

## Preface

The Soviet theater may be the best documented in history. With the possible exception of France, no other government devoted so much of its attention to theatrical matters and generated so much paper in that regard. The administration and its bureaucracies produced legislation, transactions, and red tape. In addition, Russian artists were “people of the word.” Following the example of the Moscow Art Theater, directors and companies preserved records of rehearsals, stage plans, sketches for designs, photographs, every scrap of paper associated with a production. A lively theatrical press proliferated editorials, reviews, roundtables, profiles, character studies, and surveys. In a society in which any public utterance might be subjected to close scrutiny by the powers-that-be, individuals expressed themselves privately in letters, diaries, journals, and personal memoirs. At times it seems as if almost every Soviet citizen concealed a written testament to his individuality in the face of enforced conformity.

The oft-quoted remark in Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* that “manuscripts do not burn” looks less paradoxical in view of the Russian reluctance to destroy documents. Unlike the Nazis, the Soviet political police seldom conducted conflagrations of written or published material. A sheaf of papers might be confiscated, but most usually, it was preserved in the government archives, either as collateral evidence or in case its author might return to favor. Occasionally, material in danger of such confiscation might be privately secreted away. The most famous case of this is the Meyerhold archive. In 1939, a few days before Meyerhold’s arrest, his wife, herself about to be murdered, entrusted the archive to Sergey Eisenstein, who hid it in his dacha. It was intact and available for publication when Meyerhold was rehabilitated in 1955.

The resurfacing of this documentation was important to the continued health of the theater. Many of those who had fallen into disfavor had become nonpersons, their names and careers erased first from playbills and programs, then from the histories. The document was often the only testimony that a certain person had existed and accomplished anything. Rather than obliterating, the Soviet authorities became expert at retouching, refashioning reality so that, instead of a gaping lacuna, a softened, reassuring image could be provided. This explains why, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a favorite form of publication is the collection of

documents. Sometimes a publishing house is founded solely for the purpose of making public a mass of documentation.

When the USSR imploded in 1991, it provided fresh new opportunities for scholarship. Archives and collections were opened to researchers, but, as many realized, the window might be slammed shut again at any time. We therefore decided to take advantage of the opportunity and plunge into the mass of material to compile a history of the Soviet theater based on original documents. A generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled us to devote two years to exploring archives in Russia, Israel, and the United States, in the process collecting a vast fund of material, much of it unpublished or never republished after its first appearance in a periodical.

The topic was attractive in its seeming discreteness: it could be bounded by the dates 1917, when the October Revolution marked the beginnings of Soviet power, and 1991, when the USSR disintegrated. Conversely, the field was vast, seeming to cover all the constituent republics and divagating into such topics as émigré theater. With such an *embarras de richesses*, we would have to be highly selective. Until the materials had been collected and sorted, however, it was unclear where our emphases would lie. Eventually, certain productions and individuals retained their prominence, whereas others proved to be of equivalent interest.

Another factor that impelled this project was that no comprehensive history of the Soviet theater existed in English. Books either included chapters on it or were devoted to specific periods or individuals. Certain figures, such as Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Stanislavsky, Bulgakov, and Lyubimov, were given pride of place, for obvious reasons, but turning the spotlight on these eminences left large tracts of activity in shadow. Separate monographs were devoted to such topics as children's theater, puppetry, the Yiddish stage, and censorship, but the close focus blurred the context. Earlier attempts by its participants to write of the Soviet theater's evolution, such as those of Nikolay Gorchakov and Yury Elagin, were often distorted by *parti pris* and were wielded as weapons in the Cold War.

Yet, to leach out the political element would be a different kind of distortion. In 1988, the veteran Soviet theater critic Konstantin Rudnitsky published a survey of Russian and Soviet theater from 1905 to 1933, intended for an English-language readership. Rudnitsky was steeped in the subject and had personally suffered from the Stalinist attack on "cosmopolitans" in the 1950s. Yet the only mention of Stalin in his book was in a picture caption, and Rudnitsky's choice of dates clearly showed a reluctance to deal with the repressions and purges that arrived with the Second Five-Year Plan. The brilliant theatrical achievements of the 1920s and early 1930s therefore come across, in Rudnitsky's account, as either spontaneously generated or stimulated by the artistic creations of others.

The fact is that, by definition, the Soviet theater was so tightly intertwined with politics that what happened in it has to be seen as a reaction to the constantly

changing policies of the government. We are not dealing with independent artists creating in a vacuum, nor even with theater folk responding to the tastes of an audience. Art for art's sake plays no role here. In the USSR, almost from the first, the theater is, in one way or another, a reflection of the government's mood. How theater is to serve society is dictated from above: one may oppose that diktat or find idiosyncratic ways to serve it, but it cannot be avoided.

A history that would encompass the whole arc of development was needed. We decided that the story could best be told, not by a magisterial narrative voice, but by a polyphonic compilation. Consequently, our definition of *document* is a very catholic one: it includes legislative and state records, protocols, minutes of meetings, and official pronouncements. These are amplified by memoirs and diaries, personal accounts, letters, journalism, reviews and criticism, passages from plays, parody, and satire. We decided that to rely wholly on previously unpublished matter would severely narrow the picture; in many cases, important documents had appeared in Soviet collections but were barely known in English. So we cast our net even wider to take in whatever could provide detail and variety. We have been careful to provide a wide spectrum of opinion, for even when homogeneity was most prescribed by Party congresses, individuals still found ways to make their voices heard. We have also drawn on the testimony of outside observers, foreign visitors whose reactions, often naive or poorly informed, provide valuable counterpoint.

These documents cover the period just prior to the revolution of February 1917 to just following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In many cases, they offer more information on the decision-making process—the behind-the-scenes meetings of committees and government agencies, internecine hostilities, financial considerations—than has hitherto been available to the reader with no Russian. The finished production, judged by eyewitness testimony and criticism, has to be viewed in the light of those conditions that led to its creation. Many of the documents illustrate “how the sausage is made,” ugly though the process may be. So many English-language accounts of the Soviet theater assume that its practitioners followed their own bent that this documentation may serve as a useful corrective.

To be as compendious as possible and to make the most salient points, we have excerpted and filleted the documents. Excisions are indicated by an ellipsis within brackets ([. . .]), whereas an ordinary ellipsis (. . .) is repeated when it occurs in the original document. Even with radical abridgement, we have had to curtail coverage of many of the Soviet nationalities; however, the accomplishments of the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Jewish theater in the first half of the Soviet period were so outstanding that they had to be included, if only succinctly. For the same reason, an intended chapter on émigré theater was abandoned, particularly because its relation to the Soviet stage was at most polemical.

We have followed common practice in the names of theaters: the Moscow Art Theater, the Red Army Theater, the Satire Theater, and many others are given in English, whereas the Bol'shoy, the Maly, and the Kamerny remain in Russian.

However, to use Aleksandrinsky, Mariynsky, and Mikhailovsky for the former Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg obscures the fact that these are simple adjectival forms of (Empress) Alexandra, (Empress) Maria, and (Grand Duke) Michael. So we have preferred to use those names.

Wherever possible, individuals have been identified by full names, birth and death dates, and a modicum of information. This has proven to be impossible in some cases. Once a footnote identifies an individual or an entity, the information is not repeated. Unless otherwise noted, all the translations are by Laurence Senelick.

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