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THE TAGANKA: RUSSIAN POLITICAL THEATER, 1964-84

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This paper was prepared during a research scholarship at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies from April to September 1986.

Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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One of the paradoxes of Soviet art is that even when it strives to depart from politics and to experiment in the field of "pure" form, it objectively performs a political function. This situation creates difficult conditions for Soviet artists, who involuntarily become the object of attacks on the part of the bureaucratic one-party state. Creative efforts to say a new word in art have come into conflict with the prevailing ideology of the state. As a result, the talented either capitulate before a superior force, or they are compelled to excel in the search for circuitous, compromising paths because the straight road to free creation is blocked by the barrier of ideological censorship.

Nevertheless, in spite of the extremely unfavorable conditions facing the arts in the Soviet Union, a growth in moral and aesthetic resistance to the deadening dogmas of "socialist realism," especially since the mid-1960s, can be observed. This resistance on the part of many of the most eminent and honest Soviet artists is reflected in various forms and genres of art--from guitar poetry to the large novel--but has manifested itself perhaps most clearly in the theater, in literature and in cinema. For lack of a better term, this might be called the "alternative" trend in Soviet art. Artists who have been involved in the trend are as diverse in temperament but close in their views as, for example, the writers Iurii Trifonov and Fedor Abramov, poet and singer Vladimir Vysotskii, theater director Iurii Liubimov, and filmmaker Andrei Tarkovskii. Names of other no less famous "alternative" artists who are actively working in the USSR but whose creative method is moving farther and farther from official ideological doctrine, can easily be added to this list.

By its very nature, alternative art is two-fold and palliative. To a

certain extent, this art form does not seek direct expression. Its goal is not to answer questions, much less to resolve them. It only formulates questions in a country where questions are not meant to be asked. It is perhaps precisely on the strength of its duality that alternative art is so attractive to the masses, who are infected by the "double-speak" that is so comprehensible and near to them.

Alternative art diverges from the official doctrine of "socialist realism," while not openly opposing it; it does not try to persuade its readers, listeners, or viewers of one thing or another. Perhaps it is not yet clear how and where to do this. It allows people to think that all is not yet lost--that a choice is still possible in art and, therefore, in life as well. "Alt-art" shows the artist the possibility of finding his own path, even under conditions of non-freedom. In a totalitarian society, this in itself, it can be argued, is already quite an achievement.

Alternative art is bound to its own time. It blooms and thrives during agonizing and often prolonged periods of stagnation in the life of society. Former idols and ideals have been overthrown, and new ones have not yet appeared. It is impossible to go on living in the same old way, but a new way has not yet been found. One can say something, but one is not yet free to say it fully. Under such conditions, the famous Taganka theater--the "headquarters" of alternative art in the USSR--was born.

Predecessors of the Taganka

The Taganka Theater in Moscow, in the form in which it was originally conceived and created by its former director, Iurii Liubimov, existed for exactly 20 years, from April 1964 through March 1984. On March 6, 1984, Liubimov, the founder and permanent director of the theater, who was abroad at

the time and who refused to return to his homeland if not guaranteed the necessary conditions to ensure his creativity, was dismissed from his position by order of the Board of Culture of the Moscow city executive committee "for not fulfilling his official obligations without providing valid cause." Another director was appointed to the theater Liubimov created, notwithstanding protests from leading actors of the troupe. Thus a world-famous avant-garde theater of the second half of the 20th century reached the end of its road, and yet one more vivid page in the history of Russia's theatrical life had been turned.

The work and struggle of this small studio--one of 600 theaters scattered throughout an immense country--are of great artistic and historico-cultural significance for the Russian stage. The lesson of the Taganka can be summed up briefly in the following question: is it possible under conditions of totalitarianism to struggle for free art, to seek new forms and ideas for artistic creation? If so, at what cost and through what means can this be accomplished? What relations, on the other hand, do artists, defending their right to create according to the dictates of their talent and conscience, enter into with one another? On the other hand, what sort of relations should there be with the authorities, who attempt to impose their will on the arts in order to subordinate them to political goals?

The Taganka does not provide the only model of how such relations between artists and authorities might be governed. The Soviet theater has known other variants as well. A more radical example is the theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold during the 1930s, which the authorities declared to be "hostile to the people." The theater was simply closed, and its director was arrested and murdered.[1] Another variant might be called the "compromise" model. This is a

tacit pact between an innovative artist and the authorities in the person of cultural bureaucrats: "We're for you and you are for us; work, but do not dig too deeply; seek, but not very far; do not try to get to the foundations," they seem to be saying. These are roughly the conditions under which the majority of the best theaters in the land of "real" socialism work today. They include the Gorky Dramatic Theater in Leningrad under the direction of the talented G. Tovstonogov, the Sovremennik and Lenin Komsomol in Moscow, and several theaters in outlying areas.

For a certain period of time, the Taganka stayed close to the compromise variant, but then it violated its "social pact" with the authorities and, as can be seen today, it has had to pay for doing so. For 20 years, the Taganka worked out its special creative principles. These principles blazed a new, circuitous trail for Soviet art. They defined a narrow and dangerous path because the straight road of free artistic creation was blocked with innumerable obstacles by a powerful regime that most of all in the world fears the free word. This regime, speaking in the name of "all of the Soviet people," brazenly appropriated the right to decide what art is necessary and unnecessary for the Soviet people, and what they should see in the theater--for example, *Zasedanie partkoma* (The party committee meeting) and *Stalevary* (The steel founders) at the Moscow Art Theater, or *Hamlet*, *Boris Godunov*, and *Vysotskii* at the Taganka.

Liubimov's theater was not born in a vacuum; it absorbed and utilized the great experience of Russian and Soviet culture--an experience not only of victories, but of defeats as well. Which of Russia's theatrical traditions, from both the distant and recent past, did Liubimov at the Taganka seek to perpetuate and develop under the new conditions of the times?

During the years he worked on *Boris Godunov*, from 1825 to 1830, Pushkin had already conceived of a radical reform of the Russian stage. He wanted, as he once said, to return the theater to the public square where it was born. He sought to make it independent of, or at least less dependent upon, courtly customs, prevailing tastes, and the caprices of the authorities--that is, to make it truly national, "of the public square." "With the greatest loathing," Pushkin wrote in a draft of the introduction to *Boris Godunov*, "have I decided to put out *Boris Godunov*. The success or failure of my tragedy will influence the transformation of our system of drama. I fear that its particular shortcomings will be attributed to romanticism and will thereby retard its progress. ..."[2] Pushkin did not succeed in bringing about his reform of the theater; the poet did not even see his creation on stage. His ideas were not accepted in the Russian theater, which continued to develop in the usual "courtly" way, retreating from its popular, primordially folk nature.

The brilliant play *Revizor* (The inspector general) by Gogol, in which the folk element constantly appears in the background, was able to make its way onto the stage and win over the audience because it did not openly violate tradition; it portrayed life in customary forms. The play appealed to Tsar Nikolai I, who at the height of his powers in 1836 decided to show his mayors who was the real master of the country and the arts. If the fate of *Revizor* had depended on the mayors, it is unlikely that it would have come before the footlights. It is interesting to note what happened to the play *Zhizn' F. Kuz'kina* (The life of F. Kuz'kin), based on a story by B. Mozhaev, and banned at the Taganka for slandering Soviet rural life; the authorities had arranged a discussion of the play with collective farm chairmen and brigade leaders, who were ridiculed in the play. The writer Vladimir Soloukhin wittily

remarked at the time that this was tantamount to inviting mayors to a discussion of *Revizor*. They would have closed the play on the spot.[3]

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, K. S. Stanislavskii made the next attempt to reform the Russian theater. In creating the Moscow Art Theater, he broke with the tradition of reckoning with prevailing tastes. In order to counterbalance the imperial, routine theater, he formed an opposition studio theater, which he called *obshchedostupnyi* (generally accessible), or "for all the people." The fact that the action was mostly played out not on a public square, but in a closed pavillion without a fourth wall, was only an artistic device. The Moscow Art Theater strove to portray life in the forms of life itself--that is, as if a fourth wall, separating the stage from the audience, really did exist. A special acting style was worked out derived from psychological, experiential theater known as the Chekhovian style of the beginning of the century. The first 20 years of the Moscow Art Theater's existence--before its art stagnated and submitted to Soviet dogma, that is, while the first generation of actors was alive--was of innovative significance for the Russian stage.

Meyerhold was the antipode of Stanislavskii, although he had emerged from the Stanislavskii school. After the Russian revolution, during the 1920s and 1930s, Meyerhold destroyed the "fourth wall" and strove to create an overtly agitational theater "of the public square"--theater-as-poster, or theater-as-spectacle. Meyerhold was loyal to the Soviet system, but like all idealists, he was naive in his views of what was needed by those who ruled over culture. He could not understand that revolutionary art in the postrevolutionary period was a harmful and dangerous occupation. His theater was accused of "formalism," and he paid for it with his life. Two days before

his arrest, at the First Congress of Directors in June 1939, Meyerhold said in his address to the presidium, "Hunting for formalism, you killed art!"[4] Meyerhold's pupils scattered among different theaters around the country and, it would seem, forgot the behests of their brilliant teacher. But the spirit of Meyerhold--an obsessed innovator and idealist in art--continued to hover above the Soviet stage as an example of uncompromising creativity. The Soviet theater sank into a prolonged period of crisis, killing art with its dreary, gray "respectability," its naturalism and tendentiousness.

Aside from Meyerhold, there were others--such as Tairov, Mikhoels, Diky, Okhlopkov, and Akimov--who opposed the policy of "arm twisting" in art through various means, although with unequal success. In retrospect, there was no period in the Soviet theater when opposition ceased, but all of the above figures were individual artist-daredevils. With the founding of the Taganka, a young, like-minded collective was born.

Production at the Taganka

The Taganka theater was formed in 1964, during the twilight of the Khrushchev era, an outgrowth of the studio of the Shchukin Theater School. Instead of being a naturalistic experiential theater, it played at being a theater of the public square--full of spectacle and convention, clearly violating the rigid rules of normative socialist aesthetics, even laughing at them. From an official point of view, it should have been brought to a halt from the very beginning. But the acting company of the Taganka, with the support of the liberal intelligentsia, held out for 20 years in constant battle with the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Culture.

The Taganka, under the directorship of Liubimov, not only brought together young actors; it also united famous writers, artists, and composers.

Among its admirers and friends were eminent national figures--including scientists, such as academician P. Kapitsa; cosmonauts Iurii Gagarin and German Stepanovich Titov; students; and, strange as it might seem, party veterans, headed by the old Bolshevik Lev Portnov, who had passed through Stalin's camps. The party veterans were especially active in writing letters to the highest levels of the establishment in defense of the Taganka when the authorities wanted to close it.

During the 1970s, the Taganka--the half-forbidden, half-permitted fruit of an exhausted, docile, but still living, unbroken Russian theater--became a sort of banner for those who believed that art, like life, need not follow just one path as prescribed from above, that various quests and solutions are possible. The idea of alternative art in the USSR was to liberate dormant spiritual forces and creative energies from the power of socialist realism's dreary standardization. The Taganka's program was proclaimed openly and loudly. From the very beginning, it demonstratively hung two portraits at the entrance to the auditorium--those of Stanislavskii and Meyerhold, whom party ideologists had always set off against one another as irreconcilable enemies. This aroused fierce attacks from orthodox critics such as Abalkin and Zubkov. But most importantly, the Taganka's productions--so different from those appearing on other stages throughout the country--served as a ferment for a subdued art. The plays at the Taganka were not only events for the theater; they were also for society as a whole. They included *Ten Days that Shook the World*, *Galileo*, *What Is to Be Done?*, *Maiakovskii*, *Mother*, *Pugachev*, *Master and Margarita*, and *Hamlet*. Contained in each play was a moral and aesthetic program that seemed to exhort viewers to "arise from despondency" and "feel strength" in themselves.

Artistically, Liubimov strove for a synthetic theater, in which the means of stage expression was not limited to the word, but included other art forms, such as music, mime, songs, and even film. An actor at the Taganka, it was believed, should know how to do everything--move, sing, read poetry, play the guitar, and work in mime and with shadow puppets. The Taganka created an entire system of stage techniques that helped convey an idea to the viewer, at times without words--for example, by making use of the curtain light; the Taganka's well-known, disturbing "blinking" light; the "living curtain," which, in *Hamlet*, moved with the hero, experiencing everything with him; and non-period costumes, which stressed the connection between the modern world and history. "Theater is not for the blind," Liubimov said at the beginning of his career, "it is not only an audible art, but is also *visual*."[5]

The ideas introduced at the Taganka forced audiences to shake off their mental lethargy, to think, compare, sympathize, draw their own conclusions, participate in the theatrical action, and forget that there was a "wall" between the stage and the auditorium. To this end, Liubimov often began his plays in the lobby or even on the street, and sometimes he forced the audience to cross the stage, or he made the play unfold in the auditorium, even continuing the play in the theater cloakroom after it had "ended."

Liubimov directed the actors to portray their attitude toward an image. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, the actress Slavina played two roles: the good Chinese woman, Shen Te, in love with a pilot who is only after her money; and her evil brother, the "dog" Shui Ta, who talks to the extortioner man-to-man as he deserves. In her impulse toward good, Slavina as Shen Te is fluttering, inspired, and flowing. But when she sees that goodness is weak, that in order to conquer one must become evil, she assumes the image of the "dog" Shui Ta,

that is, her brother. A bowler, black glasses, pants, and a cane are all she needs in order to be transformed right before the viewers' eyes. Her voice sounds cold and apathetic. Her movements are dry, abrupt, and arrogant; she does not know compassion. Such are the two--apparently incompatible--halves of one soul.

Gradually, through use of theatrics, viewers come to understand that in Shen Te's world, goodness is a danger and a weakness; goodness borders on destruction. In order to save itself, goodness must betray itself and become a force. Perhaps viewers also ponder that this is true not only in Shen Te's world.

Thus art imperceptibly becomes politics.

Soviet critic, V. Gaevskii, describes the acting style of Slavina, perhaps the most brilliant actress in Liubimov's theater:

> Slavina acts in a way one [is] not supposed to act, not allowed to act. Those frenzied screems, that overwrought emotional quality, that merciless expenditure of nervous energy.... Slavina's best moments are when she, tearing herself from the context of the role, from the interrelationships, from the presumed circumstances, hurls her ringing and sobbing phrases at the audience.... Slavina's art intermingles two simple abilities, but ones not granted to everyone--to pity people who have come to grief and to defend her own rights, human and feminine.[6]

The second well-known production at the Taganka--which for a long time defined the image of the theater, its aesthetics, and its civic ideas--was taken from Soviet, not Chinese, life. *Ten Days that Shook the World*, based on the book by John Reed, is a colorful, vivid, noisy, poster-like spectacle, with music, mime, shadow puppets, and rifle shots. It begins on the street in front of the theater, where a song resounds from loudspeakers over Taganka Square, muffling the roar of automobiles: "Our locomotive, fly forward. Our stop is at the commune...." At the theater doors stand Red Army soldiers with

rifles instead of the usual ticket collectors. As they let the crowd through, they thread the tickets on their bayonets, giving the viewers red bows for their buttonholes. In the lobby, sailors play on the accordion and sing ditties from the time of the Russian Civil War, such as: "To the sorrow of all, the bourgeois, we will fan the world-wide fire.... In 1918, there was a revolution. From fright my sweetie, gave birth to a piglet...." And, "My sweetie-boy is a Menshevik, and I'm a Bolshevik."

A most unusual spectacle unfolds on stage and in the auditorium, recreating the atmosphere of the stormy, chaotic time that determined the fate of the peoples of Russia for decades. In the chaos and diversity of the spectacle, it is possible to make out something integrated, fatefull, and half-forgotten. The figures and situations, familiar since childhood, are not presented in a complex way; on the contrary, they are simple, poster-like, and grotesque. They include a soldier with his rifle, a pot-bellied bourgeoise, a social revolutionary with his little beard, the hysterical Kerenskii, little ladies from the "death battalions," cripples, peasant petitioners, a *bratishka* (sailor boy), and a plowman in a field.

Techniques from the realistic, psychological theater were not, of course, suitable for a production of this sort, and Liubimov, boldly violating the laws of socialist realism, turned to techniques of Meyerhold's conventional theater, which were condemned by the party for "formalism." In contrast to the first Brecht production, where art was turned into politics, here, on the contrary, politics was transformed into art.

Ten Days that Shook the World opened a cycle of plays at the Taganka that might be called a "reflection of Russian history as mirrored by the theater." This was not only a reflection, but also a reinterpretation of history. *Ten*

Days that Shook the World was the first link in the chain of people's historical memory, dating back to 1917. When asked in 1980 whether or not he was doing this consciously, Liubimov answered:

> If you've noticed it already, then you have to go farther. The segment begins with *What Is to Be Done?*, then comes Gorky's *Mother*, and then the productions you named. These are the historical turning points in our society's life for the past hundred years. *And the Dawn Is Quiet Here*? Isn't that really a reflection in theatrical language of the war years? And *Wooden Horses*? What is it, if not the story of the fate of our countryside?

Ten Days that Shook the World was followed by the *Master and Margarita*, which portrayed the 1920s, and *House on the Embankment*, which was about the 1930s and 1940s.

But *And the Dawn Is Quiet Here* (1971), by B. Vasiliev is perhaps the most integrated, poetic, and harmonious of Liubimov's productions. In this play, he shows that the Taganka was not only a director's theater but also the actors' theater, and that psychological theater was not alien to the art of the Taganka. In addition, the further the Taganka developed, the more it incorporated the truth of subtle human experiences into stage conventions. *And the Dawn Is Quiet Here* does not show a splendid facade of war; rather, war is seen from within, through its sacrifices and losses. The fine young women of Sergeant-Major Vaskov's anti-aircraft battery perish right before the viewers, one after another during August 1941.

The texture of the production is very spare. The stage is covered with a camouflage tarpaulin. In the center, the almost life-sized body of a military truck with the licence number "IKh-16-06" has been set up. The sparsity and materialism of the stage, which was designed by David Borovskii--who firmly linked his theatrical fate with the Taganka--achieves the utmost artistic expression in this set.

Liubimov's directing is severe, energetic, and even terse in some ways. An elastic rhythm is established from the very beginning of the play, when a formation of female soldiers enters the hall down the main aisle. In *And the Dawn Is Quiet Here*, Liubimov, usually overflowing with directorial invention, subordinates not only the actors, but himself as well, to a solemn idea.

Each of the deaths of the five heroines in the play concludes with a brief theatrical illustration--a memory, the final flash of consciousness or subconsciousness that illuminates the entire life of each woman at the instant of her death. These memories occupy only several minutes of stagetime; they are of a native home, a beloved man, a farewell with one's mother, and, in the case of Sonia Gurvich, a quite recent, passing conversation with Sergeant Vaskov, whose stern appearance conceals a kind soul. Before a battle he asks her, "Are your parents of Jewish nationality?" "Naturally," Sonia answers. "If it were natural, I wouldn't have asked," retorts the sergeant-major.

Why does Sonia Gurvich recall this episode when her hour of death arrives? Why does the director make the viewers listen to this short dialogue twice? The second time, as if reflected in the consciousness of the dying Sonia, each word acquires a special meaning. What is the thought structure of the old soldier Vaskov, who asked such a strange question? Having finished only four years of elementary school with difficulty, he was able to formulate his delicate question very precisely. He did not ask about Sonia's nationality, but rather about the nationality of her parents. "Because I don't have any questions about your nationality, Sonia, you're the same nationality as all of us, that is, Soviet. It's proven," he seemed to be saying.

But when one listens carefully, Sonia's answer also deserves to be

pondered. "Naturally," she says. That is, "What is surprising, comrade sergeant-major, about the daughter of Jewish parents fighting for her homeland just like everyone else?" From an ideological point of view, however, the most pointed and significant part of this fleeting dialogue is Vaskov's reply: "If it were natural, I wouldn't have asked."

The conventionalized ending of the play is artistically pointed: a dance after death. The slain girls no longer exist, but they are still with us, like the pine trees with which they have grown together in a slow tango. Circling, they disappear, dissolving into the forest's semi-darkness, leaving their partners bewildered.

The audience slowly leaves the auditorium, shaken, mechanically wandering toward the checkroom, but Liubimov does not let his viewers go just like that. Before they are attired in contemporary clothing and immersed in the usual bustle, Liubimov will make them proceed, detaining a few, by a row of flames ablaze in ammunition cases placed on the steps of a staircase near the exit of the theater that leads to nighttime Moscow. Liubimov, as a rule, strives to make the final utterance of his productions outside the theater, thus linking the play with life.

What political meaning does the viewer attach to *And the Dawn Is Quiet Here*? The war was not "Great," as Soviet propagandists have tried to present it, but "simply war"--a slaughterhouse and a bloody meatgrinder, as Bulat Okudzhava later called it in a December 1983 interview with the Hungarian journal *Elet Es Irodalom* (Literary gazette). He declared--and this appeared in black and white: "It was not a Great, but a Terrible War, A Disgusting War. It ravaged our souls, it made us cruel. We had to become adults before our time ... this is by no means the best thing that can happen to a person. It

is not an object of pride, not a merit."[8]

One of the last productions of Liubimov's Taganka was *Dom na naberezhnoi* (House on the embankment), based on the novel by Iurii Trifonov.[9] This complex, monumental play is a grandiose chronicle of pre- and postwar Soviet life portrayed through a complicated arrangement of short scenes and written in bold, sharp strokes. The most important but often forgotten historical moments were shown, as well as the unsolved contradictions and junctions in history, in which good and evil were intermingled. Evil, in the final analysis, triumphed and mocked those who believed in the "bright future" that was promised to the people at the outset of the revolution. The terrible year 1937 passes before the viewers' eyes--a year that instilled terror in the souls of the people. This is "*Ezhovshchina*" in its most repulsive aspect. The "Great" war is shown not to the sounds of fanfares in Red Square before the moustached tyrant, but rather through its victims--through the image of a legless war invalid begging in a commuter train and singing to an accordian: "Oh, you, papa, don't listen to mama. Return home as soon as you can. It's nothing, papa, that you're a cripple. It's nothing, papa, that you're lame."

Later, this scene had to be removed from the play. In Liubimov's opinion, it was too strong and detracted from the main theme. But other images of the difficult postwar period remained, first and foremost a central scene in the play portraying the "unmasking of cosmopolitans" powerfully, grotesquely, and savagely. Liubimov, sparing neither himself nor the actors--who were tired but exhilarated by creative inspiration--tried over and over again to achieve verisimilitude, laconism, the furious rhythm of *mises en scene*.

"You shouldn't explain what cosmopolitanism is. In the few minutes given

to you, you won't manage to explain it in any case," Liubimov excitedly urged the actors. "And besides, that isn't our task. You're talking at a meeting, so give your speeches, throw out slogans, hang labels: Strike! Away with! Uproot! Sweep off the face of our earth, Wrecker! Agent! Passportless! Homeless! That's your entire vocabulary!"[10]

In order to convey a better understanding of the special nature of the Taganka, a witness will be introduced--an artistic device that is an example of how to put to good effect the theater's declaration about avoiding political generalizations, and, at the same time, lend a pointed political subtext. In *Dom na naberezhnoi*, the Pioneers of 1937 thank their party and government in verse "for a happy childhood." One of the Pioneers recites a quatrain in which he sings the praises of the head of the NKVD (later renamed the KGB), N. I. Ezhov. The name Ezhov served as a rhyme word. At a dress rehearsal, a commission of bureaucrats who were to pass judgement on the production, demanded that the name of the Stalinist executioner not be pronounced aloud. "Why stir up the past?" they said. Liubimov relented. But during the play, everything proceeded as at rehearsal. The Pioneers read their verses into the microphone, but when, according to the rhyme scheme, the audience was led to expect the name "Ezhov," the microphone was turned off and the actor standing at the proscenium--probably Antipov--mockingly looked right into the hall and slapped his hand over his mouth. The censorship demand was formally met, but because of one expressive gesture, the whole scene, much to the delight of the audience, acquired special pungency.

The image of the actor with his hand covering his mouth comes to mind in discussions of alternative Soviet art. It symbolizes the moral and aesthetic opposition of artists to depressing lies contained in official Soviet

politicized, utilitarian "pseudo-art." The Theater on the Taganka by no means always spoke to its audience through such encoded texts. The closer it approached its end, the more frequently, unambiguously, and boldly it resorted to the use of open texts. Alternative art exists in a number of degrees and has a broad range of artistic means of expression.

Another play performed by the Taganka is Fedor Abramov's *Dereviannye koni* (Wooden horses), which is about life on a collective farm. Zinaida Slavina played Pelageia, who is a simple Russian woman, a toiler, whose "bitchy" daughter Al'ka escapes from rural boredom to city life with a lieutenant without even saying goodbye to her parents. Two days later Pelageia's sick husband dies. A rural funeral takes place, and official speeches are given: "an example to all ... from the very first day of the collective farm's existence he has been at his post ... we won't forget ...." During her life, Pelageia has gone through a lot, but she breaks down when she hears these speeches. She comes forward to the proscenium, stands face to face with the audience, and speaks her mind: "It's all true, the quiet Pavel worked unstintingly, like a horse, but who appreciated his labor?" Neither she nor the collective farm. After a pause, she says pensively, "And how can you appreciate a person if he is paid nothing for his work?" Then, for once in the play, Pelageia lets out a heart-felt howl and screams wildly--in a manner inappropriate for Soviet realistic theater: "Let this [life] be damned!" Instead of "life," the actress says "company" in order to avoid generalizations, but the audience understands her. She falls on the floor the way she always did when, as a young woman, she arrived from field work and wanted to cool her exhausted body on the painted boards. But this time she will not get up.

At this point, the shaken viewers understand why Liubimov made them come to their seats from across the stage where an ethnographically exact Russian *izba* (peasant hut) stood. This was done in order to draw the theater closer to life, that is, in order to activate and arouse the viewers' souls.

Loneliness, boredom, death, old age, an unsettled life, drunkenness, swinishness, and the destruction of nature are dealt with in *Dereviannye koni*. There is no word about who exactly is to blame for these maladies. There are no generalizations, and little social commentary. But at the same time, at the most crucial moment, a human being has removed her social mask, forgetting her everlasting fear or caution in the face of external circumstances and gives reign to her true feelings. The individual--the isolated phenomenon--shows its strong tie to "the whole," to the fate of the country, the motherland, and to home. The division of Soviet writers into "villagers" and "urbanists" is purely conventional. This discussion here is of something more important: the rebirth of those spiritual values perverted under the Soviet regime.

Boris Godunov

For just under 40 years, Liubimov has been working in the arts like a hired day-laborer--that is, he has been working and not serving. Vsevolod Meyerhold--one of Liubimov's closest precursors--did not like the word "work" to be applied to actors. "One works in a vegetable garden," the master used to say, "but one serves in the theater." However, time has compromised the word "serve." While continuing, on the whole, on Meyerhold's path, Liubimov has amended his teacher's assertion, holding that people "serve" in ministries and various government organs, while they "work" in the theater. One of the last productions at the Taganka--a pantomime with songs by Bulat

Okudzhava--was called *Rabota est' rabota* (Work is work).

In the fall of 1981, it seemed that the Taganka was still in good form, but there were inner signs of crisis, fatigue, and a certain confusion from recent shocking events. The tragic death of Vysotskii in 1980 was followed by a spontaneous nation-wide farewell and obvious ill will on the part of the authorities, who wanted him buried beyond Moscow's city limits. This, in turn, was followed a year later by a ban on the play *Vysotskii*, and by the unexpected death of Trifonov, who had become a family friend of the theater, virtually a member of the Taganka troupe while working on two of his plays, *Obmen* (The exchange) and *Dom na naberezhnoi*. For many years, Liubimov had sought a dramatist who shared his convictions. Just when he had found one, he lost him. Last but not least was the insulting, senseless, and organized silence regarding the Taganka on the part of the official press. For four years after the devastating criticism in *Pravda* of the play based on Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*, the press had placed a taboo on any mention of Liubimov's name and the very existence of the Taganka.[11] All of this was undermining the health and will of the troupe, thereby accomplishing its evil end.

The main ideas found in alternative art in the USSR during the 1970s and 1980s--that is, ideas that were directly relevant to all forms of artistic creation, not only to the stage--were concentrated at the Taganka. In the area of form, there was liberation from the oppressive routine of socialist realism; in terms of content, there was some reinterpretation of key problems from Russian history that had been distorted by Soviet falsifiers; and regarding cultural politics, there was struggle over the party's control of art and over its bureaucratic-administrative way of governing it. Liubimov's

last production at the Taganka, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, in December 1982, represented the culmination of this struggle.

The fate of Pushkin's tragedy and its bad luck on the Russian stage has been discussed elsewhere.[12] Both in Pushkin's time and afterwards--on the imperial stage at the Moscow Art Theater under the direction of Nemirovich-Danchenko, and in the 1973 production by the brilliant Meyerhold--just when everything, it would seem, was ready, even the set design and the music, which was especially written by Sergei Prokofiev, the authorities ran scared and did not allow the play to be shown. They were not so much afraid of Pushkin's text as of the directors' vision of the eternal Russian problem of relationship between "the people" and "state power."

In his production of *Boris Godunov*, Liubimov embraced the idea of a national folk drama--an idea proposed by Pushkin himself and picked up, but not brought to fruition, by Meyerhold. This was a play without a central hero. The role of the "main character" was assigned to "the people" and performed by a chorus that did not leave the stage from the beginning of the play to the end. The chorus personified the people, who had lost hope in their rulers, who had been duped by them, and who could unburden their hearts only in song. The chorus, dressed in costumes from various periods--from multicolored old Russian *sarafans* to contemporary jeans and leather jackets--lived an independent life on stage, which was only indirectly related to the scenes about the tsar. The stage served as a motley, folk background, against which the intrigues and struggle for power at the top took place. The chorus, which consciously violated any historical basis, created a colorful and dynamic idea of the simple Russian people, united by the folk songs they preserved through the ages. Their singing--free and mischievous, lyrical and

plaintive--their round dances, laments, and wailing, carried the play as if on the waves of a folk sea, bringing coherence to the free arrangement of short and vivid scenes.

Central characters of the play were also dressed in "meaningful" costumes. Grishka Otrepiev--played by V. Zolotukhin--was dressed like a "sailor boy" of the Civil War period; Godunov--played by Nikolai Gubenko--wore an Asiatic robe; while the main schemer, the courtier, Shuiskii, was in a long leather coat. A leather coat may not say anything to Westerner, but it means a great deal to a Soviet viewer. If, in addition, a goatee were glued onto the actor playing Shuiskii and he strode headlong, making the flaps of his coat flutter, then the meaning could not be made any clearer--the entire era of "iron Felix" arose lifelike before one's eyes. Felix Dzerzhinskii was the head of the Soviet secret police from 1917 to 1926.

Liubimov introduced another substantial innovation into his production of *Boris Godunov*: he showed the people losing faith in their leaders. In the Taganka production, Tsar Boris grew virtually to the dimensions of a tragic figure--that is, the ruler-favorite. Attempting during the Time of Troubles (1605-13) to establish order with a firm, punitive hand, Godunov fell victim to court intrigues in the Kremlin. The people remained entirely uninvolved in his fate, both in his rise and his speedy death. This also suggested a number of topical allusions to the present.

At the conclusion of the play, Gubenko, as Godunov, changed from his Tartar robe into contemporary street dress. He emerged from the auditorium, climbed onto the proscenium, and addressed the last words of the play to the audience: "Why are you silent?" The people in the auditorium "kept silent." Thus Liubimov, true to his principle of involving the viewers in his

productions, made them the main participants.

One hardly need add that the fate of Taganka's production was a foregone conclusion, that the authorities prohibited its showing before the public. However, the fact that under Andropov it was forbidden to show a work of Pushkin perhaps undermined the position of the authorities more than the production itself might have.

As often happens in such circumstances, aesthetic and political problems intermingled, resulting in an explosion. Liubimov, as a sign of protest, against bureaucratic capriciousness, wrote a letter to Andropov in 1984 announcing that he would leave the theater if not allowed to show *Godunov* and two other forbidden plays. In this atmosphere of conflict, when the theater's fate was hanging by a thread, it was suddenly suggested to Liubimov that he go to London with his family to direct a production of a play based on the work of Dostoevskii. The consequences are well-known; Liubimov was stripped of his citizenship while he was in London. This allowed the authorities to get rid of Liubimov and his unruly theater. According to the plans of those who had organized Liubimov's persecution, the director who was appointed as his replacement, Anatoly Efros--who at one time had been out of favor--should, have turned the Taganka into another ordinary, docile Soviet theater. However, in December 1984, the first post-Liubimov production at the Taganka--Gorky's *Na dne* (The lower depths)--showed that the actors' opposition to state administrative pressure and the search for new ways and means to practice alternative art had merely taken new, yet more refined forms.[13]

The Importance of the Taganka

The Taganka--with its bold metaphors and oblique hints, its transparent allegories, and at the same time its forced concessions to the strictures of

censorship and the authorities--is a theater that belongs to a transitional period. For 20 years, it remained just one step ahead of its audience--no more--and that made its art especially infectious. It seemed that anyone who saw its plays could also take this one small step beyond the theater. "Not to lie either in art or in life"--this seemed entirely attainable by anyone exiting the small theater onto Taganka Square.

The Taganka theater was necessary precisely as it was--at once angry and mocking, lyrical and poster-like, vivid, bright, and full of surprises, with portraits of Stanislavskii and Meyerhold displayed side by side. Otherwise, it could hardly have existed for 20 years in Moscow and would hardly have been so well understood and accepted by its contemporaries and compatriots.

On the one hand, the Taganka was entirely legal--subject to censorship within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture of the RSFSR--and, on the other, it was somehow "unruly." Time and again, it disturbed the regular order of Soviet art and stubbornly called down fire upon itself, both by its truthful plays about the present day--such as *Zhizn' F. Kuz'kina*, *Vysotskii*, *Dereviannye koni*--and by its treatment of the classics--*Hamlet*, *Tartuffe*, and *Boris Godunov*. Does its partisan art not embody the spirit of a transitional period, that is, a period when irreversible changes were occurring in Soviet art, regardless of the will of the leadership?

When Westerners express skepticism about the possibility of nonconformist art existing in the Soviet Union, they usually make their judgements according to Western standards. Nonconformism in the West, however, is not at all the same as it is in the East. In Russia, it does not take the form of political opposition, but rather of moral and aesthetic resistance. In addition, the forms of nonconformism are different in the East and in the West. Within the

framework of Western democracy, art speaks openly, while for those who live under a socialist democracy, it speaks in code and is understood first and foremost by those who live under those conditions.

The Taganka under Efros, as well as under successors since Efros's death in January 1987, is undoubtedly a different theater from what it was under Liubimov. Perhaps it will be an even better theater from the point of view of those who from the very beginning wanted to tame, to subdue its fighting, nonconformist spirit, and to make the Taganka like other obedient Soviet underlings. But the theatrical world will remember the Taganka as it was and as it will remain, in the memory of the generation of the 1960s and 1970s. It will be preserved in the history of the Russian and the world dramatic stage, much as Meyerhold's theater has been preserved. The theatrical world will remember Liubimov's Taganka, study its experiment in aesthetic opposition to Soviet art, and draw strength from it in order not to lose heart entirely.

Notes

1. The resolution of January 7, 1938 by the Committee on the Arts of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR on the liquidation of the Meyerhold State Theater stated that "The Meyerhold Theater, in the course of its entire existence, could not free itself from totally bourgeois formalistic positions, alien to Soviet art." *Teatr*, 1938, no. 1, p 1.

2. A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, vol. 7, (Leningrad, 1978), p 433.

3. Iurii Liubimov, "V takikh usloviiakh ia bol'she rabotat' ne budu ...." *Strana i mir*, 1984, no. 1-2, p 134.

4. This quotation is according to an entry by Iurii Elagin, who was a witness of the episode. Iurii Elagin, *Temnyi genii* (Vsevolod Meyerhold), with an introduction by M. A. Chekhov (New York; Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1955), p. 410. The full transcript of Meyerhold's speech at the All-Union Directors Conference of June 15, 1938 has not to this day appeared in print in the Soviet Union, and was removed, as was the name of Meyerhold, from the *Materialy konferentsii*, published in Moscow in 1940.

5. Iurii Liubimov, "Iskusstvo govorit' obrazami," *Teatr*, 1965, no. 4, p. 59. Reprinted in *Sovetskaia Estoniia*, March 28, 1975.

6. V. Gaevskii, "Slavina," *Teatr*, 1967, no. 2, p. 75. See also N. Krymova, *Imena* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 144-163.

7. Aleksandr Gershkovich, "V teatre na Taganke, s utra do vechera," *Kontinent*, 1938, no. 38, p. 309.

8. Bulat Okudzhava, "Tul koran kellet felnonunk" (We had to grow up too soon), *Elet es Irodalom* (Budapest), December 9, 1983. Reprinted in Russian for the first time in *Obozrenie*, 1984, no. 8, pp. 23-25.

9. This author had the pleasure of observing how *Dom na naberezhnoi* was put together.

10. Gershkovich, "V teatre na Taganke," p. 299.

11. N. Potapov, "'Seans chernoi magii' na Taganke," *Pravda*, May 29, 1977, p. 4.

12. See, for example, Alexandr Gershkovich, "The Fate of Boris Godunov," *Russia*, 1938, no. 7-8, pp. 40-47.

13. E. Surkov, "Spor o cheloveke," *Pravda*, February 7, 1985, p. 5. See also Alexandr Gershkovich, "Nazad k Gor'komu?" *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* (New York), February 24, 1985, p. 3.