

A history of Russian theatre

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1 The origins of the Russian theatre

CATRIONA KELLY

‘The theatre’, in its central Western sense of scripted drama staged by paid performers in specific arenas for a paying audience, is not a cultural institution indigenous to Russia. *Teatr* (or its popular corruptions *kiatr* and *featr*) retained an exotic ring to working-class ears as late as the nineteenth century; in the sixteenth century, even aristocrats would not have understood the word. Of the concepts which it now embraces, the only one that would have been familiar at that period was that of ‘paid performers’, which a Russian could have glossed as *skomorokhi*. The idea of a dramatic repertoire was introduced to Russia in the seventeenth century, along with the literary culture (*literatura* – also a foreign borrowing) with which it is intimately connected. Regular theatre troupes and permanent purpose-built performance spaces arrived rather later, becoming institutionalised only in the second half of the eighteenth century.

But if the theatre was very definitely a foreign seed, it was not one that fell on altogether stony ground. Russia before Peter the Great, like any pre-modern or early modern society, was a culture where the spoken word was far more important than the written. Performances of all kinds – processions, sermons, readings from the Bible and the lives of the saints, storytelling, games and entertainments, and rituals for religious, occult, social and political occasions – had a central role. In this chapter, I shall briefly survey the types of early Russian performance that can most readily be described as ‘theatrical’, before going on to analyse the influence of the West on some of the genres of entertainment that were to be the basis of the popular theatre when it eventually became properly established, in the late eighteenth century. My main sources are contemporary documents: ecclesiastical pronouncements and royal decrees, and the accounts of early foreign travellers to Russia, some of whom set down detailed descriptions of the Russians’ ‘crude’ and ‘barbarous’ manner of amusing themselves, as well as of the more seemly rituals of Church and court festivals. I have used later documents, such as nineteenth-century records of folklore, only

where these appear to reflect earlier practice, as is the case with the agricultural rites and seasonal festivals of Russian villages, which had apparently changed as little over the centuries as had the work practices of peasant life.¹

Revels and rituals: performance traditions before 1648

There can be few important social groups in medieval and early modern Europe that are as tantalisingly ill-documented as the *skomorokhi*, the professional entertainers of Old Russia. Until the end of the seventeenth century, Russia's written culture was dominated by the Orthodox Church, and the vast majority of books and manuscripts were religious in character. Since Russian Orthodoxy was also characterised by an extreme ascetic distaste for the things of the world, and most particularly for 'devilish' secular entertainments such as music and dancing, the only Russian-language sources relating to the *skomorokhi* are those in which their activities are condemned as sinful. Though references to the *skomorokhi* go back to at least the eleventh century, a large number of the documents in which they are mentioned date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period during which anxieties about Western influence enhanced the sense of proper Orthodox belief as a necessary part of 'Russianness'. In the *Stoglav*, the proceedings of the Church Council called by Ivan IV in 1551, the entertainments of the *skomorokhi*, and other social practices seen to subvert the interests of church and state, were branded as 'Hellenic devilry'.²

In fact, the anger of churchmen and rulers was oddly misdirected; so far from the *skomorokh* shows being evidence of Western influence, they were examples of the indigenous practices that were later to be displaced or transformed by westernisation. By the late seventeenth century, the *skomorokhi* had disappeared from polite society; by the mid-eighteenth century, they were no more than a memory even amongst the lower strata of Russian society. Up to the mid seventeenth century, however, the *skomorokhi* were the nearest thing to a class of professional theatrical performers that might be found in Rus or Muscovy, and so it is important to piece together what evidence we have about their activities.

Contemporary sources overwhelmingly suggest that the *skomorokhi* were first and foremost musicians. A thirteenth-century ecclesiastical document speaks disapprovingly of 'whistling, bawling, and wailing'; churchmen of later generations were to condemn the 'vile tooting' of the

skomorokhi, and the English interpreter Richard James, who visited Northern Russia in the late sixteenth century, translates 'skomoroke' as 'fidler'.³ Accordingly, *skomorokh* is frequently rendered as 'minstrel' in English; however, this translation, with its suggestion of refined music performed by epicene young men in tights, as in a pre-Raphaelite painting, does not adequately convey the rough and coarse character of the entertainments that the *skomorokhi* offered their audiences. As one English visitor to Russia in 1557 recorded:

In the dinner time there came in sixe singers, which stood in the midst of the chamber, and their faces towards the Emperour, who sang there before dinner was ended three severall times, whose songs or voices delighted our eares little or nothing.⁴

Other travellers, such as the early-sixteenth-century German visitor Petrus Petreus, made it clear that the words of the songs were as unpolished as their musical values:

At weddings they set their dogs on great bears, and they also have many musicians in attendance, who sing numerous shameless and unchaste songs, sounding their trumpets and sackbuts, pipes and cymbals the while, and beating their kettle drums to make a strange and wonderful music, that falls on the ear as charmingly as the howling of dogs; but the Muscovites are delighted to hear this music and make merry with it, holding it the best and most charming in the world, since they have heard no other; however, any stranger can only be overcome with disgust.⁵

Besides executing the bawdy songs for which they were most famous (the word *skomoroshina*, meaning a comic song of scabrous inclination, survived in dialect use as late as the nineteenth century), the *skomorokhi* also performed as jesters and tumblers. The English traveller Giles Fletcher has recorded that such shows were an inevitable part of the evening entertainments enjoyed even by the relatively pious and mild-mannered Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich:

After his sleep he goeth to evensong and, thence returning, for the most part recreateth himself with the empress until suppertime with jesters and dwarfs, men and women that tumble before him and sing many songs after the Russian manner.⁶



1. A *lubock* showing a Russian round dance.

Not all the songs that *skomorokhi* performed were necessarily obscene: their repertoire appears to have included paeans to rulers, and also the epic poems later known as *bylinas* or *starinas*; these latter were always chanted, rather than merely recited, and *skomorokhi* occasionally appear in them as characters.⁷

The *skomorokhi*'s suggestive lyrics were often accompanied by gesticulations and dances that rammed the suggestions home. According to a famous verbal description made by a German traveller, Adam Olearius, who visited in 1637, during performances the *skomorokhi* would flourish their bare posteriors at the audience, and represent acts of sodomitic or bestial intercourse, sometimes using small hand puppets manipulated by an operator concealed from his waist to well over his head by a sack (a form of puppetry also recorded in Central Asia).⁸ Whether any of the *skomorokh* performances went beyond gesticulatory accompaniment to songs, and turned into the performance of actual plays without music, is harder to say. The customary word used in church documents for the *skomorokh* acts was *pozorische*, spectacle, a term that could signify simply a musical or acrobatic performance.⁹ Speaking of the *skomorokhi*'s puppet-show, Olearius uses the German word *Posse*, glossed as the Dutch *klucht*, which could refer merely to a rough jest, though it is also possible that Olearius had in mind a short

comic sketch or a rudimentary farcical playlet. Evidence is equally ambiguous for other genres. References to the fact that the *skomorokhi's* accoutrements included 'masks and hobby-horses' may imply that they performed short comic scenes – acting out, say, comic weddings or funerals, as the similarly accoutred mummers, *ryazhenniki*, would do in Russian nineteenth-century villages.¹⁰ But such references could also suggest no more than a costumed ritual dance, like the morris-dancing of English tradition. Those *skomorokhi* who 'led bears about' may also have put on short verbal shows, instructing their bears to perform certain human actions ('Marusya, comb your hair'), as some bear-trainers did in the nineteenth century; but their bears may equally well have been trained to do no more than prance to the skirl of the pipes.¹¹

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts indicate that there was a high degree of resemblance between the professional entertainments offered by the *skomorokhi*, and those that Russians of the lower classes organised for themselves: comic songs were vital in 'amateur' entertainments too. Sigmund von Herberstein writes of Russian women in the early sixteenth century: 'They often stand and sing before their houses, clapping their hands so they resound'; a more detailed description of such activities survives in the writings of Petrus Petreus:

They also have a most curious dance which they perform at weddings or suchlike feasts: two women will stand clutching one another, and sing songs of most impolite content. From time to time as they are singing they will leave hold one of the other, then clap their hands, and smack their hands on each other's, leaping in the air and turning towards one another, now with their faces, now with their rears, and then standing still and moving their hindmost parts as though they were grinding mustard or lentils, and the one who sings the loudest, and moves her body and hindmost parts most vigorously, will be accounted the winner, and win high praise for her efforts.¹²

It is possible that the resemblance between professional and amateur entertainments partly depended on diffusion. Whilst some of the *skomorokhi* were evidently employed as full-time entertainers in the households of princes and boyars, others led an itinerant existence for at least part of the time. Petrus Petreus, again, states that 'these jesters wander up and down, travelling the land from place to place, with their bears and their musical instruments, earning much money with their dancing, singing,

wailing and playing, for the Muscovites are much delighted by their efforts and have themselves much merriment withal'.¹³ According to some records, the *skomorokhi* might descend on towns and villages in large numbers, perhaps at traditional festival seasons such as Christmas, Shrovetide and Easter.¹⁴

Whatever the importance of the *skomorokhi* in livening up the existence of towns and villages, though, it is clear that their shows were by no means the only available form of entertainment. Other peripatetic performers included the *kaliki-perekhozhie*, the wandering cripples and blind men who, in return for a small donation of alms, would give performances of religious songs, such as 'The Mother of God's Visit to Hell', or 'The Tale of St George'.¹⁵ There was also a strongly dramatic flavour to the appearances of the *yurodivye*, 'holy fools' or 'fools for Christ's sake', who would appear in towns and villages and castigate the local population, including local dignitaries, for their sinful ways.¹⁶

The fact that the *yurodivye* and the *kaliki-perekhozhie* appealed to piety in order to survive gave them a very different status from the *skomorokhi*, but all these groups were alike in that they were made up of social outsiders who expected to be rewarded, in financial or material terms, for their efforts. In contrast, other activities in pre-Westernised Russia that could be described as 'theatrical' were the responsibility of people from within an urban or rural community, or else of the community as a whole. Some such activities involved an individual giving a recitation in front of an audience, much as the 'social outsiders' did. But, while the local performer might use his or her skills to earn some small windfalls in the way of gifts or favours, these skills were not fundamental to existence in the way that the talents of *skomorokhi* or *kaliki-perekhozhie*, or the wiles of *yurodivye*, were; whilst skilled individuals might have a peculiar, and often marginal, status in their own community, they did not lead peripatetic lives.¹⁷

Among the important performances that were given by skilled 'insiders' was the formal lament, a complicated paean of praise to a dead person which was sung in the presence of his or her relatives and friends as part of the secular rites surrounding a funeral. Lament-singers in Russia, as in other countries where similar rites have been recorded, such as Greece or Ireland, were always women of the locality: as Fletcher puts it, 'When any dieth they have ordinary women mourners that come to lament . . . and stand howling over the body after a profane and heathenish manner.'¹⁸ Other vital genres mediating between life and death included spells and

charms (*zaklinaniya, zagovory*), which to a large extent depended for their efficacy on the performance skills of the wise man or woman (*znakhar, znakharka*) who uttered them.¹⁹ If spells and laments were elevated above ordinary life, the *skazka*, or folk-tale, a prose text narrated to entertain, rather than impress or astonish, definitely belonged to the world of its listeners; but here, too, success greatly depended upon a narrator's dramatic skills.²⁰

For all the importance of performances by gifted individuals, by far the most significant place in pre-Westernised popular life seems to have been occupied by prototheatrical activities that were carried on in a collective or group form. Apart from the singsongs that were mentioned earlier, one of the most important types of such activity was the ritual game. The most elaborate of these were associated with certain seasonal festivals, such as the spring and summer festivals of *Semik* (held seven weeks after Easter) and *Kupala* (the feast of St John the Baptist on Midsummer Day). On *Semik*, women of the village would get dressed up, some in men's clothing, and ritually 'murder' a straw-stuffed dummy to signify the end of the old season; *Kupala*, a mixed-gender festival, was the occasion for the building of a huge bonfire, around which rumbustious games, involving much coarse banter, were played by large groups of villagers.²¹ These ritual games were generally linked to agricultural practices, being believed to ensure crop fertility and economic success for the rest of the year; but Russian peasants and other members of the lower classes also played a large number of other games for their own sake, without any such ulterior motive. Most consisted of some form of tug-of-war, or trial of strength, accompanied by simple dialogues. One game called 'The Radish', for example, was an elaboration of the tug-o'-war principle. A group of villagers would gather in an open space: two would act the speaking parts of 'The Merchant' and 'The Old Woman', whilst the rest squatted down in a long line, each person sitting on the knees of the person behind. Then the following dialogue took place:

MERCHANT: Here, grandma, sell us a radish!

GRANDMA: Surely, your honour.

[*The Merchant gropes several of the people in the line, pretending to 'feel' the radishes.*]

MERCHANT: Here, grandma, these feel a bit squashy to me.

GRANDMA: How can you, your honour; they're all young and sweet, every one; why not pull one out and taste it?

[*The Merchant grabs hold of a 'radish' and starts pulling for all he is worth.*]

MERCHANT: Here, grandma, it doesn't seem to want to come out: must've bolted. Give me a trowel, will you, so I can dig out the root.

GRANDMA: No need to cast aspersions on my radishes, dearie. They'll slip out as easily as ice from water, just you see.

[*The Merchant manages to tear one 'radish' free: then he shakes it about, pretending to clean the dirt off. All the other radishes jump to their feet and chase him away, flailing at him with their fists.*]²²

The rough play on which these games depended was also evident in contexts less formalised by ritual. Foreign travellers record that even high-class Russians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to a certain crudity of speech; on the streets or amongst the common people, there was no reticence whatever. Banter and sharp talk was ubiquitous, particularly as part of the rituals of buying and selling. The elaborate sales jingles that were later to be used by merchants and traders in Russian cities (see chapter 6) do not seem to have been current in the days before westernisation, but many accounts suggest that coarsely jovial exchanges of insults were frequent. Richard James records that an acquaintance of his said to a woman trader '*Dai etti*' (Give us a fuck) rather than '*Dai yaits*' (Give us some eggs), 'for which shee', understandably, 'did well revile him'.²³ Wedding processions also attracted a good deal of crude humour. James recalls a scandal created when some lads in the street called out '*Priyobonna*' (She's been fucked before) in the wake of a bridal procession; the bride's husband was only too inclined to believe the accusation.²⁴ According to an English contemporary of James's, after weddings there was a ritual resembling the *charivari* of Western Europe: 'the boyes in the streets cry out and make a noyce in the meanetime, with very dishonest words'.²⁵

From all this different material we can understand the importance to medieval and early modern Russian society of performance in the broadest sense. However, whilst the games, entertainments and rituals that I have described could certainly be called 'prototheatrical', and whilst they do indicate that Russians before the time of Peter the Great would have been receptive to performances of drama, they do not provide firm evidence for any tradition of such performances. There is in fact only one unambiguous record of a dramatic performance in Russia before westernisation. Rather ironically, given the Russian church's hostility to the theatre, this was of a religious play, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, which was traditionally put on

during the third week of Advent.²⁶ As the play's name indicates, it was an adaptation of the tale in the Book of Daniel, chapter 3, which describes how the three noble youths, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, refuse to worship the 'golden image', supplication to which has been decreed by Nebuchadnezzar. The play's provenance and antiquity are not recorded – the earliest accounts of it date from the sixteenth century, but it quite possibly goes back to some much earlier, perhaps even Byzantine, prototype. However, relatively elaborate details of its performance survive. The 'furnace' itself, or three-sided curved box with gilded representations of flames carved upon it, would be set up in church, with tall candles beside it, the pulpit being specially dismantled for the occasion. The main actors in the drama, the 'Chaldeans', or Babylonian sorcerers, and the three youths, would make their first appearance at Saturday vespers; the play itself was performed at Mass the following day. At the end of the seventh verse of the Canon, a further series of verses paraphrasing the Book of Daniel's narration of the youths' history would be sung. Then followed the play itself, which consisted of a series of dialogues in which the Chaldeans threatened the youths, and the latter responded that they were not afraid to die:

CHALDEAN 1: My friend!

CHALDEAN 2: What?

CHALDEAN 1: Are these the children of a king?

CHALDEAN 2: They are.

CHALDEAN 1: Will they obey our king?

CHALDEAN 2: They will not.

CHALDEAN 1: Will they worship the golden image?

CHALDEAN 2: They will not.

CHALDEAN 1: Shall we cast them into the furnace?

CHALDEAN 2: Yes, and scorch 'em and burn 'em!²⁷

When the youths were being placed in the furnace, the officiating deacon cried, 'Praise be to God our Father! May His name be praised unto endless ages!' and the boys repeated his words. Eventually, the youths having been bound and cast into the furnace, a *deus ex machina* angel descended in a blast of thunder and lightning; his arrival disarmed the Chaldeans both literally and figuratively, and they released the youths from the furnace unharmed.

As the above description makes clear, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* was rather like the mystery plays popular in the medieval West, having a similar dependence upon spectacular stage effect and gesture, though the number

of characters was more limited and the plot more concentrated. Like the medieval mystery play, too, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* appears to have been a scripted drama: as Fletcher jadedly recalls, it depended upon 'the same matter played each year without any new invention at all', a comment suggesting fidelity to a manuscript text.²⁸ Despite the solemn religious character of the spectacle, it appears to have touched off a genuine resonance in secular life: during the festival season, apparently, the Chaldeans would run about town in costume letting off fireworks and making 'much good sport'.²⁹ Other religious ceremonies which depended on particularly elaborate celebrations also often spilled over into street life. Perhaps the most important of these was the Palm Sunday procession, described here by Robert Best:

First, they have a tree of a good bignesse, which is made fast upon two sleds, as though it were growing there, and it is hanged with apples, raisins, figs, and dates, and with many other fruits abundantly. In the midst of the same tree stand five boyes in white vestments, which sing in the tree before the procession. After this there follow certaine young men with waxe tapers in their hands, burning, and a great lanterne, that all the light should not goe out. After them folowed two with long banners, and six with round plates set upon long staves. The plates were of copper, very ful of holes and thinne. Then folowed six, carying painted images upon their shoulders; after the images follow certain priests, to the number of 100 or more, with goodly vestures . . . after them followed one half of the Emperours' noble men. Then commeth the Emperours maiestie and the Metropolitane.

First, there is a horse covered with white linnen cloth down to ye ground, his eares being made long with the same cloth like to an asses eares. Upon this horse the Metropolitane sitteth sidelong like a woman; in his lappe lieth a faire booke, with a crucifix of Goldsmiths worke upon the cover, which he holdeth fast with his left hand, and in his right hand he hath a crosse of gold, with which crosse he ceaseth not to blesse the people as he rideth.³⁰

Of a similar spectacularity were the royal processions on occasions such as coronations; even more ordinary days might see the tsar's servants process through the streets, taking dinner to one of his subjects who could not attend a banquet in the palace, or the progress of a nobleman and his retinue.

Whilst ‘theatrical’ enough, however, all these processions, whether religious or royal or both together (the Russian state before Peter the Great followed the Byzantine model, in which ecclesiastical and temporal power were at once autonomous and fused), were fundamentally different to the theatre in that they were manifestations, not of artistic skill for its own sake, but of the symbolic authority vital in a society where to make a show of power is to be at least halfway to having it. Similarly, the performances that surrounded seasonal rites, funerals, weddings and so on were always instrumental to the final purpose of the ritual, which was strictly functional (the attempt to ensure the productivity and viability of the community). And, whilst the entertainments of medieval Russia had some affinities with those of Western fairgrounds, they were more ad hoc and ephemeral even than these. Therefore, the importation of Western theatre under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich was to wreak profound changes in every stratum of Russian society, from the upper echelons of the aristocracy right down to townspeople and peasants, changing both the character of theatrical forms, and the general context in which they were understood.

The popular theatre after westernisation

As befitted a tsar whose epithet was ‘The Most Pacific’ (Tishaishtii), yet who caused popular revolts to be put down with a ferocity worthy of Peter I or Ivan IV, Aleksei Mikhailovich’s reign (1645–76) was rich in paradoxes. A ruler who gave the dictates and traditions of the Orthodox Church a pious prominence in his actions, Aleksei was at the same time no fundamentalist. During his reign, wide-ranging liturgical and doctrinal reforms were instituted, provoking traditionalist ‘Old Believers’ to a schism with the mainstream church; relying heavily on convention to legitimise his rule, Aleksei at the same time discarded the chauvinistic obscurantism of his predecessors, and encouraged contacts with Europe and European culture, thus beginning the slow westernisation of Russia, and laying the foundations for Peter I’s more radical, and more notorious, rebuilding of the country.³¹

In terms of the development of the theatre, Aleksei’s policies were equally contradictory. Deferring to the Orthodox Church’s hostility to the impious shows of the *skomorokhi*, in 1648, the third year of his reign, Aleksei issued two decrees banning these shows, forbidding the *skomorokhi* from the practice of their profession under pain of severe penalties, and dictating the destruction of their instruments. Yet Aleksei himself was to encourage – at first hesitantly, but later with growing enthusiasm – the

importation of Western theatrical forms along with new styles of painting and architecture, music and dance. In the 1640s and 1650s, the tsar's court was to be intrigued by numerous dramatic performances, and in 1660 the English merchant John Hebdon was commanded to recruit large numbers of German puppeteers to work in the Russian theatre.³²

Whilst Aleksei's right hand put an end to 'Hellenic devilry', his left hand was encouraging this 'devilry', albeit in a new and different form. But, whatever the contradictions in his approach – which were to be seized upon by such hostile contemporary commentators as the Old Believer Archpriest Avvakum – their effects on theatre and entertainment history were coherent. Traditional Russian genres of performance art were gradually replaced by, or at any rate transformed by, imported Western genres. Late-seventeenth-century travellers – who inevitably mixed in urban and upper-class society first and foremost – make no reference to shows by the *skomorokhi*, describing instead performances by visiting foreign troupes.³³ From the 1650s until the revolution, but especially between 1700 and 1840, foreign performers and entertainers, among them mechanical-theatre operators, acrobats, puppeteers, animal-trainers, clowns and pantomime artistes, as well as 'straight' actors, were to flood into Russia, some travelling in groups, and some as individuals. From the fusion of foreign influence and native enthusiasm and talent was to grow the remarkable, varied and sophisticated tradition of theatrical entertainments that thrived in Russia between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The technical terms for entertainments that are given in eighteenth-century wordlists and dictionaries of the Russian language allow one to form some appreciation of the chronology according to which genres of theatrical entertainment became established in Russia. Early- to mid-eighteenth-century lexicons provide entries for rope-dancers, conjurers and puppeteers alongside their listings for such high-theatrical terms as 'playhouse', 'comedy' and 'tragedy'; only in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, however, do more specialised words such as 'marionette' (*marionetta*), 'peep-show' (*rayok*) and 'circus' put in an appearance.³⁴ The delay in Russifying such terms suggests that the activities they denominated became accessible to a wider audience, as distinct from the small Francophone elite, only in the last few decades of the eighteenth century. This suggestion appears to be confirmed by other evidence. The advertisements placed by foreign entertainers in Russian newspapers, and the depositions which they were forced to make about their activities to the