

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

RUSSIAN DRAMA

OVERVIEW

There is no record of dramatic works in Early Russian literature. Starting from the 15th century, Russian travelers began to observe some theatrical works in the West, but there was no attempt to introduce them to Russia and Russian playwrights' experience was confined to translation and adaptation of neoclassical tragedy and Molièrean comedy. Throughout the 18th century Russian theaters' repertoire continued to include performances of translated or adapted foreign plays. The 19th century witnessed the appearance of Russian drama's first native masterpieces, specifically with the appearance of the romantic historical drama. As a result of the end of the monopoly of the imperial theaters, the domestic repertoire began to grow. During the Soviet era the repertoire of the theaters still largely relied on foreign plays, but did stage some Soviet propaganda plays. Soviet playwrights also contributed their share to the Soviet war effort and portrayed the heroism of simple Russian people during WWII. However, with the Thaw, the injection of some liberal tendencies into the Soviet system showed its effect and plays began to manifest a more honest picture of Soviet reality. In the *Glasnost* era playwrights were freed from thematic restrictions, and were able to return to the forbidden avant-garde traditions of the 1920s and portray the largely neglected history of the country.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

17th century: It was not until the 17th century, with the introduction of literary culture, that the concept of a dramatic repertoire became known in Russia. Symeon Polotsky became the first dramatist in the history of Muscovy with his comedy on the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* printed in Moscow in 1685. The text of Symeon's comedy was in Russo-Slavonic and reprinted four times. In the Kievan school, on the other hand, the main dialogue in drama was in Latin or Slavonic.

Dimitry Tuptalo, who established the first Orthodox seminary in Muscovy, also opened the school of drama where his first drama *The Repentant Sinner* was performed in the 18th century. At this century the school drama was also given at other institutions, like the Slavonic-Greco-Latin Academy in Moscow.

In the 17th century a large number of works were translated from western languages. The degree of Western influence grew dramatically with the reforms of Peter I. One result of this increased contact with Western Europe was the attempt to adapt the literary models of Western Europe to Russian writing. German pastor Johann Gottfried Gregory, who later became a playwright in Moscow, wrote his play *The Action of Artaxerxes* in German, and it was then translated into Russian. After his death, Georg Hübner staged his *Bayazed and Tamerlane*, and then Stefan Chizhinsky wrote his *David and Goliath* and *Bacchus and Venus*; both of these works were subsequently lost.

18th century: In 1702 a public theater was established in Red Square by order of Peter the Great. When completed, a German theater troupe came to put on performances. Initially the performances were in German, but by 1705 plays were being translated into Russian and performed. Most of these plays were translations of German and Dutch comedies, or poor adaptations of plays such as Molière's *Amphitryon* and *Le Médecin malgré lui*. Later, both the Moscow Academy and the Moscow Medical School would stage dramas. More surprising, perhaps, was the establishment of a theater in Rostov by its bishop, Dimitrii, which he then used for performances of plays he wrote.

In 1707 Natalya Alekseevna, daughter Tsar Alexis I, had her own court theater and wrote plays herself which were dramatized versions of saints' lives and a play titled *The Tale of Otto, Roman Emperor*.

It was Alexander Sumarokov who was considered the founder of Russian drama, blending Russian themes with European dramatic forms in his works. Sumarokov was appointed as the first director of the Russian theater in 1756 by Elizabeth, and directed Russia's first professional public theater between 1756 – 1761; his works would become the basis of the theater's repertoire. His later works included comedies such as *The Troublesome Girl*, *The Imaginary Cuckold*, and *The Mother as Rival of Her Daughter*; and such tragedies as *Mstislav* and *Dimitry the Pretender*. This last work was ostensibly a tale about a despotic ruler, and has often been interpreted as a criticism of papal power. However, its real significance was as an indirect criticism of Catherine the Great's arbitrary use of power, while at the same time defending legitimate monarchy. *Dimitry the Pretender* was thus the beginning of a long tradition of theater as political criticism. In addition, Sumarokov's plays *The Guardian* and *Khorev* were regarded as the first political comedy and tragedy in Russia.

Later, other prominent dramatists copied the classicist tradition. Lomonosov, on the order of Elizabeth, wrote two plays for her theater: *Tamira and Selim* and *Demophon*. Mikhail Kheraskov with his three-act tragedy *The Nun of Venice* followed the classicist canon with a greater national awareness. Yakov Knyazhnin adapted several plays by Metastasio, Racine, and Voltaire for the Russian stage and wrote the tragedies *Rosslav* and *Vadim of Novgorod*. Vladislav Ozerov was the last major tragic dramatist in the classicist tradition. His first play *Yaropolk and Oleg* was modelled on the style of Knyazhnin, and he scored his greatest success with his patriotic tragedy *Dimitry Donskoy*.

The major playwright of Catherine the Great's era was Denis Fonvizin. Two of his most famous plays were the neo-classical *The Minor* and *The Brigadier*. Both were satires of the values of the age and attempted to encourage more moral conduct, however *The Brigadier* takes particular aim at the ignorance and moral laxity of the upper classes. Despite the fact that the monarchy often took issue with Fonvizin's works, Catherine the Great was an admirer of them.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Golden Age: The first half of the 19th century witnessed the appearance of Russian drama's first masterpieces. Among these works was Alexander Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, an old-fashioned classicist comedy which was first staged in 1831 and published in 1833 depicting Moscow society of about 1820.

Nikolay Gogol's first attempt at drama was *Order of Vladimir, Third Class*. His next work, *Government Inspector*, was a satirical comedy that subtly criticized the state of the Russian Empire through its depiction of the inefficiency and corruption of government officials in a minor provincial town.

The tradition of Russian historical drama developed from Russian romantic drama, despite the fact that Russian romantic drama's Western roots are even more obvious than those of romantic fiction. Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, a poetic, yet somewhat realistic depiction of this period of Russian history. Among the most prominent playwrights of Russian historical drama in the first half of the 19th century were Nikolay Polevoy and Nestor Kukolnik. Aleksy Khomyakov, known for his Slavophile sentiments, wrote two historical dramas which were staged for only a short time, *The False Dmitry* and *Ermak*.

In 1842 the romantic writer Mikhail Lermontov made his mark on the history of Russian drama when his play *A Masked Ball* was staged. There was a strong reaction by officials to its uncompromising depiction of the moral corruption of the Russian upper classes which resulted in the play being censored. It was not until 1862 that Lermontov's work was presented in its entirety.

However, Russian theater continued to thrive in the 19th century although much of what was performed was still of foreign origin. The plays by Alexandr Ostrovsky which appeared around the middle of the century would inspire a new generation of performers. His series of plays on merchant life highlighted the negative qualities of merchants as cheats, tyrannical bosses and fathers, and narrow-minded philistines. Among his well-known plays are *The Bankrupt* (or with its later title *It's a Family Affair-We'll Settle It Ourselves*), *A Poor Bride*, *A Lucrative Position* and *Lumber*.

Historical drama was also written by Count Aleksey Tolstoy. His main importance came from his dramatic trilogy, *The Death of Ivan the Terrible*, *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich* and *Tsar Boris*.

Silver Age: Although many plays staged at many theaters were still foreign, the domestic repertoire was also growing as a result of the end of the imperial theaters' monopoly. Lev Tolstoy was an important figure in the drama of later part of the 19th century whose reputation as a major playwright comes primarily from three works. The first two, *The First Distiller* and *The Power of Darkness* were short, realistic morality plays which premiered in Saint Petersburg in 1886. The third, *The Fruits of Enlightenment*, a satirical comedy that targeted the educated elite, was performed in Moscow in 1892.

Russian drama began to take new directions and gain international recognition with the plays of the short story writer Anton Chekhov. In his plays Chekhov deliberately broke with and ridiculed the dramatic conventions of the classic theater that had been in use since the 18th century and which were thought to be essential for a well written play. His four best-known dramas were all written after a period of intense short story writing. The first, *The Seagull*, employed both modernist and symbolist elements, while the other three – *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* - met with negative criticism for being plotless and actionless, and were perceived as unorthodox.

Maxim Gorky used the social, political and historical issues of his time as the subject matter for his dramas. His first works, *The Petty Bourgeois* and *The Philistines* are generally regarded as promising, but unpolished efforts. *The Lower Depths* is widely viewed as the finest of Gorky's plays. Gorky wrote a total of fifteen plays, yet none of them achieved any commercial success.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the early 20th century, there was a blossoming of theatrical performances as official control of the arts relaxed. A number of private theaters appeared. One of them was Alexander Tairov's Chamber (Kamerny) Theater that opened its doors in 1914 after the end of the government's theater monopoly in 1882. In Tairov's theater the repertoire was largely composed of foreign plays, but some Soviet propaganda plays were also staged.

Shortly after the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917 they issued a decree of the Soviet of People's Commissars on 9 November 1917 that placed all the theaters under the authority of the arts section of the State Commission for Education, and all served as *agitprop* (agitation and propaganda) theater. So the Soviet theatre became a *director's theatre*, but not a *writer's theatre*. It was utilized to do what has been ordered rather than provide only entertainment, and used as propaganda and communication agent.

During the era of Stalin Russian theater continued to be primarily a propaganda tool, and failed to keep up with the development seen in other literary genres. The majority of works performed in Soviet theaters continued to be foreign or pre-revolutionary dramas.

During the 1930s and 1940s Socialist Realism was the predominant style for drama. Mayakovsky's plays during this period *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* were anti-utopian satires written for Meyerhold's theater. Both works move from portrayals of a subversive, chaotic present during the NEP era, to a future that is at times ideally perfect, and at other times regulated and controlled.

Another classic example of this genre is *Fear* by Alexander Afinogenov with a happy ending for the Communist hero. While the play incorporates the good-to-better development typical of Socialist Realist works, it is clear that complex situations from real life are ignored in the plot in favor of ideology. Other examples of this type of drama are *Aristocrats* and *Kremlin Chimes* by Nikolay Pogodin.

When the Soviets began preparing for WWII, the state turned its attention to the previously condemned Russian past, and to increase patriotism, they used the Russian tsars, princes, military leaders and religion. Soviet playwrights contributed their share to the Soviet war effort. Afinogenov's *On the Eve*, Leonov's

Invasion and *Lyonushka*, and Simonov's *Russian People* all extolled the courage of ordinary Russians, but their plots were all predictable and melodramatic.

After the war, both Soviet literature and drama failed to produce any works worthy of notice. Most dramas from the period between the end of the war and Stalin's death were very cautious efforts to dramatize the party line of the day.

Khrushchev's Thaw period (1956-1964) saw a dramatic change in the official attitude to the theater. Playwrights were suddenly free to portray both Russian history and life in the Soviet Union in a more realistic way. Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins* adapted from his novel *The White Guard*. *The Days of the Turbins*, took the struggle between the Bolsheviks and the Whites as its subject matter, and portrays the upheaval of the Civil War through its impact on a Kievan family. Other notable dramatists from this period are Leonid Zorin, Alexander Shtein, Viktor Rozov and Alexey Arbuzov. Abuse of power and corrupt party officials were the focus of both Zorin's *The Guests* and Shtein's *A Personal Matter*. Unsurprisingly, neither play was received warmly by the authorities.

The period of the Thaw saw a revival of experimental theater, and innovations in theater of the absurd from Europe were enthusiastically incorporated into the works of Russian playwrights. The plays *Christmas at Ivanov's* by Alexander Vvedensky and *Elizaveta Bam* by Daniil Kharms are perhaps the most representative of this brief trend. Another important playwright of the period was Viktor Slavkin with his famous play *A Young Man's Grown-Up Daughter*.

Much like the period of Khrushchev's Thaw, the Glasnost era witnessed a return to the avant-garde in Russian theater and dramas that explored periods of Russian history that had previously been off limits. Mikhail Shatrov's plays *The Sixth of July* and *The Bolsheviks* were centered on Lenin, while the Third Youth League Congress was the subject of *Blue Horses on the Red Grass*. For the first time in Russian drama Trotsky and Bukharin, both officially eliminated in Soviet history books, appeared in Shatrov's *The Dictatorship of Conscience*. Its performance in 1985 marked a clear break with previous state policy towards the theater.

During the 1990s Nikolay Kolyada and Roman Viktyuk through both their plays and their support for new playwrights made significant contributions to the development of Russian drama. They were able not only to revive the traditions of avant garde theater, but to then move beyond them. However, one of the major challenges facing the Russian theater in this period was the adaptation to commercialization, a process which took a number of years. New trends and developments in Russian drama could only emerge after this transition had been completed.

Discussion/Questions

1. Why did Pushkin's drama *Boris Godunov* play an important role in the history of Russian literature?
2. What were the key differences between Socialist Realism and Avant-Garde? Why did the playwrights of the Glasnost' period want to reconnect to interrupted avant-garde traditions?
3. How did the end of the monopoly instituted by the imperial theaters influence the development of playwriting?

Reading

- 1-Beumers, B., "Drama and Theatre", *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko & Marina Balina, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp.215-235.
- 2- Terras, V., *A History of Russian Literature*, Yale University Press, 1991.
- 3- Kahn, A., et al., *A History of Russian Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2018.
- 4- Moser, C.A., *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- 5- Russell, R., *Russian Drama of the Revolutionary Period*, MacMillan Press, 1988.
- 6- *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Russian Literature*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- 7- Brody, E.C., "Pushkin's "Boris Godunov": The First Modern Russian Historical Drama", *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (Oct., 1977), pp. 857-875.
- 8- Gudzy, N.K., *History of Early Russian Literature*, The MacMillan Company, 1949.

9- *An Introduction to Russian Language and Literature*, Companion to Russian Studies 2, Editors: Robert Auty & Dimitry Obolensky, Cambridge University Press, 1977, Ch. 8, 9, 10.