

General introduction

Between the opening of the Moscow Art Theatre in October 1898 and the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917¹ the theatrical situation in Russia underwent a number of important changes. However, these changes did not represent major breaks with the past but, rather, shifts in a theatrical tradition which was marked by a significant degree of continuity. In the major capitals, Moscow and St Petersburg, there continued to exist important so-called 'Imperial' Theatres, such as the Alexandrinsky in St Petersburg and the Maly in Moscow.² Their titles meant that, although they were self-governing and had an independent administrative system, they were ultimately dependent on royal patronage as they had been throughout the nineteenth century. Their repertoire tended to be conservative, in that they usually confined themselves to the production of great classic dramas of the nineteenth century by Russian authors – Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Ostrovsky. Occasionally, they would experiment with new work by unknown, or untried playwrights such as Anton Chekhov, whose *Seagull* was given its first, disastrous production at the Alexandrinsky in 1896.³ The reason for the failure owed much to the unusual nature of the dramatic material but was also attributable to the absence of a directorial tradition in the Russian theatre of the time. Added to this, the established theatre was a victim of hidebound conventions and its attitudes towards acting and staging tended to be untheoretical and generally lacking in rigour. However, the basis for the resurgence of theatre as a seriously conceived and executed art form, commensurate with the quality of the best dramatic material at its disposal, had already been established, both in their writings and in their theatrical practice, by such important innovators as Gogol, Turgenev, Shchepkin and Ostrovsky.⁴ It was this tradition, which conceived theatre art as a high-minded, moral and educative cultural form, which was subsequently developed by Stanislavsky and has since become established as a *sine qua non* of theatre practice in the Soviet Union.

Co-existing with the Imperial Theatres were the ordinary commercial theatres run by independent entrepreneurs, who performed the standard classics of the Russian and Western European repertoire, but who tended to rely for commercial success on stock melodramas and farces which were mainly imported from abroad, as well as the vaudeville.⁵ It was in provincial theatres such as these that Chekhov's *Arkadina*⁶ would have performed. Rehearsals in these theatres were perfunctory affairs. The star reigned at the expense of the ensemble and, often, at the expense of the play.⁷ Dialogue would be improvised rather than learned. Sets would be taken from stock, rarely refurbished or renewed, and plays were frequently staged less for their intrinsic artistic merit than to provide profitable benefit nights for the leading actor or actress – a fact which also contributed to the debacle of Chekhov's *Seagull*.⁸ Theatres of this order existed in the larger regional centres such as Kiev or Kharkov but could also be found in distant outposts of the Russian empire such as Vologda, or Kerch, from whence the itinerant actors in Ostrovsky's play *The Forest* are journeying when they first meet.

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Mention of Ostrovsky's play is a reminder of a kind of theatre which also served the smaller towns and the countryside. This was a more broadly based popular theatre centred on markets and fairs during public holidays and broadly categorised as the *narodnye gul'yanya*. This kind of popular entertainment included everything from travelling puppet theatres to pantomime and circus-style entertainment, as well as the native Russian *balagan*, with its stock characters whose origin went back to the eighteenth century when theatre in an organised form was first introduced to the country via travelling *commedia dell'arte* troupes, as well as through visiting French and German professional companies. This popular form exerted an increasing influence on mainstream theatre after the turn of the century, its types and its subject matter being taken up by dramatists, directors and musicians. Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka* (1911), for example, based its subject matter on a typical Russian Shrovetide fair, while Alexander Blok's highly influential 'symbolist' work *Balaganchik* (*The Puppet Show*)⁹ drew its inspiration from the Russian clown show or *balagan*. *The Puppet Show* was first staged in 1906 as part of Meyerhold's struggle to promote an anti-naturalistic theatre and it was in this production that Alexander Tairov played the part of 'a masker in pale blue'.

The turn of the twentieth century, as well as heralding Russia's 'Silver Age' in the arts¹⁰ also saw the establishment of a number of independent theatres inspired by the naturalist movement in Western Europe and influenced by the examples set by the companies of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and Otto Brahm in Germany and by André Antoine in France.¹¹ Their Russian equivalents, usually patronised and financed by wealthy industrialists with an interest in the arts, succeeded in establishing a number of serious theatre enterprises. Based mainly on a tradition of realism, they sought to refine it and extend its range to encompass varieties of new drama. Up until 1898 there existed few, if any, professional theatre companies in Russia capable of staging the serious new drama which was being produced within its own borders by Chekhov and Tolstoy and, beyond them, by Ibsen, Strindberg, Zola and Hauptmann. That deficiency was repaired with the establishment, by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, of the Moscow Art Theatre, which set out to implement the ideas of Saxe-Meiningen, Shchepkin and Ostrovsky and to establish Gogol's ideal of a theatre which, as well as being a place of entertainment, was an institution of educational and moral concern.¹² The Art Theatre, from the outset, revolutionised concepts of staging and costume design, rehearsal procedures and production techniques. Probably their most important revolutionary innovation related to Stanislavsky's concept of acting and the role of the actor. The theories which he was to conceive and elaborate from 1907 onwards, and which came to constitute the basis of the so-called Stanislavsky 'system', were to have far-reaching effects on twentieth-century theatre. They also came to figure centrally in the ideological struggle between an actor-centred and a director-centred theatre; between a 'realistic' theatre and a 'theatre of convention'; between 'humanist' and 'formalist' conceptions of theatre art and even between apparent acceptance or apparent rejection of the political 'status-quo' – of 'reality' itself.

Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko were not alone in regarding the

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acting profession as something other than a dilettante occupation for amateurs, or in seeing the theatre as something more important than a mere branch of the entertainment industry providing work for educated and semi-educated people of doubtful respectability. Their example and their watchword were taken up by proselytisers with just as much seriousness and dedication. Chief among these were actors and directors such as Vera Komissarzhevskaya and her brother Fyodor and the actor-managers Korsh and Nezlobin.¹³ However, the most significant influence of the Moscow Art Theatre between 1898 and the first revolution of 1905 was in generating a theatrical opposition to the naturalism which it so assiduously espoused and which, in broad terms, became reflected in the dominant anti-naturalist art movements of the inter-revolutionary period which flourished in Russia, such as symbolism, futurism, cubo-futurism, suprematism and the like.¹⁴ In theatrical terms, the way was led at home by the artists of the 'World of Art' movement,¹⁵ the theorists and practitioners of the symbolist movement and the futurists. Among those whose theoretical work inspired from abroad were Richard Wagner, Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia and Georg Fuchs.¹⁶

Alexander Tairov's contribution to theatrical 'modernism' in Russia between 1913 and 1930 deserves to be seen alongside the work of such figures as Diaghilev and Meyerhold with whom he had much in common. Tairov was someone who wished to raise the art of theatre to the level of its sister arts such as ballet, painting and music. With Meyerhold he shared an antipathy towards post-Renaissance theatre which had culminated in the *cul-de-sac* of late nineteenth-century naturalism. They both sought to resurrect the archetypal theatre forms of pantomime and the harlequinade; the Roman *mimi*, and the improvisatory spirit of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Tairov also sought to derive new theatre forms from ancient Greek and Eastern myth and trained his actors to handle their bodies on stage in such a way that distinctions between a *corps de ballet* and a *corps de drame* were broken down and where the art of the designer, the musician and the actor merged in a unified, aesthetic whole. His work at the Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, which he founded in company with his actress wife Alisa Koonen in 1914, became the forum for experiment in 'pure' theatre, but where the formalism never degenerated into *fin de siècle* decadence or sterile 'art for art's sake'. Tairov's essentially modernist theatre, influenced by symbolist poetry, cubo-futurist painting and the music of avant-garde composers became, in his hands, one of the world's great theatres with Tairov now acknowledged as one of the world's great directors.

Anti-naturalist theatre practice was supported by a whole range of theories, many of which drew their authority from Renaissance, pre-Renaissance, Greek and Roman theatre practice. It was Tairov, in his own theoretical work, *Notes of a Director* (1921) who quoted the symbolist theorist Fyodor Sologub¹⁷ in describing the transformation of the theatre of Dionysus into a 'cosy tomb for rabbits'.¹⁸ Another theorist, Vyacheslav Ivanov,¹⁹ sought to resurrect the spirit of that very same theatre of Dionysus – a theatre of religious ecstasy which brought about a spiritual merging between audience and actors. Valeri Briusov,²⁰ an advocate of symbolist theatre, in an important essay, *Unnecessary Truth* (1902), advocated a

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means of theatrical production which eschewed true-to-life appearances. He argued for a theatre which could express abstract, poetic feeling in the spirit of the Belgian poetic dramatist, Maurice Maeterlinck, who was himself an important influence on the anti-naturalist theatre movement in Russia during this period.²¹ Ivanov also inveighed against the 'deathly influence of the material in art' in the pages of the symbolist journal *The Balance (Vesy)*²² which first appeared in 1904. The spirit of his declarations was supported by, among others, the novelist and essayist Andrei Bely²³ in an essay entitled *Theatre and Modern Drama* (1908) and by Fyodor Sologub in his essay *The Theatre of a Single Will* (1908). Sologub advocated the wholesale adoption of the devices of a conventionalised theatre and felt that the living reality of the actor was an unhelpful distraction from the essence of theatrical representation. These last two essays appeared as part of a collection published in St Petersburg,²⁴ which also contained significant contributions from Alexandre Benois,²⁵ Anatoli Lunacharsky²⁶ and Meyerhold.²⁷ Meyerhold's essay was of seminal importance in furthering the cause of a non-representational, anti-naturalist, aestheticised theatre. The former Art Theatre actor (he had left the company in 1902) levelled serious criticism at that theatre for its excessive reliance on the external trappings of naturalist performance which, in the case of its productions of Chekhov, had led to an inability to comprehend the 'symbolist' elements in the dramatist's work.²⁸ Another important theorist/practitioner in this context was Nikolai Evreinov,²⁹ who founded the Antique (Starinny) Theatre in St Petersburg in 1908, devoted to the resurrection and reconstruction of mediaeval theatrical forms and whose theory of 'monodrama' was first introduced in 1908. He also drew inspiration, as did many others, from the archetypal theatrical forms of pantomime and the harlequinade.

Even Stanislavsky became disillusioned with naturalism as a method and, in 1905, invited Meyerhold to return from the provinces where he had established his own company, to direct a theatre studio in Moscow devoted to experimentation in new, 'symbolist' methods of acting and stage presentation.³⁰ The experiment was not successful and Meyerhold transferred his experimental researches to St Petersburg, where Vera Komissarzhevskaya had established her own theatre, equally determined to devote her energies to the stage-realisation of the emergent forms of theatre art. Stanislavsky was left, virtually on his own, at the Moscow Art Theatre to forge the practical means whereby symbolist works could be staged. His efforts led to interesting, yet never wholly satisfactory, attempts to stage works by Maeterlinck, Leonid Andreyev and Knut Hamsun,³¹ before he reverted to his earlier, realist style. Now, however, he sought to deepen, broaden and refine his method by investing that earlier naturalism with psychological and spiritual inwardness, a greater reliance on inner emotion and genuineness of feeling rather than emphasis on external manner and visual effectiveness. The first production to put the beginnings of his 'system' into effect was that of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, in 1909.³² Stanislavsky was to continue his attempts to extend the experimental range of the Art Theatre's work, a significant example being his invitation to Edward Gordon Craig to stage *Hamlet* at the Art Theatre.³³ Another

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important step was his decision to open a theatre studio and to invite the young Evgeni Vakhtangov to conduct experiments in Stanislavsky's own 'system' – a remarkable act of faith in the talent and ability of someone whose eventual reputation would rival that of Stanislavsky himself.

Despite the comparative brevity of Vakhtangov's theatrical career – a total of about ten years spent as a professional artist – he has left a permanent mark on the history of world theatre establishing himself, with extraordinary rapidity, as a director of genius. If one seeks for analogies in the contemporary world which approximate to Vakhtangov's place in the theatre of his day, one thinks of the leaders of religious sects whose influence on their followers is as much personal as it is ideological, a compound of love, fear and intellectual respect. In many ways, Vakhtangov was an artistic fanatic whose standards were maximalist and absolutist. The theatre for Vakhtangov, as it was for Stanislavsky and had been for that fanatical genius of the nineteenth-century theatre, Nikolai Gogol, was a moral institution. It is not unusual to discover among Vakhtangov's writings connections between the actor's calling and a 'sense of mission', references to Stanislavsky as a 'god' and a theatrical art which needed to be 'served' as part of a 'service to the people'. Acting groups are referred to as 'sects' and the atmosphere of studio work is frequently compared with that of a monastery. The theatre is a place where 'the truth' can be sought and 'the soul purified' of the imperfections of living and where, eventually, the 'meaning of life' can be discovered. Vakhtangov was himself seen as a spiritual leader in the realm of art much as Lenin was regarded as a spiritual leader in the realm of politics.

Meanwhile, in St Petersburg, Meyerhold had succeeded in realising some of the dreams of an anti-naturalist theatre with important 'symbolist' productions at Komissarzhevskaya's theatre of work by Ibsen, Blok and Andreyev as well as work by other symbolist dramatists.³⁴ When, as a consequence of disagreements with Komissarzhevskaya, he was forced to leave her theatre in 1907, it was a complete surprise to everyone when the then head of the Imperial Theatres in St Petersburg, V.A. Telyakovsky, (apparently committed to the dominant mood of innovation and experimentation) appointed Meyerhold to head both of the Imperial Theatres and provided him with an almost unlimited budget. Meyerhold's subsequent pre-revolutionary work, mainly at the Alexandrinsky, can be said to have incorporated everything marvellous and sumptuous in the 'Silver Age' of Russian culture, bringing together the greatest designers, actors, singers and musicians of the age and staging some of the most magnificent productions in the history of this or any other theatrical epoch.³⁵ However, equally important (if not more important in the long term) was the experimental work which Meyerhold conducted under the pseudonym 'Dr Dapertutto', establishing acting studios and directing productions at various small-scale venues in and around the city. It was here that he experimented with styles which drew their inspiration from the ancient *mimi*, from *commedia dell'arte* and from the Russian *balagan*. It was here, also, that he laid the basis for the 'bio-mechanical' acting theories which he was to elaborate after the revolution.³⁶ It was as a result of witnessing some of Meyerhold's 'fringe'

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productions during this period that Vakhtangov, who had joined the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911, began to reassess his commitment to the total validity of those theories of Stanislavsky's which he was seeking to implement, both in his own Mansurov Studio and in the Art Theatre's First Studio. It was also as a result of seeing Meyerhold's production of Lermontov's *Masquerade*, staged on the eve of the revolution in 1917, that the young Sergei Eisenstein, decided to enter the theatre.³⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the February revolution in 1917 very little changed in the theatrical situation. However, two weeks after the October (Bolshevik) revolution, the Council of People's Commissars issued a declaration which transferred responsibility for the theatre administration to the newly organised People's Commissariat for Education and Enlightenment, whose leader was Anatoli Lunacharsky. The government had been faced with a difficult situation. It could either have granted complete autonomy to all institutions involved in the arts, knowing that the majority were potentially hostile to the new government, or it could seek to implement a policy which would convert the consciousness of old-established institutions to a gradual acceptance of the new regime. The Bolsheviks knew full well that the arts, and especially the theatre, were an important means of extending their influence but that the system needed some form of central organisation to administer the entire artistic network via specially established regional organisations.

Responsibility for theatres throughout the RSFSR³⁸ was placed in the hands of a Theatrical Section within the Commissariat, with regional leaders in each part of the Federation. One of the first leaders in Petrograd³⁹ was Leon Trotsky's sister, while Meyerhold, who had welcomed the revolution by staging a production of what has become known as 'the first soviet play' (Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* in November 1918),⁴⁰ was appointed head of the Moscow Theatrical Section. Traditionalists in the theatre, as well as those uncommitted to Bolshevism, were amazed and angered by the apparent change which then overcame Meyerhold. The erstwhile theatrical aesthete cast aside his top hat, cape, white gloves and patent-leather shoes⁴¹ and donned the uniform of a Red Army man. In this new guise he proceeded to conduct a ruthless campaign against the established theatres, including the Moscow Art Theatre and the old Imperial Theatres. Between 1920 and 1921 (when he resigned his post as head of the Moscow Theatrical Section), Meyerhold ushered in what he called the 'October in the Theatre' movement⁴² under whose banner he sought to organise the theatres along semi-military lines as part of an attempt to bring them all within a propagandist, revolutionary orbit, subject to governmental diktat. He even went so far as to seek to change their well-established names, substituting numbers in their stead, so that Meyerhold's own RSFSR Theatre No. 1, was to be followed by the renaming of other theatres as RSFSR Theatre No. 2, 3 and so on.⁴³ Needless to say, Meyerhold's onslaught was strenuously resisted by those organisations and institutions to whom Meyerhold appeared most hostile, including the Moscow Art Theatre and the Kamerny Theatre.

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In addition to leading the attack against the old 'bourgeois' theatres, Meyerhold staged a 'revolutionary' production of Verhaeren's *The Dawns*, in 1920,⁴⁴ virtually rewriting the Belgian poet's play so as to adapt it to the circumstances of the Russian revolution and, in the process, bringing down on his head the sarcastic wrath of Tairov and others.⁴⁵ He also sought to stress the connection between theatrical and industrial production by incorporating 'constructivist' elements in the staging of both this and subsequent plays.⁴⁶ At the same time, he was attempting to establish a training ground for future actors and directors in a revolutionary Russia. He recruited students of the quality of Sergei Eisenstein⁴⁷ and Nikolai Okhlopkov to his directors' workshop. At his actors' workshop he experimented in 'bio-mechanical' acting techniques and mounted daring and startlingly innovative productions of traditional plays – such as his constructivist versions of Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922 and of Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Tarelkin's Death* in the same year.⁴⁸

The way in which actors, directors and dramatists accepted or rejected the Bolshevik revolution varied widely. Apart from Meyerhold, only Mayakovsky⁴⁹ and Blok, among major artistic figures of the day, pledged total support to the Bolsheviks.⁵⁰ For the rest, they tended to co-exist as so-called 'fellow-travellers', were won over gradually (as were Vakhtangov, Tairov and Stanislavsky), or else they emigrated. After 1917, the Art Theatre went into a temporary decline with no new productions being staged. In response to encouragement from Lunacharsky, Stanislavsky insisted on artistic freedom, declaring that art which was worth anything at all could not be created by official decree. The Art Theatre's problems were exacerbated by the fact that, whilst on tour during the Civil War, half the company had been cut off from Moscow by a White Army advance. Some members of that group then emigrated rather than return to Moscow in which the Bolshevik government appeared secure by 1921. Stanislavsky staged little apart from a production of Byron's *Cain* (1920), in which he meditated on the trials and tribulations of civil war. Nemirovich-Danchenko turned his attention, for the time being, to the staging of operetta and musical comedy.⁵¹ Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, Nikolai Evreinov, Leonid Andreyev and Fyodor Chaliapin emigrated. They were to be followed by many others during the course of the 1920s, one of the more significant being Michael Chekhov, nephew of the dramatist and an outstanding actor, who had headed the Second Moscow Art Theatre (MAT 2).⁵² Former futurists, such as Mayakovsky, found little problem in integrating their artistic beliefs with their political convictions, and his establishment of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF)⁵³ reflected a broadly based fusion between the spirit of avant-garde artists and the revolutionary mood of the time. Even former symbolists, such as Vyacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely, took an active part in the work of the Theatrical Section and sought to place their theories at the service of the revolution. Before he emigrated, Evreinov tried his hand at staging a mass spectacle, *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, which was a far cry from his pre-revolutionary theory and practice.

Such mass performances, which often involved tens of thousands of participants, including detachments of the Red Army and Navy, were usually called

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'actions' or 'mysteries'. They recalled the popular spectacles of the Middle Ages and were part of an attempt to return theatre to the public square. They were often staged according to mediaeval principles of 'simultaneous' staging, or on motorised 'pageant waggons' processing through a city. The action of these plays sometimes extended over centuries and frequently tended to modernise or parody biblical legend. Their main significance lay in the fact that they attracted and involved vast crowds who enacted, or saw enacted, in generalised, schematic terms, the main political themes of the day embodied in the allegorical figures of Labour, the Priesthood, Capital or Revolution. The names of the presentations were an indication of their content – 'The Pantomime of the Great Revolution', 'Hymn to the Liberation of Labour', 'The Flame of Revolution', 'The Action of Free Peoples', 'The International', 'Red Days', etc. Vakhtangov also felt drawn towards the idea of staging a mass spectacle based on the Bible, especially 'A Life of Moses'. Meyerhold adapted a production at his theatre in 1923 of *Earth Rampant*⁵⁴ as a mass spectacle which he staged on the Lenin Hills overlooking Moscow, involving military and naval detachments. Meyerhold's pupil Sergei Eisenstein, was also attracted to such mass entertainments which he eventually realised on film when he re-staged the taking of the Winter Palace as part of the film *October* (1927). Tairov's former colleague at the Free Theatre, Konstantin Mardzhanov,⁵⁵ planned a mass-spectacle version of Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* (which parodies the 'Noah' legend) to be staged on a mountain top near Tbilisi in Georgia. The first production ever staged by the young Nikolai Okhlopkov was just such a mass spectacle – 'The Struggle of Labour and Capital' – which he mounted with a cast of thousands on the central square of his home town, Irkutsk, in 1921.

Okhlopkov's major contribution to Soviet theatre practice dates from the 1930s, rather than the 1920s, but the effect of the revolutionary period on the mental outlook of a young man who was seventeen years old in 1917 was permanent and ineradicable. Compared with his great counterparts – Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Tairov – all of whom were born in the nineteenth century, Okhlopkov was quintessentially twentieth-century man, born into a world on the brink of epic events to which his consciousness was uniquely attuned. Okhlopkov was always interested in theatre on an epic scale. His dream was to resurrect a Soviet equivalent of the dramatic festivals of fifth-century Athens, to rival open-air performances like those of the mediaeval mystery plays, or the festivals staged by Leonardo da Vinci with their giant floats, some depicting models of the universe. He wanted a theatre of communal passions which could speak in a universal language to thousands simultaneously. Although Okhlopkov's experiments were restricted to the limits of the small Realistic Theatre during the 1930s, it was here that foreign visitors such as Bertolt Brecht recorded a sense of authentic theatricality and where the American director, Norris Houghton, experienced an excitement unlike any other he had felt in the theatre.

The background to all this exciting activity, between 1918 and 1921, was poverty, war, cold and starvation. The general effect of the civil war had been to bring the country close to economic ruin. At the Tenth Party Congress, held in

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March 1921, Lenin put forward a proposal designed to alleviate the situation and provide the revolution with a breathing space. The measure in question was the New Economic Policy (commonly referred to as NEP) which marked a change from war communism to a new economic politics involving the reintroduction of limited forms of free enterprise. It was hoped that, by encouraging free trade in consumer goods between town and country, the nation would be enabled to survive until some future time when full socialist policies could be implemented. The re-establishment of the principle of private enterprise meant that, in practice, many regional theatres drifted away from control of the local branch of the Commissariat and back into the hands of private entrepreneurs. Types of play and methods of play production then arose which were seen directly to reflect the tastes and preoccupations of what were referred to as 'NEP people'. The aesthetic extravagances of Tairov's theatre in the early 1920s were said to be attributable to the NEP tastes of its audiences. As well as including plays in his repertoire which satirised NEP people, such as Nikolai Erdman's *The Mandate* (1925), Meyerhold was accused, in his productions of *Bubus the Teacher* (1925) and, to a certain extent, of *The Government Inspector* (1926), of reflecting or pandering to NEP tastes.⁵⁶

If the Bolsheviks were experiencing difficulty in establishing a degree of political hegemony on the local and regional front (civil war continued to be fought in parts of the Far East until the late 1920s), the same was true, in the ideological sense, on the artistic front. Here, the source of the problem lay in Proletkult (the Proletarian Culture Organisation) which, together with the organisation which later became known as RAPP (The Association of Proletarian Writers), remained a thorn in the flesh of the party until the early 1930s.

The enormous broadening of a participatory theatre created by amateur performers, which marked the years of the civil war and afterwards, was one which was supported on firm ideological grounds by Proletkult. The organisation officially came into existence in 1917, before the October revolution, and its platform, very basically, rested on the belief that the culture of the past was so much useless lumber as well as being ideologically alien to the proletariat. Any future socialist culture and any future socialist art would take its form and substance from the working class acting independently, and in isolation, from the cultural and artistic forms of any other social group. This isolation was necessary to ensure the ideological purity of the new forms. The Proletkult theoreticians on the theatrical front included someone like Platon Kerzhentsev⁵⁷ (instrumental in Meyerhold's eventual downfall) who saw no place in the artistic future of the Soviet Union for members of the intelligentsia, or even for any artist whose origins stemmed from the peasantry, like the poet Sergei Esenin.⁵⁸ In supporting the amateur manifestations of theatrical activity, Proletkult was also striking a blow against any form of professionalism in the arts. However, being so absolute in theory, the Proletkult movement was often exposed to blatant contradiction in practice. For example, the forms which it took to most readily in the post-revolutionary period were those with which its anti-traditionalist ideology had most in common, namely futurism

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and constructivism. It was also forced, in its more official activities, to employ the services of artists such as Sergei Eisenstein, who staged outstandingly original productions at the First Proletkult Theatre in Moscow during the early 1920s, based on his theatrical concept of 'montage'. Eisenstein's personal credentials were far from being authentically proletarian, hailing as he did from a bourgeois background and possessing decidedly cosmopolitan tastes and interests.

In 1922, an article appeared in *Pravda* by one of the leaders of Proletkult, V.F. Pletnyov,⁵⁹ entitled 'On the Ideological Front', in which he referred to the need for the proletariat to reconstruct the basis of art from the very root, having broken with all previous cultures, especially bourgeois culture. Pletnyov's main point was that the intelligentsia should stand aside from the affairs of the cultural revolution. Lenin himself took Pletnyov to task over this article, which he described as 'a falsification of historical materialism'. He also considered nonsense Pletnyov's idea that 'the proletarian artist will simultaneously be both worker and artist'. It was Lenin, together with Lunacharsky, who led the attempt to retrieve the major achievements of the historical past as models for the further advance of a specifically socialist art. The basis for this was seen to be essentially grounded in realistic forms. Neither Lenin, Lunacharsky nor Trotsky felt that futurism, constructivism, cubism or any other fashionable 'ism' had anything significant to offer the revolution.⁶⁰ The immediate consequence of this was Lunacharsky's coining of the slogan 'Back to Ostrovsky', designed to make artists aware of the importance of a 'critical realist' inheritance which went back to the nineteenth century and great Russian artists of the past. The struggle between 'realism' and 'formalism' can be seen to intensify from here onwards. By 1934 and the First Writers' Conference⁶¹ the struggle had become one between 'socialist realism' and a decadent 'modernism', although the essential terms of the conflict remained the same.⁶² It is interesting to note that the immediate responses of Meyerhold and Tairov to Lunacharsky's call were for each to stage productions of plays by Ostrovsky – *The Forest* and *The Thunderstorm* – in styles which were uncompromisingly idiosyncratic and non-realistic.⁶³

On the socialist realist front, the major breakthrough is officially seen to have occurred in 1924 with productions of Bill-Belotserkovsky's play *Storm* at the Moscow Trade Union Theatre, and of Lidya Seifullina's *Virineya* at the Vakhtangov Theatre.⁶⁴ These plays, and their methods of stage realisation, were firmly within a tradition of realism which, henceforth, would be officially encouraged. The content was also specifically that of Soviet reality, firmly rooted in the historical events of the recent past – in these instances, of civil war. Both the themes and manner of presentation of these plays were in marked contrast to the, seemingly, self-indulgent and irresponsible work being conducted, for example, by Kozintsev and Trauberg at the Factory of the Eccentric Actor⁶⁵ or the expressionistic experimentation of Sergei Radlov⁶⁶ (both in Petrograd) or the theatricalised dances' being performed at his Moscow workshop by the company led by Nikolai Foregger,⁶⁷ or the grotesque versions of Gogol being staged by Zavatsky and Igor Terentyev.⁶⁸ The changing climate towards formal experimen-