

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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RUSSIAN THEATER

Overview Until the 11th century the early Russian people had primitive forms of entertainment, mostly ritualistic ceremonies, pagan shows with dramatic recitations of fables, tales and proverbs, and singing and dances, performed by *skomorokhi*, traveling minstrels. While in the past the rigid rules of the Orthodox Church made the development of a truly national theater impossible, and theaters suffered partial destruction and the persecution of performers, during the Soviet period theaters had to conform to the rigid frames of ideological dictatorship.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Pagan ceremonies in which tales, proverbs and fables were recited, together with the songs and dances of itinerant jesters, known as *skomorokhi*, laid the foundation for the development of Russian theater.

POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

Skomorokhi: The Skomorokhi, based on Byzantine models, appeared around the middle of the 11th century in Kievan Rus and were performers who played musical instruments, sang, danced and even composed the scores for their performances.

The *skomorokhi* were not universally popular in Kievan Rus, and were described in pejorative terms in the *Primary Chronicle*. Both the ruling authorities and the Orthodox Church viewed the *skomorokhi* as being in league with the devil, and persecuted them for maintaining what they regarded as pagan traditions.

A major reason for the *skomorokhi*'s unpopularity with both the secular and religious leaders was the nature of their art. The *skomorokhi*'s performances were aimed at ordinary people, and often were in opposition to those in power. As a result the clergy and feudal rulers viewed the *skomorokhi* as useless to society at the very least, and politically and religiously dangerous at the very worst.

Both civil and religious leaders subjected the *skomorokhi* to particularly intense persecution during the period of Mongol rule, a period which also coincided with the Orthodox Church's strong advocacy of asceticism.

The *skomorokhi*'s performances continued to be viewed with suspicion during the time of Ivan IV; it was believed that they undermined the authority and interest of the civil and religious leaders. There were even claims that their practices were somehow a form of devilry from the Greeks.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

16th century: At this time the Orthodox Church was hostile to any kind of performances and allowed only plays that had religious content. Performances were given in city squares or in the streets; spectators were encouraged to take part in them. Occasionally, in the 16th– 17th centuries, groups of *skomorokhi* would join together to form a *vataga* (large group) and put on a performance.

17th century: The *skomorokhi*'s performances were banned by Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich in the mid-17th century for being blasphemous; nonetheless, popular celebrations remained a venue for occasional performances. A number of dramatic performances were given in the royal court in 1640 and 1650. An English merchant, John Hebdon, was ordered to hire German puppeteers in large numbers to perform in Russia in 1660. Significant changes in both Russian theater and Russian society would result from the introduction of Western theater during the reign of Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich. Court theatrical performances

continued until Alexis' death in 1676, after which they were stopped under pressure of the Patriarch Joachim.

It was not until the 17th century, with the introduction of literary culture, that the concept of a dramatic repertoire became known in Russia. In the 17th century the large number of works translated from western languages and the founding of Russia's first theater were clear indications of Western influence. The degree of this 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.

18th century: The 18th century witnessed the end of the *skomorokh*'s performances, but some aspects of their art survived in the *rayok* (humorous talk shows) and *balagan* (puppet theater). The puppet shows had a long existence, and shows were put on in city and market squares as well as at fairs. Performances were aimed at the lowest classes, with jokes and plot lines being rather bawdy.

A public theater was built in Red Square in 1702 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 *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, Dmitrii, which he then used for performances of plays he wrote.

It was not until the latter half of the 18th century that the theater truly became an institution in Russia. The establishment of St. Petersburg's Alexandrinskiy Theater on August 30, 1756 is often taken as the starting point of Russian professional theater. A major innovation was the merging of two theatrical groups – aristocratic students from the Cadet School and a troupe of professional actors from the theater founded by Fedor Volkov – and then giving performances for the public at large. At the same time uniquely Russian drama was emerging in the works of the playwright Alexander Sumarokov. His tragedy, *Khorev*, is regarded as the first Russian drama which depicts the relationship between the monarch and the nobles and includes warnings against tyranny, excessive favoritism, and arbitrary disgrace, and was even performed for the Empress Elizabeth.

Considered the founder of Russian drama, Alexander Sumarokov blended 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 *The False Demetrius*. This last work is ostensibly a tale about a despotic ruler, and has often been interpreted as a criticism of papal power. However, its real significance is as an indirect criticism of Catherine the Great's arbitrary use of power, while at the same time defending legitimate monarchy. *The False Demetrius* is thus the beginning of a long tradition of theater as political criticism. In addition, Sumarokov's plays *The Guardian* and *Khorev* are regarded as the first political comedy and tragedy in Russia.

Catherine the Great, fearful of importation of liberal Western European thought, introduced a state monopoly on the Moscow and Petersburg theaters, and the Ministry of Interior supervised actors' registration as members of the civil service, applied strict censorship on the repertoire of the theaters in Moscow and Petersburg, and independent entrepreneurs were allowed to operate only under police supervision.

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

In 1819, the Ministry of the Interior had taken control over theatrical censorship; the severity of its censorship would only increase over time and expand outside of the theaters. In some cases, periodicals which made negative comments about actors found themselves the target of the Ministry's displeasure – since actors were civil servants, criticizing them was tantamount to criticizing their employer, the state. However, the effect official censorship was felt most keenly in the theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow, whose creativity was stifled by government guidelines. Beyond St. Petersburg and Moscow, the situation was slightly better, as independent theaters could put on performances, but still under the watchful eye of the police.

The roles of St. Petersburg and Moscow as the Russia's theatrical centers grew in the 19th century as new theaters were founded. In Moscow in 1824 the Maly (Small) Theater was established, followed in 1825 by the Bolshoi (Big), which was a replacement for the Peter's Theater which had burned down. In 1832 the Alexandrinsky Drama Theater opened in St. Petersburg, and in 1898 the MAT (Moscow Art Theater) established by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky opened in Moscow which later renamed the Gorky Moscow Art Theater in 1932.

The MAT proved to be the most influential with their productions of the last four plays written by Chekhov which brought them great fame, and the theater would go on to profoundly influence theater in Russia. Combining their talents, playwright Nemirovich-Danchenko and actor-director Stanislavsky adopted Wagner's approach to play production as high art.

Directors would now determine how a drama would be staged, as well as their atmosphere and style – an innovation in Russian theater. The MAT was saved from financial ruin in its initial season by its sixth production, *The Seagull* by Chekhov which opened on December 17, 1898. Its first performance two years earlier in St. Petersburg had been a disaster, and Chekhov was understandably hesitant to give his permission for a second production of his play. However, Nemirovich-Danchenko's persistent pleading paid off and Chekhov was more than rewarded by the reception his play received from its second production. The following year in 1899 the MAT staged *Uncle Vanya*, and Chekhov wrote his two last plays, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* with the MAT in mind.

The first half of the 19th century also witnessed the appearance of Russian drama's first masterpieces. Among these works were *Inspector* by Nikolay Gogol, and Alexander Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*. The plays by Alexander 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.

After the emancipation of Russian serfs in 1861, and the abolition of the imperial monopoly during Alexander II gave impetus to the people's theater movement which was promoted by the *Narodniks* (populists). The theater now began to serve less as a leisure activity than as an educational tool.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

At the beginning of the 20th century there were only six Imperial theaters in Russia administered by the Directorate of Imperial Theaters, and all explicitly served Tsarist propaganda purposes. However, after the first revolution of 1905, the government was gradually easing restrictions on theaters. Theaters were not only sponsored by the Imperial government, there were also intellectuals who organized theaters for peasants and workers throughout the country, and a few touring troupes and eventually-amateur theaters organized performances for peasants and workers. In addition to the Tsarist government, in many provinces local *zemstva* (local administration) and factory-owners sponsored popular theaters. Theaters began to stage controversial and almost overtly political plays.

In 1909 a commission on village theater was set up under the protection of the Moscow Society of People's Universities as *The Section to Aid in the Establishment of Rural, Factory, and School Theaters*, and in 1915 the Section was joined by the *Russian Theater Society* (RTO). 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 their doors in 1914 after the end of the government's theater monopoly in 1882.

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. The Soviets also opened a theater section (TEO) to monitor the theaters, and appointed Meyerhold as director in 1920, its repertoire was selected by the poet Alexander Blok, and the directing section was run by Evgeny Vakhtangov and Stanislavsky's friends.

Lenin, on 26 August 1919, signed a decree centralizing all the finances and nationalizing all theatrical property. They regularly distributed free tickets to the ordinary people to promote popular education, changing the predominantly urban character of earlier theater.

An experimental artistic institution, the Proletkult was founded in September 1917 by Alexander Bogdanov during the course of the war. Its stated goals were a total break with the bourgeois past, radically modifying existing artistic forms, rejecting all existing professional theater and promoting a new, so-called proletarian culture. However, the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party approved a decree on 1 December 1920 which condemned both the institution as a duplication of services that competed with existing bureaucratic systems, like Narkompros, and its hostile idealist philosophy. As a result, Proletkult was integrated into Narkompros.

The full-scale Bolshevik offensive against the theater began during Stalin when all theaters were accused of having purely bourgeois, alien and hostile ideology. For the Soviets the theater should serve as a propaganda tool of Party's orthodox catch-phrases. The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party passed a resolution on April 23, 1932, the so-called *On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations*. There was a terror of persecution and intimidation of art experts and players, many of whom lost their positions, and theaters were closed.

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.

After the death of Stalin, the attitude towards theaters was suddenly changed with Khrushchev's Thaw period (1956-1964). Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech presented at the 20th Party congress in 1956 introduced more freedom and humanism in the theater. During Khrushchev's period, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins*, and *Flight*, the dramatisation of his novel *The Master and Margarita* were staged; and three directors, Georgii Tovstonogov at the Gorky Theater in Leningrad; Anatolii Efros and Iuriy Liubimov at the Malaia Bronnaia and Taganka theaters in Moscow directed outstanding plays.

Under Brezhnev, on the other hand, the majority of theaters favored safe plays, and, as a result, theaters played to half-empty houses, continuing to survive due to financial support from the Ministry of Culture.

Gorbachev's new and more liberal approach to the arts showed its effects, and there was a 50% increase in the number of theaters in Moscow in only two years (1986-1988). There were also a number of *Palaces of Culture* (club-houses attached to the factories), which provided auditoria for amateur and semi-professional groups to perform. The control of theaters was removed from the Ministry of Culture and handed over to the independent *Union of Theater Workers* established in 1986 which aimed at freeing all theaters from the Ministry's strict control, allowing theater companies to handle their own affairs, effectively abolishing censorship.

Discussion/Questions

- 1- Discuss the *skomorokhi* and their importance in the history of Russian theater.
- 2- Why was theater used as a weapon during Stalin's time?
- 3- Why did the theaters served as *agitprop* theater during the Soviet Union? Why did the artists' political inclinations compel them to subordinate art to ideology?

4- What were the motives behind the hostility of the Soviet government toward the creative theaters? What distinguishes the Soviet attitude from the Tsarist attitude against theater?

Reading

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