

RUSSIAN THEATRE

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Introduction

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. 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 scored for their performances.

The *Skomorokhi* were not universally popular in Kievan Rus; they are 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 saw 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.

The high point of the *Skomorokhi* was the period of the 15th – 17th century. 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.

The *Skomorokhi*'s performances were banned by Tsar Alexei 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 Alexei Mikhailovich.

The 18th century witnessed the end of the *Skomorokhi*'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 put on shows 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.

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. An early example of this process can be seen in the plays of A.P. Sumarokov. Considered the founder of Russian drama, Sumarokov blended Russian themes with European dramatic forms in his works.

A public theater was built on 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 A. Sumarokov. His tragedy, *Khorev*, is regarded as the first Russian drama and was even performed for the Empress Elizabeth. Sumarokov would direct Russia's first professional public theater between 1756 – 1761, and his works would also 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.

Based on the quality of his satirical comedies, Fonvizin is generally regarded as the pre-eminent playwright in 18th century Russia. 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.

The theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow were later combined to form a state bureaucracy, as a means to control forms of expression that Catherine the Great regarded as dangerous. By 1827 this bureaucracy had become a monopoly which registered actors as civil servants, and which placed as much importance on protocol as it did on art. Earlier, 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 of 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.

The first half of the 19th century also witnessed the appearance of the Russian drama's first masterpieces. Among these works were *Inspector* by Gogol, and Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*. The plays by Ostrovsky which appeared around the middle of the century would inspire a new generation of performers.

In the early 20th century there was a blossoming of theatrical performances as official control of the arts relaxed. A number of private theaters, among them the Moscow Art Theater, the Korsh Theater, and Alexander Tairov's Chamber Theater opened their doors after the end of the government's theater monopoly in 1882.

Of these newly established theaters, the Moscow Art Theater, established by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1898, proved to be the most influential. Their productions of the last four plays written by Chekhov 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 Moscow Art Theater 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 Moscow Art Theater staged *Uncle Vanya*, and Chekhov wrote his two last plays, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* with the Moscow Art Theater in mind. In 1902 the theater put on the play *Lower Depths* by Maksim Gorky.

Reading Assignments:

Malnick, B., The Origin and Early History of the Theatre in Russia, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 19, No. 53/54, The Slavonic Year-Book (1939 - 1940), pp. 203-227

The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture, Edited by Nicholas Rzhevsky, Cambridge University Press, 1998, Ch. 11.

Senelick, L., Historical Dictionary of Russian Theater, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007.

Figes, O., Natasha's Dance, A Cultural History of Russia, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2004.

Varneke, B.V., History of the Russian Theatre, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1951.

A History of Russian Theatre, Edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, Cambridge University Press, 1999, Ch.1.

Russian internet sources: Sumarokov, <http://az.lib.ru/cgi-bin/seek>

Questions

Discuss about the Skomorokhi and their importance in the history of Russian theatre.

Read Sumarokov's *The False Demetrius (Dimitrii Samozvanets)* and discuss why the play is considered the beginning of the tradition of political criticism in Russian literature.

Compare Sumarokov's and Fonvizin's conception of the virtuous ruler and their treatment of this subject in *The False Demetrius (Dimitrii Samozvanets)* and *The Minor (Nedorosl)* respectively.

Read Chekhov's *The Seagull (Chayka)*. What does the seagull symbolize in his play? Why did he name his play *The Seagull*? Can we consider the play a comedy?