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Soviet Theatre in Transition
The Politics of Theatre in the 1980s

Alma H. Law
Graduate Center, City University of New York

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Soviet Theatre in Transition: The Politics of Theatre in the 1980s

Alma H. Law
Graduate Center, City University of New York*

If there was ever any question of the importance the Soviet government assigns to theatre as a political instrument, certainly the events of the past two years can leave little doubt. Theatre was the first of the arts to be targeted for criticism following Leonid Brezhnev's death in November 1982, and it continues to be the focus of a great deal of attention as first the Andropov, and now the Chernenko government strive to bolster the role of the Communist Party in controlling the arts. As Konstantin Chernenko stated in a recent speech, "Artistic creation outside of politics does not exist."[1]

The first formal statement of the post-Brezhnev policy came in a Central Committee directive issued in February 1983, calling for the Party organization of the Yanka Kupala Belorussian State Academic Theatre to exert more influence on the creative life of that theatre, from the selection of plays to their artistic realization on the stage. In terms reminiscent of the heyday of Socialist Realism, the directive also called for a return to more theatrical productions "in which are

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reflected clearly and truthfully the basic Leninist principles of Party spirit (partinost') and kinship with the people (narodnost')."[2]

This Party directive was, of course, intended to apply to all theatres in the Soviet Union, as Minister of Culture, Pyotr Demichev, made clear when he stated in April 1983:

> There are on the stages of our theatres still many mediocre and colorless productions which are shallow and engrossed in the trivia of everyday life. Theatres are staging too many foreign plays, while at the same time some key problems of our social development are not being reflected on our stages. There are not enough plays about the problems of the scientific-technological revolution, few gripping productions about the intelligentsia, its concerns, its objectives. The industrial theme is not being developed or broadened.[3]

Demichev's statement was followed by a steady barrage of articles and editorials calling for productions with greater socio-political content and for a new generation of positive heroes who would "Come out from Behind the Draperies," as one article was entitled which criticized plays with weak characters who give up too easily.[4]

To anyone who has been observing the Soviet cultural scene since the 1950s, these pronouncements sound little different from those delivered during earlier periods of tightened ideological control, as for example, following the trials of Sinyavsky and Daniel in 1966 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. But the politics of theatre today is a far more intricate and sophisticated game than it was in the 1960s when it was possible simply to dismiss directors and shut down productions without regard for the consequences. In the past several years, such heavy-handed methods have largely been replaced by more covert and subtle means of control. When, for example, the Ministry of Culture wanted to stop further performances in Moscow of the Rustaveli

Theatre's iconoclastic production of Mikhail Shatrov's Blue Horses on Red Grass during the theatre's visit to Moscow in 1980 (which had, among other sins, three Lenins cavorting about the stage) it called on the playwright to demand its removal. This put Shatrov in the embarrassing position of having to condemn a production he had highly praised after seeing it on the theatre's home stage in Tbilisi.[5] Witness, also, the recent very careful orchestration of Yurii Liubimov's dismissal as chief director of the Taganka Theatre "for failure to return to work," and at the same time the fact that the majority of his productions are continuing to be performed, even though he has been stripped of his citizenship.[6] This concession, which caught everyone by surprise, is something no one would have foreseen based on past precedent.

Today it is no longer a simple matter to map out the boundary between what is permissible and not permissible, nor are there easy answers any more to such questions as to why one theatre is able to stage a controversial contemporary play and another cannot. Is a certain production that seemed doomed to limbo suddenly passed for public viewing because the director has a well-placed patron who is willing to take personal responsibility for the decision? Or is it for just the opposite reason, that there's an enemy out there trying to build a case for getting the director fired?[7] Generalizations are almost impossible to make anymore. What this suggests is that there is at the present time a great deal more negotiability within the official establishment than had previously been the case. And as a result, while the current batch of exhortations may have a familiar ring, their overall impact on the theatre world is considerably more difficult to

predict as the government tries to balance its ideological program for the theatre against the increasing demands of audiences and theatre practitioners--directors, actors and playwrights--for art and entertainment.

There are two reasons for the dilemma the government faces today in seeking to maintain its control over the theatre. One is increased competition from television, movies and other activities, all of which offer audiences an alternative way to spend their leisure time. Work in television and films has also given theatre artists an economic independence they never before enjoyed. The other reason for the dilemma is the growing role of alternate forms of theatres, both within the professional network where virtually every theatre now has a "little stage" or other pocket-sized performing space; and outside of this system in the form of the many thousands of amateur groups that have come into being in the past two decades.[8]

When one looks at the productions that are currently playing in theatres throughout the Soviet Union, it becomes clear that there is a serious gap between ideology, as reflected in Party pronouncements, and actual practice. It is true, in response to the crackdown following Brezhnev's death, many theatres did quietly revise or put aside some of their more questionable productions, often under pressure. Others shelved, at least temporarily, their plans to stage plays by some of the more controversial contemporary playwrights. But instead of coming up with works to fit the current guidelines calling for positive heroes, the 1983-1984 season saw theatres avoiding the issue altogether by beating a safe retreat to the classics, to plays with historical themes,

or to propaganda plays dealing with the international situation. Finding a positive contemporary hero among these offerings proved all but impossible. In fact, as the critic, Boris Liubimov, pointed out in summing up the 1983-1984 season, "There are theatres that said absolutely nothing about life today. Almost no collectives staged more than one production about our times. And saddest of all, these productions were not liked by audiences and did not become hits."[9] (My underline.)

The gap becomes ideology and practice becomes even greater when one turns to the many thousands of amateur stages in houses of culture, schools and other institutions. This is where the works of Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter are being performed as well as controversial Soviet plays such as Nikolai Erdman's The Suicide (the original version and not Sergei Mikhalkov's laundered adaptation) and Aleksandr Volodin's The Mother of Jesus.[10] In an article reviewing a production of Peter Weiss's Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marats. . . at the Leningrad University student theatre, one critic asked pointedly, "Why do the professional theatres, which are constantly searching for heroes, more rarely find them than the amateurs do? Why do they [the professional theatres] take up some mediocre dramaturgy, and pass up such significant phenomena as Peter Weiss, avoiding also the enormous stratum of contemporary Soviet 'new drama.' While at the same time, in the amateur theatres these works find both productions and audiences?"[11] The answer is, of course, that far more is permitted these performing groups outside the mainstream than within the network of professional theatres. This is just one of many paradoxes one encounters in the

Soviet theatre today.[12] It also explains why these amateur groups are so appealing to audiences as well as to professional directors and actors.

But even within the professional theatre there is a discrepancy between what is officially promoted and what the general public wants to see. This is especially true in provincial regions where, to quote one critic "sprightly comedies built around the minor problems in our life parade through the theatres" in order to win audiences without whom it would be impossible to fill the financial plan.[13] As the chief director of the Vologoda Dramatic Theatre pointed out last year, "As long as the plan exists, we don't have the right to forget about entertainment and accessibility."[14] Thus one finds among the top ten most staged and performed plays in the Russian Republic in 1982, four of these "sprightly comedies," three by Emil Braginsky (one with Eldar Riazanov), and another by the perennially popular team of Konstantinov and Ratser, who in 1983 had twelve comedies playing in sixty-one different theatres.[15] In addition, two others plays among the top ten for 1982, Alexander Gelman's Alone Among Many (a Soviet battle of the sexes à la Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf) and Viktor Rozov's The Nest of the Woodgrouse (a satirical look at the domestic tribulations of a top-level bureaucrat), have come under sharp criticism for their depiction of weak, whining heroes. They were obviously popular with audiences, however, as together they were seen by more than a half million people.[16]

Today, trying to maintain the idea of a theatre for the masses is one of the most serious problems facing the cultural establishment.

Thanks to the large number of tourists from other parts of the Soviet Union as well as from abroad, the major houses in Moscow and Leningrad can expect to be full every night no matter what is playing. But they are only a small part of the approximately six hundred full-time repertory houses in the Soviet Union for whom the average evening attendance in 1983 was 75%.[17] In more than 60, that is, in 10% of all theatres, attendance was no more than 50% of projected attendance. And bear in mind that projected attendance may not necessarily be a full house. Furthermore, there were many houses that fell far below that attendance figure.[18]

As cultural officials contemplate this picture, they cannot help but recall what happened in the fall of 1955 when people stopped going to the theatre because they didn't like what was being shown.[19] That was at a time when there was no television or any of the other attractions available today. It was also a time when it was still possible to fill a house by bringing in from outlying districts busloads of people who were happy to spend an evening in pleasant surroundings and stock up on candy and other delicacies at the theatre buffet during the intermission. Today, these inducements alone are not enough to lure people away from their television sets. It is quite possible that if theatres were forced to return the repertories to anything approaching the second-rate fare served up during Stalin's rule, audiences would again simply stay away.

In a very real sense, the Soviet government is caught in a three-way tug-of-war between its own program for an ideologically-based theatre for the masses, a younger generation of artists wanting the

freedom to experiment and move in new directions, and the demands of audiences, for whom theatre is only one of a number of options available today. In heavily subsidizing its theatre, the Soviet government is itself also trying to meet two largely conflicting objectives. First, it is clear that the government still continues to regard theatre as a principal tool of indoctrination and education of its own people. But in addition, today it also wants to use the theatre as a means of bringing international prestige to the Soviet Union. The unfortunate truth is that it is virtually impossible to serve these two goals simultaneously.

The 1970's saw an unprecedented effort by the Soviet government to promote its own theatre and dramaturgy abroad. By the end of the decade more theatres than ever before were taking part in international festivals and touring to countries all over the world; and Soviet directors were also being allowed with increasing frequency to accept invitations to stage productions in other countries. The decade following the Soviet Union's accession to the Universal Copyright Convention in 1973, and the formation of VAAP, the All-Union Copyright Agency (Vsesoiuznoe agenstvo po avtorskim pravam), has also seen a similar effort to promote the purchase and staging of contemporary Soviet plays in the Western world.[20]

But the government constantly subverts its desire to become a full-fledged member of the international theatre community. In sending theatres and directors abroad, the Ministry of Culture all too frequently follows a practice of giving preference to directors and productions that are ideologically safe over those having the greatest

artistic or commercial merit. Consider, for example, the consistent refusal to allow the Taganka Theatre to show their production of Bulgakov's Master and Marguerita abroad (a sure box office hit), and on the other hand, the rather lukewarm reception given to the Moscow Art Theatre during its recent tour in Austria where their repertory consisted of a docu-drama about Lenin, Thus We Shall Prevail, and a 1980 production of The Seagull, neither of them the best examples of Soviet theatre today.

The government also refuses to sanction for sale abroad for foreign production those plays that Western directors consider as having artistic merit, but which the Ministry of Culture regards as showing Soviet life in a poor light. For instance, it took Joseph Papp over four years to get permission to present Victor Rozov's The Nest of the Woodgrouse at his Public Theatre in New York, mainly because of the Ministry of Culture's fear that it would serve as a vehicle for anti-Soviet propaganda. In addition the Ministry is extremely reluctant to sanction those plays by dramatists whose works are not officially supported in the Soviet Union, for example, Liudmila Petrushevskaya and Mark Rozovsky. The idea that a play could be sold for foreign performance even though it is unsuitable for home consumption, may be persuasive in the market place, but it has yet to find acceptance among those making the ideological decisions.

The current crackdown comes at a very crucial period of transition in the Soviet Theatre as the generation of directors, actors and playwrights who reached artistic maturity in the years just after Stalin's death are gradually being replaced by a younger generation.

This process, which began well before Brezhnev's death and will continue for some time to come, further complicates the task of maintaining control over the theatre while at the same time trying to preserve it as a viable artistic institution.

This period of transition marks a turning away from the Meyerholdian-Brechtian tradition that has dominated the Soviet stage for the past twenty-five years toward more intimate forms of theatre. The post-Thaw period of the fifties and sixties had seen the rehabilitation of Vsevolod Meyerhold and the rediscovery of the forms of total theatre he and other avant-garde directors were creating in the years just after the Revolution, in which music, dancing and spectacle were an integral part of the theatrical experience. It was also a time for discovering Brecht and the idea of political theatre as it was later perfected by Yurii Liubimov and his actors at the Taganka.

Graduates of the directing schools in the sixties were understandably eager to try out these newly-discovered ideas in their own productions, and every one of them dreamed of having his own theatre in which to do so. This is not to say that studios and other forms of intimate performance were not also a part of the theatrical landscape, though there were far fewer than there are today. But at that time they were viewed mainly as stepping stones, places to experiment with the same materials that would, these young directors hoped, eventually be used on large stages.

Today, just the opposite is the case. Director Mark Rozovsky, for example, has stated that, in returning as he recently did to running an amateur theatre studio, he no longer saw it as a stepping stone to the

professional theatre. When he organized the Moscow University Student Theatre, "Our Home," back in the 1960s, he dreamed of turning the collective into a professional troupe. He now sees this as one of the reasons for its failure. This time he has told his group of studio members at "Nikitsky Gates" on Herzen Street, "We are only a rank-and-file amateur collective which is going to do productions and show them to whomever is interested in seeing them." He went on to say that the only criterion for their work would be whether it is "art or non-art," adding that "the difference between amateur and professional theatre is only in their organization and the principles of their work, and not in the evaluation of their results."[21]

The younger generation of directors sees the established theatre system as a bureaucratic morass keeping them from creating the kind of theatre they want. In fact, the professional theatre has become so over-organized and so burdened with repertory directives that there is little room left for staging anything really innovative or risky. Each year sees a growing number of festivals honoring everything from the dramaturgy of the national republics to plays about the working class. In addition, there is a seemingly endless parade of anniversaries in honor of important dates--the onset of the Revolution, the birth of Lenin, the end of World War II, the birthdays of the major writers. They must also be included in the repertory plan. Added to that are the civic obligations the theatre must fulfill, such as meetings with factory workers. There are also the performances to be given in outlying districts. These are not only a civic duty but a necessity in order for the theatre to meet its financial obligations. Finally, there

is the amount of time the artistic staff must spend in locating suitable plays and getting them approved, first for production, and then for showing to the public. Georgii Tovstonogov, chief director of the Leningrad Gorky Theatre, estimates he spends about eighty percent of his time on administrative work. It's little wonder, then, that the artistic heads of theatres have so little time or energy left for directing the productions they are expected to stage each year.

The movement away from large theatrical forms toward a more intimate theatre actually began in the late sixties. The most notable early example of it was Igor Vasilyev's production of Rus' which he staged in a communal apartment in Moscow. In order to watch a performance of this extraordinary production about the conflict between Archpriest Avaakum and Patriarch Nikon over church doctrine in the 17th century, the audience, numbering only a dozen or so, stood packed like sardines in the center of the room following the action as it took place around the periphery.[22] Now, fourteen years later, examples of this kind of intimate theatre can be found in cities and towns throughout the Soviet Union.

In Perm, for example, Aleksandr Volodin's Five Evenings has been performed in a studio outfitted like a room in the Leningrad apartment in which the play is set. On entering, the spectators simply sit wherever they can find an empty place, on a chair or sofa, or on the window sill, with the action taking place all around them. At another performance in the same theatre, of Chekhov's The Seagull, the spectators sit around tables arranged to form a rectangle with the performance taking place in the playing area inside the rectangle.[23] In

another production, this time at the Blue Bridge (Ciniaia most'), a Leningrad amateur theatre, the playwright Aleksandr Volodin sits in the audience and carries on a spontaneous exchange with the performers on stage as a part of the production of his play, Dialogs.[24]

At the ninety-nine seat arena theatre at the Malaia Bronnaia in Moscow, one can see a monodrama entitled Married for the First Time.[25] The audience enters to find in the center of the playing area a cluster of old kitchen tables with a samovar, tea glasses and platters of cookies. A middle-aged woman in a house dress is bustling about, filling the glasses with tea and offering them to the spectators. As she enlists several people to help pass the plates of cookies, she starts talking about her past life. In this way, almost unnoticed, the performance begins. At one point the woman (admirably played by Antonina Dmitrieva) pulls out a photo album. She walks over, sits down beside a spectator and begins showing him pictures of her daughter. The audience members listen with rapt attention to her story of being abandoned by her soldier-boyfriend and of raising her illegitimate daughter by herself. And they respond to her comments completely unself-consciously, as if they were actually neighbors who had dropped by for tea and a bit of gossip.

What is significant in these, and the many other examples one could cite, is that sense of a communal theatre where performers and spectators share a common space and a common experience. Completely absent is any sense of "we" vs "they," of the audience as merely a group of observers. Instead one finds an intense, very alive feeling of mutual presence.

This kind of performance, while nothing new in the West, marks something of a departure for the Soviet theatre, mainly because of the powerful hold the Stanislavskian tradition has had. Stanislavsky saw the audience as a presence beyond an invisible wall, allowed to observe the proceedings on stage like so many voyeurs. It was he who first insisted on a darkened auditorium and on complete silence from the spectators. Even today, in the Soviet theatre there is resistance among audience members to performers being out in the auditorium. And many an actor continues to regard the audience as a necessary, and hopefully invisible, evil. As one old timer said, "My place is on the stage, and the audience's place is out there on the other side of the footlights."

In the past few years, more and more of the younger generation of directors, actors, and playwrights have come to the realization that an intimate setting--a small auditorium, a studio, a room--is the only place where genuine theatre can be made. By the end of the 1970s, even Yurii Liubimov had reached a point in his artistic development where he was seeking to move in new directions. Aware that sixteen years was already "quite an age for a theatre," he speculated in the fall of 1980 about the possibility of an experimental studio which he tentatively called "The House of Dostoevsky." "It won't be simply a matter of here's a play, here are the characters..." he said. "This would demand some kind of special physical and spiritual training. A special form of concentration." But, he added, "for that I must close the theatre, or leave the theatre, and select new people and begin all over again..."[26]

Significant in this light are the substantial number of theatre practitioners in the Soviet Union who are exploring Polish director

Jerzy Grotowsky's actor training techniques, many of which are now taught in the theatre schools, though not openly attributed to him. There is also a growing underground studying the Russian actor-director Mikhail Chekhov's psycho-physical theories of actor training and an increasing interest in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical teachings which had had such a profound influence on Chekhov's work.

For many people, theatre has become a way of life and a spiritual refuge, in many instances almost a form of group therapy. This goes a long way toward explaining the enormous popularity of the amateur movement in recent years, not only for those running these groups, but for the people taking part in them as well, many of whom admit to finding new meaning in their lives through this activity. One begins to appreciate the role that theatre can play in enriching an otherwise mundane existence. When Mark Rozovsky announced an audition for his new studio, more than 200 people turned up. And whereas in the 1960s such a call would have brought out mainly students, today people of all ages and from all walks of life are joining these groups. Among the sixty members presently in Rozovsky's studio there are, in addition to the doctors and nurses from the House of Medical Workers where the studio is located, a blacksmith, a fitter, a bakery worker, as well as two professors and two Doctors of Science.[27]

Much of the current impetus for intimate theatre has come from the younger generation of playwrights, people like Liudmila Petrushevskaya, Semen Zlotnikov, Aleksandr Galin, and Liudmila Razumovskaya. And where would the young Soviet playwrights be without these theatres as a testing ground for their talent? For example, of the more than twenty

plays Liudmila Petrushevskaya has written, only two or three have been shown in professional theatres, whereas virtually all of them have been, and continue to be performed by amateur groups all over the country. Instead of dealing with larger social issues such as war and revolution--the traditional subject matter of Soviet dramaturgy--the plays of this younger generation are concerned with the minutiae of everyday life and with tracing the geography of their characters's inner world. Three fellows sit in an empty apartment drinking Cinzano and talking about their women; a pair of newlyweds returns to the bride's mother's apartment where they will be living and they get into an argument; a young couple, he with a black poodle and she with a white one, meet in the park and begin talking ostensibly about their dogs, but actually about themselves.[28]

Aleksandr Remez writes a play, The Way, about Lenin's brother, an early revolutionary, setting it in the family dining room. In Mark Rozovsky's recent two-character play, The Lounge (Krasnyi ugolok) two women, one a young alcoholic and the other an older woman, meet and talk in the lounge of a worker's dormitory. The older woman, a supervisor in the dormitory, tries with little success to persuade the young woman to stop drinking. Finally, in despair she begins talking about her own life. Rozovsky doesn't pretend to offer any resolution, he simply presents a picture of two women's lives in today's world.

In a country where plays with large casts have traditionally been the norm, works such as these are truly revolutionary. And as directors and actors have quickly discovered, this type of drama, in which on the surface nothing much seems to be happening, requires a completely

different form of theatre--one demanding above all close contact with an audience. Actors, accustomed to projecting loudly and to gesturing broadly in order to reach an invisible audience in the second balcony have had to learn an entirely different form of acting.

What are the consequences of this movement toward intimate theatre? First, we are seeing the emergence of a two-tier theatre system in the Soviet Union. The established theatres with their audiences of 800 to 2,000 people are unlikely to disappear. They will go on fulfilling their official function of educating and indoctrinating the masses by presenting large works dealing with war, revolution, and the myriad of industrial and social problems facing Soviet society today. They will also continue to provide a home for more traditional classical fare. Ironically, it is these theatres that have co-opted the Meyerhold tradition of theatre as spectacle, and where it is more likely to prevail in the next few years. At the same time, performances in the lobby, second stages (and every theatre now has at least one, including the Moscow Art Theatre and the Maly Theatre), as well as studios and amateur groups are taking their place as an important form of alternate theatre catering to small, but dedicated audiences of like-minded people.

In these intimate settings directors and actors are able to work with materials that would not be regarded as officially acceptable either for or by the average theatregoer. In addition, these alternate performing spaces give directors an opportunity to experiment with a wide variety of theatrical forms without having to worry about fulfilling a financial plan as is the case in the regular professional

theatre. The audience can be seated right on the stage, or can be arranged in any number of configurations in relation to the actors. People go to these theatres in the expectation of encountering something different.

For the official network of theatres, these smaller forms of performance can serve as a feeder line for training a new generation of theatre practitioners, many of whom would have to wait years to direct or to perform in a major role on the main stage. Georgii Tovstonogov, for example, acknowledges that without the Little Stage on the fifth floor of his Gorky Theatre in Leningrad which was inaugurated some fifteen years ago, he could not have taken a chance with all the new playwrights and directors he has introduced during that time.

These alternate forms of theatre are also proving important to established actors and directors who find renewal for their creative energies through their contacts with the enthusiasm and dedication of their non-professional counterparts. The stigma these little stages and amateur theatres had initially has now largely disappeared. The actors at the Gorky Theatre, for example, regarded that theatre's Little Stage as nothing short of Siberia when it first opened in 1970 and almost had to be forced to work there. Today many leading actors, aware of the potential of this new form of theatre for giving them a fresh artistic lease on life, are eagerly taking part in these productions. For example, when Vadim Golikov staged Jean-Paul Marats... at the Leningrad University Student Theatre, Andrei Tolubeev and Sergei Losev, both prominent actors at the Gorky Theatre, played the title roles, rubbing elbows with a large cast of amateurs.

For his production of The Club Car (Vagonchik) on the little stage at the Moscow Art Theatre, director Kama Ginkas invited several girls who had grown up in a Moscow orphanage to take part in the production. This play, an adaptation by a new playwright, Nina Pavlova, of an article she wrote for Molodoi kommunist revolves around the trial of a gang of teenage girls who beat up one of their number.[29] Gradually, in the course of rehearsals, the professional actresses from the Moscow Art Theatre who were rehearsing with these girls from the orphanage picked up their movements, their way of talking, their songs and slang. The result was a production remarkable for its almost frightening immediacy, in which it was virtually impossible to distinguish the professional performers from their amateur counterparts.

Along with the shift to more intimate forms of theatre, the past few years have also seen the erosion of the permanent company repertory system which was adopted by all theatres throughout the USSR in 1939. To a certain extent, this has been an extremely healthy trend as it has provided opportunities for actors to grow artistically by working with a variety of directors. For example, Anatolii Efros elicited some remarkable performances from the actors at the Moscow Art Theatre in his 1983 production there of Tartuffe.

But carried to an extreme, as is the case in a growing number of theatres today, this practice strikes at the very cornerstone of Stanislavsky's ideal of a permanent troupe informed by a single esthetic vision. In a recent season at the Moscow Art Theatre, five out of the seven new productions were staged by outside directors. At the "Sovremennik" Theatre in Moscow, the chief director, Galina Volchek,

hasn't staged more than one production a season during the past ten years, and many of her leading actors haven't been in one of her productions for five or six years. Instead, they either stage productions themselves or work with guest directors. Under such circumstances, the critic Boris Liubimov asks, "How can there be any talk of a like-minded collective?"[30]

Without question, the power of television and films to attract actors and directors in recent years has given theatre artists a degree of financial and artistic independence that they never before enjoyed. It has provided an escape by freeing them from the economic necessity of remaining with a particular theatre because they had nowhere else to go. On the other hand, this kind of freedom can't help but also cause a certain amount of alarm in official circles for whom stability alone has always played an important part in controlling any institution. Today, many directors, especially younger ones, prefer to work as "fliers," staging productions by invitation in a variety of theatres. It is a practice encouraged by the theatres as well, since they have much less to risk if an outsider stages a production and it flops or it is banned. Many of them now keep one of their rank-and-file directing positions open as a kind of revolving door through which passes a steady stream of outside directors.

Actors, too, are finding it profitable to perform in different theatres, sometimes even in ones located in different cities. Here again, television and movies must bear much of the blame, this time for bringing into the theatre all the vices of the star system. Today, people often go to the theatre to see a favorite actor, rather than the

production itself. This encourages theatres to insure a box office success by inviting outside actors to star in their productions, a practice many heads of theatre are engaging in these days. With theatres bidding against each other for the leading actors, they in turn are less and less willing to play minor roles, thus eroding another one of the cornerstones of the Stanislavsky system--that all roles in a production are equally important. Instead, these actors fill their time working in television, or they go off to some other theatre to play a guest role.

Ten years ago it was fairly clear to everyone just who were the major theatre directors and which were the major theatres: Georgii Tovstonogov, at the Gorky Theatre in Leningrad; in Moscow, Yurii Liubimov and his Taganka Theatre; Anatolii Efros working at the Malaia Bronnaia Theatre; and the "Sovremennik" Theatre, still coasting along on the momentum gained during Efremov's leadership prior his departure for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1970. Under the guidance of their talented directors, each of these theatres had a clearly defined artistic profile. As William Lee Kinsolving noted in writing about the Soviet theatre in 1967:

> . . . When the question is asked, "What are you seeing tonight?" the answer is not a play, a star or a writer. It is a name--Gorky, Contemporary [Sovremennik], Vakhtangov, MAT, Satire--which defines for the questioner an entire theatre with its actors, directors, style, guiding principles, and most important, repertoire.[31]

What is the picture today? Yurii Liubimov is gone, and the unique theatre he created has for all intents and purposes been eliminated. The talented troupe Anatolii Efros carefully crafted has been dissolved, and it is uncertain what is ahead for him now that he is at the helm of

the Taganka. One thing is clear, he faces the greatest challenge of his career in working with a company of actors who not only didn't want him, but whose training and esthetics are completely different from his.

The "Sovremennik" Theatre drifting along under Galina Volchek is in serious trouble, as it has been for several years. It was just recently attacked in the press for the large number of box office flops it has had in recent years.[32] Georgii Tovstonogov celebrated his seventieth birthday last year and is more or less coasting. His Gorky Theatre still has a very strong company of actors, without question one of the best ensembles in the country, perhaps in part because he staunchly refuses to invite outside actors to perform in his theatre, a practice he roundly deplores. But we can hardly expect him to make any significant departures from the rather conservative artistic position that he has taken in his recent productions. The same can be said for Valentin Pluchek, now seventy-five, who has been at the helm of the Satire Theatre for the past twenty-seven years.

In his fourteen years at the Moscow Art Theatre, Oleg Efremov has failed to unify that collective, and in the last several years he has increasingly relied on a wide variety of guest directors and actors to inject some life into that moribund institution. Other once prestigious theatres such as the Maly and Mossoviet in Moscow and the Pushkin Theatre in Leningrad are now being run by artistic councils, a sure-fire way to assure mediocrity.

In the meantime, a new generation of talented directors has emerged and is busily at work in both the professional and amateur theatre. Their number includes Mark Rozovsky, who last season staged Amadeus at

the Moscow Art Theatre, Lev Dodin, who has staged several remarkable productions in the past few years, including a blockbuster staging of Brothers Karamazov with his students at the Leningrad Theatre Institute, and Anatolii Vasilyev, a brilliant but eccentric director whose need to spend several years on a single production has already cost him a number of permanent positions in Moscow theatres. The work of Genrikh Cherniakhovsky and Vladimir Portnov can be seen at a variety of Moscow theatres, as well as that of two Leningraders, Kama Ginkas and Genrietta Yanovskaya, both of whom are former Tovstonogov pupils. And there are many other promising directors coming along as well.

But it remains to be seen whether these younger talents will be able to continue to operate relatively freely, experimenting in the amateur theatres and enlivening the repertories of a large variety of professional theatres. Or will the current ideological crackdown ultimately force them to choose between joining the establishment or making a further retreat from the mainstream of theatrical life, as happened with many younger directors following the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia when there was a similar tightening of artistic controls.

With regard to the theatre repertory, the picture at this point is one of great uncertainty as everyone waits to see who will make the next move. Here, too, the government is caught between its tough ideological stance and a need to nurture a new generation of playwrights, not only for domestic consumption, but for the foreign market as well. A recent editorial in Sovetskaia kul'tura suggests that the government is not backing away from its tough position, but on the contrary, is escalating its pressure on theatres and playwrights to fall into line. The

editorial once again reminds Party organizations in the theatres that the repertory should be their main concern. More significantly, perhaps, it calls on the Ministry of Culture's own repertory-editorial collegium to "expand its activities and raise the level of its demands" on theatres. The editorial goes on to criticize that body's laxity in recommending "doubtful" plays to theatres and calls on the Ministry to control more closely the collegium's activities.[33]

While such measures as this may meet with some success in the short run, the current picture suggests that any long term effort to dictate what theatres will stage and audiences will go to see, is probably doomed to failure. Already among some observers there is a concern that the theatre boom of the last decade is on the wane and that the reimposition of classical Socialist-Realist dogma can only hasten the decline in audience attendance. Whether the younger generation of theatre practitioners will accept a return to the past is also subject to question given the financial alternatives such a television and film that are open to these talents today freeing them to pursue their artistic interests outside the professional theatre. Also, a return to a repertory of "optimistic" Socialist-Realist plays would certainly close the foreign market for both Soviet drama and theatre. Overall, the cultural establishment can expect some rough weather in the months ahead as it struggles to resolve the dilemma it faces in trying to juggle its conflicting objectives of ideology, theatre for the masses, and international prestige.

Notes

1. Speech by Konstantin Chernenko, 25 September 1984, at the fiftieth anniversary plenary session of the Board of the USSR Writers's Union. Reported in Pravda, 26 September 1984, p. 1.
2. "O rabote partiinoi organizatsii Belorusskogo gosudarstvennogo akademicheskogo teatra imeni Yanki Kupaly," Literaturnaia gazeta, 2 March 1983, p. 2.
3. Quoted in Sovetskaia kul'tura, 16 April 1983, p. 3.
4. Vladimir Bondarenko, "Vyiti iz-za shtor!" Literaturnaia gazeta, 4 April, 1983, p. 3.
5. Private information. The production was shown on the tour's opening night at the Maly Theatre in Moscow. The fact that further performances were banned in Moscow did not prevent the production from being performed again when the theatre returned home to Tbilisi.
6. For a further discussion of the events surrounding Liubimov's dismissal see my article, "Soviet Theatre Notes," Newsnotes on Soviet and East European Drama and Theatre, 4, No. 3 (1984), p. 3.
7. According to one reliable source this is the reason Lyubimov's production of Trifonov's The House on the Embankment was passed with so little difficulty in May 1980, much to everyone's surprise. At the time, Anthony Austin wrote, "Why have the censors, at least so far, been so forbearing with a play that in the view of several prominent writers . . . is the strongest anti-Stalinist work yet to

be mounted on the Soviet stage?" ("An Advance for Soviet Candor," New York Times, 8 May 1980, p. C19.)

8. For a more detailed discussion of the various forms of alternate theatre see my articles: "Eindrücke von der sowejetischen Theater: Amateur- und Studio-Buhnen," Osteuropa, 30, No. 4 (1980), pp. 344-53; and "Eindrücke von der sowjetischen Theater: Die Volkstheater," Osteuropa, 31, No. 1 (1981), pp. 3-12.

9. Boris Liubimov, "Utrachennoe ravnovesie," Pravda, 11 July 1984, p. 3.

10. In 1964, for example, of the 1,072 plays performed in the Soviet Union, over half (526) were seen only on the amateur stage. (S. Gantsevich, comp., Narodnye teatry strany, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968, p. 81). While more recent statistics are not available, any look at what is being shown in these theatres indicates that the practice most certainly continues.

11. E. Alekseeva "Vozvrashchenie v alma mater." Article from a Soviet newspaper, source unknown.

12. The government is, of course, not unaware of this situation and there are indications of a move under way to exert more control over these amateur groups. A very important step in that direction was taken on 28 March 1978 when the Central Committee of the CPSU passed a resolution "On Measures for the Further Development of Amateur Art." This resolution specifically calls upon the USSR Ministry of Culture and Union-Republic Ministries of Culture to form repertory and editorial collegiums on the creation and selection of works for amateur production. It also calls upon the

Ministry of Culture and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions to provide assistance to amateur theatres in forming repertories of "high ideological content." (Spravochnik partinogo rabotnika, Vyp. 19, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi literatury, 1977, pp. 361-365.)

13. Vasily Chichkov, "Gorizonty kritiki," Pravda, 30 September 1984, p. 3.

14. S. Parkhomenko, "Razgovor za 'kruglym stolom,'" Teatr, No. 6 (1983), p. 103. The theatre receives a bonus to be distributed to the staff and troupe for fulfilling the financial plan, and extra bonuses are given for overfulfilling the quarterly and annual plans.

15. Ya. Kapeliush, "Lidery teatral'nogo prokata v RSFSR," Teatr, No. 11 (1983), p. 64. The information on the 1983 productions of Ratser and Konstantinov's plays is from an unpublished repertory analysis.

16. Kapeliush, p. 64.

17. E. Zaitsev, "Otvechaia veleniiu vremeni," Sovetskaia kul'tura, 23 August 1984, p. 2. According to 1976 attendance statistics for the Russian Republic, only two dramatic theatres outside of Moscow had an average attendance of more than 90% (the Perm and Chuvash Theatres), and only three, more than 80% (Omsk, Kuibyshev and Cheliabinsk); while at the other end of the scale, the attendance for the Astrakhan Theatre was only 40% and the Tambov Theatre, 37%. These statistics are from an article on the plusses and minuses of box office success by V. Sakhovsky-Pankeev, "Igra v poddavki," Literaturnaia gazeta, 28 December 1977, p. 7.

18. Zaitsev, p. 1.

19. O. Remez, "Trebovaniia vremeni," Teatr, No. 4 (1957), pp. 63-72.

20. Additional information on VAAP can be found in: Dietrich A. Loeber, "VAAP: The Soviet Copyright Agency," University of Illinois Law Forum, 2 (1979), pp. 401-52; and Mark Boguslavsky, The U.S.S.R. and International Copyright Protection, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979.

21. Mark Rozovsky, "Voiti v reku dvazhdy," Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel'nost', No. 13 (1983), p. 22.

22. For a fuller description of this production see my article, "The Theatre on Chekhov Street," The Drama Review, 23, No. 4 (1979), pp. 27-30.

23. These are productions at the People's Theatre of Poetry in Omsk which is headed by Liubov Ermolaeva. For a description of the theatre's productions see "Vernost' cebe," Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel'nost', No. 1 (1978), pp. 33-36. I was fortunate to see the production of The Seagull when the theatre took part in a festival held in Moscow in February 1978.

24. The production was directed by Genrietta Yanovskaia several years ago when she was the head of that amateur group. The Blue Bridge People's Theatre is located in the Volodarsky House of Culture on Antonenko pereulok, just a few steps from the Astoria Hotel.

25. The play was an adaptation of a story of the same name by Pavel Nilin, published in Novyi mir, No. 1 (1978), pp. 80-102. The production was directed by Vladimir Portnov.

26. Interview with the author, Moscow, 22 October 1980.

27. Mark Rozovsky, "Studiia--eta ser'ezno!" Sovetskaia kul'tura, 28 August 1984, p.3.

28. The first two are one-act plays, Cinzano and Love, by Liudmila Petrushevskaia; the third is Two Poodles, a one-act play by Semen Zlotnikov.

29. Pavlova, Nina, "Shto ty reshish' sud'ia?" Molodioi Kommunist, No. 5 (1974), pp. 91-99. The play was published in Teatr, No. 8 (1983), pp. 137-166.

30. Boris Liubimov, "Ne v polniu silu," Pravda, 18 May 1983, p. 3.

31. Michael Glenny and William Lee Kinsolving, "Soviet Theatre: Two Views," The Drama Review, Vol. 11, No. 3 (T-35) Spring 1967, p. 107.

32. A. Maksimov, "Rassudit stsena," Komsomol'skaia pravda, 25 February 1984, p. 4.

33. "Repertuar teatra," Sovietskaia kul'tura, 15 November 1984, p. 1.