilated every sphere of human activity. My thesis has demonstrated, in great detail, the real freedom theaters had to experiment creatively in the first decade after the revolution, even as this relative autonomy was contested or adjudicated.

Confronted with multiple, often irreconcilable, political and artistic interests during his tenure at Narkompros between 1917 and 1929, Lunacharskii himself reflected their contradictions and prevarications; he was the personification of a still blurry “general line.” I set

out, in the introduction to my thesis, to scrutinize and challenge the conventional notion of Lunacharskii as a figure of “relative toleration and moderation.” What I have shown, through his contributions to various public debates over individual plays, or participation at semi-official gatherings concerned with “theatrical issues,” is that Lunacharskii’s capacity for taking principled, humane positions on certain issues – the value of the classical repertoire, the notion of an autonomous, enlightened audience, for example – was genuine, consistent, and clear. On the other hand, these core beliefs were overridden by political instincts that rendered Lunacharskii subject to useful manipulation by himself – and others. Ultimately, however, the utility of this malleability, along with his celebrated erudition, were exhausted, and as Lunacharskii confided to his diary in 1930, “I am not wanted now.”⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁹ I. Lunacharskaia, “Why did Commissar of Enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii Resign?”, 335.

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[A note on transliterations: I use the Library of Congress System of Transliteration, thus “Lunacharskii”; others do not, and I’ve rendered the titles here in their original form.]

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