Introduction

'By nature I am no dramatist', Nabokov confessed in the foreword to his screen adaptation of *Lolita*.[1] He wrote only four plays and a handful of short closet dramas during his Russian period – a rather meagre amount in comparison to the numerous novels and short stories which span both his Russian and English-language period. On the few occasions when Nabokov talked about theatre, it consistently emerges as a minor, inherently flawed art form. Initial unease seems to have finally turned into outright disgust when he equates theatre with 'group activity, that communal bath where the hairy and the slippery mix in a multiplication of mediocrity'.[2] Nabokov's statements, however, are challenged by his own practice as a writer of dramas and fiction. His plays are clearly written for the stage, imagining the stage space and utilising and interrogating the formal properties of theatrical performance. His novels are populated by characters who, although hardly ever setting foot into a theatre, are constantly involved in theatrical performances; some in such crude theatricals as the one Cincinnatus is caught in, others in more haunting and alluring illusions which keep them enveloped for the duration of the novel. Nabokov may condemn and deride the theatre as a concrete art form, but as metaphor, structural principle, theme and context, the theatre becomes an essential and pervasive element of his fiction.

Nabokov's playwriting coincides with points of rupture in Nabokov's life and work. His dramas frame his European period, marking the beginning and the end of his career as a Russian émigré writer. His first experiment in drama *The Wanderers* (*Skital'tsy*, 1923), written in 1921, was followed by the brief closet dramas *Death* (*Smert'*, 1923), *The Grandfather* (*Dedushka*, 1923) and *The Pole* (*Polius*, 1924), which eventually resulted in his first full-length drama, *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* (*Tragediia Gospodina*

[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels 1955–1962* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 673.
[2] *Ibid.*, 673.

Morna, written 1923–4). All of them belong to the initial stages of exile in Cambridge and Berlin. Artistically, they prepare and accompany Nabokov's transition to prose. The publication of Nabokov's first novel, *Mary* (*Mashen'ka*, 1926) – a turning point in his artistic career – is dovetailed by his second play *The Man from the USSR* (*Chelovek iz SSSR*, written 1926). Although Nabokov would later call 1926 'one of the happiest years of [his] life' (*Stories*, 648), the play articulates darker sentiments, namely the anxieties and uncertainties of the Russian émigré community in Berlin as it witnesses its own disappearance. It is around the same time that exile changes for Nabokov (and most Russian émigrés) from a temporary to a permanent condition. Nabokov would return to drama only in the late 1930s during another period of transition in his personal and artistic life. *The Event* (*Sobytie*, 1938) and *The Waltz Invention* (*Izobretenie Val'sa*, 1938) were written shortly after the move from Nazi Germany to France and with yet another departure, this time to an English-speaking country, already on the horizon. A period of radical changes encompassing linguistic, cultural and geographic moves was imminent. This is not to say that personal and artistic crises generate dramatic work, but periods of transition leave their stamp on Nabokov's plays. Drama with its inherently transitional nature (always looking ahead to its metamorphosis in the theatre) becomes a formal equivalent to wider questions of transition which are explored in the related themes of border crossing, exile and translation in Nabokov's work.

Theatrical subtexts pervade to a greater or lesser extent the whole of Nabokov's work, just as questions of exile and transition underlie directly or indirectly most of Nabokov's writings. *The Man from the USSR* continues the theme of émigré life and the exile condition from *Mary*, but as a theatrical form it feeds into the puppet theatre of *King, Queen, Knave* (*Korol', dama, valet*, 1928), a specific form of theatre which would be varied and developed in Hermann's comedic and almost perfect performance in *Despair* (*Otchaianie*, 1934). This thread of theatricality which has only occasionally surfaced in the 1920s becomes clearly visible during a phase of intense and continuous interest in theatre, which somewhat overlaps with a period of linguistic and geographical transition in Nabokov's life. Nabokov's most overtly theatrical novel, *Invitation to a Beheading* (*Priglashenie na kazn'*, 1935–6) had been prepared in a brief étude on theatrical reality in the short story 'The Leonardo' ('Korolek', 1933). *The Event* and *The Waltz Invention* trigger the theatrical short story 'Lik' (1939) about a Russian émigré actor. The close association of theatre and transition becomes once more manifest in Nabokov's subsequent

novel, and his first in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), which marks a crucial turning point in Nabokov's fate as an exile. To the loss of Russia is now added the loss of language, the last firm link with his native country. This self-imposed linguistic exile informs the explicitly theatrical shape of this novel of loss, emigration and twin identities. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is thus an integral part of this series of 'theatrical works'. Nabokov's theoretical ideas on drama, which he articulated after his move to the United States in his lectures on theatre at Stanford in 1941, were subsequently reworked in '"That in Aleppo Once…"' (1943) and in *Bend Sinister* (1947), both thoroughly theatrical works which are shaped by Nabokov's exilic concerns, thematising the transition between different cultures and languages. While the emergence of the theatrical theme in Nabokov's work during the 1930s and 1940s is the focus of this study, this is not to suggest that theatricality is a chronologically limited phenomenon in Nabokov's work. Nabokov's novels sustain a strand of theatricality long after he has left his dramatic work behind. Theatrical structures and themes also inform his later American novels, in the gruesome nightmare realities the amateur actress Lolita has to endure, and notably in the tragicomedy *Pnin* (1957), in Kinbote's rather creative reworkings of Shakespeare's plays or in the comedic performance which Nabokov's last published novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), puts on.

The ambiguity of Nabokov's response to the theatre – his anti-theatrical stance in lectures and interviews on the one hand and the integration of theatricality into his fiction on the other – is directly related to the essential properties of theatre, which are both points of fascination and causes of anxiety for Nabokov. Some of the aesthetic requirements of theatrical performance are difficult to reconcile with the insistence on individual authorial control, one of the fundamental principles of Nabokov's art. Theatre is an inherently collaborative art form and the consequent absence of one organising principle runs contrary to Nabokov's notion of the author as 'the perfect dictator in that private world [of fiction]' (*SO*, 69) or as the commander of his fictional 'galley slaves' (*SO*, 95). The fleeting and fickle reality of a medium which exists only for the short time of its performance and which is unable to reproduce itself exactly is a further point of contention for an artist who subscribes to a notion of eternal and absolute art and beauty. The theatricality of Nabokov's work, however, is established not only in regard to questions of concrete production, but also in the specific representational mode of theatre.

Theatre is unique among all art forms in its capacity to let the real and the imaginary (the reality of the auditorium and a fictional stage reality) physically coincide in the same space. In what one theatre semiotician has called the 'iconic identity' of theatre, the young man on stage is present as both an actor and a Danish prince trying to avenge his murdered father.[3] A piece of material on stage exists both as a painted backdrop and as a blossoming cherry orchard which is to be sold off for summer cottages. In contrast to fiction which is conditioned by the inherent absence of the object it conjures up, theatre transforms actually physically present objects and realities into something else. This is what Peter Handke describes as objects pretending to be other objects or brightness pretending to be another brightness.[4] Theatre creates a twofold vision of reality in which a location is both here and somewhere else or where time is both now and then. The gap between the here and the somewhere else is an essentially theatrical characteristic. The theatricality of Nabokov's work is located in precisely this transitional zone, in the gap between something present and its representation. It is here that Nabokov's interrogation of theatricality takes place, in transit on the famous magic carpet which is folded in such a way as to enable a simultaneous vision of different times, places and realities.

This contrapuntal perception facilitates the immediacy of a theatre production, which presents a striking contrast to the mediated reality of a book. Literature, through the necessity of having been written, records a past event, as Susan Langer points out: 'Literature projects the image of life in the mode of virtual memory', while theatre presents 'a perpetual present moment … filled with its own future'.[5] Jacques Derrida also locates the written text in the past, displacing the author from the text in the process: 'Tout graphème est d'essence testamentaire' (Every piece of writing is in essence a testament).[6] The same distinction can be made between cinema and theatre. As a markedly visual medium, theatre has naturally certain affinities with the cinema, another mode Nabokov frequently emulates in his fiction. Both theatre and cinema convey a narrative through visual representation and share the consequent reliance on actors, costumes, make-up and props. Their strong visual element makes

[3] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), 22–3.
[4] Peter Handke, *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, in his *Theaterstücke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 18.
[5] Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 306 and 307.
[6] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 100.

them especially suitable for a vivid depiction of the sudden collapse of a fictional world. At the end of *Bend Sinister*, for example, theatrical and cinematic imagery are fused in the exposure of the novel's world as artifice. Theatre and film are also combined in *Mary*, where the protagonist works as a film extra in a crowd scene set in a theatre. In the subsequent play *The Man from the USSR*, a film set exposes the illusionary nature of the stage reality which encloses it so that cinematic and theatrical reality cancel each other out. Yet, like literature, cinema presents a mediated reality from some point in the past, while theatre is exclusively bound to the present tense, as Peter Brook notes:

> There is only one interesting difference between the cinema and the theatre. The cinema flashes on to a screen images from the past. As this is what the mind does to itself all through life, the cinema seems intimately real. Of course, it is nothing of the sort – it is a satisfying and enjoyable extension of the unreality of everyday perception. The theatre, on the other hand, always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This also is what can make it so disturbing.[7]

Cinema's past mode, in contrast to theatre's present mode, positions it much closer to narrative fiction than theatre. Like a book, the medium itself becomes transparent during its reception. The cinematic mode essentially emulates the mode of narrative fiction, replacing the film which runs before the inner eye of the reader, with an actual visualisation of the narrative.[8]

The immediacy of the theatrical performance conditions the inherent imperfection of the theatrical illusion. The overlap of production and reception in the theatre exposes the concrete production of a fictional reality. In this process, theatre points to itself as an artistic medium, laying bare its own devices. In contrast, 'the printed text is largely "transparent" as a medium, indicating an imaginative world from which the book itself recedes during the reading process'.[9] The theatrical illusion is therefore never absolute unlike the fictional worlds of literature or cinema. The process of fictional construction is frequently an integral part of Nabokov's

[7] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1968), 99.

[8] In her study on Nabokov and cinema in the wider context of modern American literature, Barbara Wyllie demonstrates cinematic influences on specifically narrative techniques in Nabokov's fiction, i.e. narrative perspective (the point of view as a camera eye), narrative pace, narrative control and narrative tone (*film noir* and screwball comedy), which implicitly confirm the closeness of cinema and narrative fiction (see her *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2003).

[9] Stanton B. Garner, Jr, *The Absent Voice: Narrative Comprehension in the Theater* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xi.

novels, as in *Despair* or *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1937–8), novels which are in the process of being written while being read. Vladislav Khodasevich, a fellow émigré and one of Nabokov's most perceptive critics, was the first to notice the specifically theatrical dimension of these devices in Nabokov's fiction:

> [Nabokov's] works are populated not only by his fictional characters, but also by a great multitude of devices, reminiscent of elves or gnomes, who dashing back and forth among the characters, perform a gigantic task: before the spectators' eyes they saw, cut, nail and paint, erecting and changing the settings between which the play is staged.[10]

The audience's interaction with the stage is an integral part of the theatrical performance. The spectators in the theatre constitute an essential other against which the actual performance is defined. The audience therefore establishes and maintains a different reality, which sustains the inherently twofold reality of theatre. An essential entity in the creative process, the audience corroborates the performance, as Carlson points out: 'Performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self.'[11] The recognition of the performance relies on the distance between self and other, in both the audience and the performers, which sustains the theatre's peculiar double vision throughout.

Richard Bauman suggests that performance is conditioned by a twofold perception which differentiates between 'the actual execution of an action' and the 'capacities, models, or other factors that represent the potential for such action or an abstraction from it'.[12] Richard Schechner thinks along similar lines when he defines performance as 'restored behaviour', implying like Bauman a pre-existing model which is re-enacted in performance.[13] Nabokov sees the theatre primarily in its relation to the scripted drama text. Central to his thinking is the implied notion of the theatrical performance as relying on a pre-existing, original drama text which is enacted in the theatre. Taking the Western stage tradition of modern drama as a paradigm of theatre, this notion ignores, of course, the whole

[10] Vladislav Khodasevich, 'O Sirine', *Vozrozhdenie*, 13 February 1937, 9. Reprinted in his *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow: Soglasie, 1996–7), vol. II, 388–95 [391].
[11] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 5–6.
[12] Richard Baumann, 'Performance', in Erik Barnow (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communications* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 262–6 [262].
[13] See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35–116.

area of possible performances without a drama text as their base which can be found in, for instance, experimental or non-Western theatre forms. Within this rather conventional concept, theatre emerges as an ambivalent art form which negotiates its position between the scripted drama and the performance in the theatre. Closely connected with the split of the theatrical process into a dramatic written text and a theatrical performance is the absence of the playwright from the actual theatrical performance in the theatre. The drama text is removed from the playwright's control and translated into a new artistic medium. In the process, the theatrical performance becomes de-centred and loses a clearly discernible origin. In Nabokov's mind this issue of what could be termed 'theatrical translation' is associated with the wider question of faithful translation of a text and the author's control or lack of control over his texts. Theatre thus crystallises pivotal concerns of Nabokov's art, questions of authorial control and textual property in relation to linguistic, cultural and theatrical translation.

The theatricality of Nabokov's work is framed by wider concerns of exile as a personal experience and an artistic condition. The fleeting reality and impermanence of the exile existence corresponds with the unique and temporary nature of theatre performances, while the 'contrapuntal vision' characteristic of the exile condition, which Edward Said and other theoreticians of exile have noted, finds a formal equivalent in the twofold perception of a theatre performance.[14] The playwright's dependence on the theatrical performance to realise his or her work provides an analogy for the exiled writer's reliance on linguistic and cultural translation to give a (strange) voice to his or her work. Removed from the immediate control of their creators, theatrical performance and translation develop a certain degree of autonomy. The exiled author and the playwright remain in the wings, the marginal spaces off the centre, conspicuous only by their absence.

The absent author is a commonplace in much of twentieth-century literary theory. Expelled from the text by Formalists and New Critics, the author was allowed a cautious return in the ghostly figure of the 'implied author', only to be eventually assassinated (in the heady days of 1968) by Barthes. The author has vanished (at least in theory) from the text as a source of origin or a source of intention. The text has thus become uprooted, a de-centred autonomous entity the coherence and unity of which is determined by itself or by its readers. Nabokov's work

[14] See, for instance, Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', in his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173–86; Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

shapes and is shaped by this literary discourse about the status of the author. With fierce insistence on his privacy, Nabokov denied any form of discernible personal presence or traces in life or text: 'I hate tampering with the precious lives of great writers and I hate Tom-peeping over the fence of those lives … and no biographer will ever catch a glimpse of my private life.'[15] Elsewhere he insisted that it 'is pretty useless to deduce the life history and human form of a poet from his work; and the greater the artist the more likely it is for us to arrive at erroneous conclusions'.[16] Paradoxically though, it is this very absence which produces the God-like invisible presence of some form of authorial control beyond and above Nabokov's texts. The rather crass appearance of Nabokov himself at the end of his second novel, *King, Queen, Knave*, is only one of many authorial manifestations which become ever more complex during the course of his career. It is somewhere between the implied author, who is a largely ideological category, and the fictional author, who is part of the fictional world, that Nabokov locates glimpses, reflections, shadows of himself and his fictional representatives, in the form of an authorial principle or an artistic structure which interacts with and consciously shapes the text. A large part of Nabokov's work rests on this tension between the absence of the empirical writer and the presence of some authorial principle in the text, between Nabokov's absence and the traces of what in *Lolita* (1955) would become McFate's presence in the text. In the later stages of Nabokov's career, with increasing public exposure, the space 'in between' is taken over by the stylised, thoroughly theatrical persona VN. Nabokov's enactment of the conceited, strongly opinionated, sharp and witty author-figure extends the space of the fictional and shields the real author from preying eyes. Theatricality emerges yet again from a gap, the no-man's-land between reality and fiction, self and persona, the actor and his role, Nabokov and his fictional or implied representatives.

It would be going too far to say that Nabokov's plays are *terra incognita*, but until very recently they have occupied a forgotten niche in what is otherwise the thoroughly explored and classified territory of Nabokov studies. Although Nabokov had most of his Russian works translated into English after *Lolita* brought him worldwide fame, he was much less successful with the translation of his dramas, apart from *The Waltz Invention* which

[15] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego, New York and London: Bruccoli Clark Layman, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1981), 138.
[16] *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (Woodstock, NY and New York: Ardis, 1988), 79.

was translated into English by his son Dmitri Nabokov in the mid-1960s.[17] During his lifetime, *The Event* was not published in English translation, while his first two plays, *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* and *The Man from the USSR*, remained unpublished. Of *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* only an incomplete manuscript, given by Nabokov to the Library of Congress for mere tax reasons, survives.[18] In 1990, Ardis still planned to publish one volume of Nabokov's complete dramas as part of the collected works in Russian, to be supervised by Véra Nabokov.[19] This project was, however, abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Nabokov's work began to be published in his native country. The Russian plays available from émigré journals were collected into one volume in 1990, but the collection included only the first act of *The Man from the USSR*, while *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* was left out.[20] The latter appeared in print in *Zvezda*, the accuracy of which was compromised by a number of mistakes and misprints.[21] Until very recently, Nabokov's complete dramatic works had been published only in German translation as part of the Rowohlt edition of Nabokov's collected works.[22] A distinct turning point in this state of affairs was the recent publication of an excellent edition of Nabokov's plays in Russian, prepared by Andrei Babikov.[23] As the first and only comprehensive, accurate edition which contains all of Nabokov's available dramatic works in the original, this volume has opened the way for a thorough assessment of Nabokov's dramatic work. For the English reader, *The Man from the USSR*, *The Event* and the early verse plays *The Pole* and *The Grandfather* were published in translation by Dmitri Nabokov.[24] This edition was the first to include also two of the thematically related lectures on drama.

[17] An English translation of *The Waltz Invention* was initially unsuccessfully offered to the *Playboy*. See A. C. Spectorsky to Carmen Pomroy, 16 April 1965, VN Berg.
[18] See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (London: Vintage, 1991), 367.
[19] See Dieter E. Zimmer, 'Nachwort des Herausgebers', in Vladimir Nabokov, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XV/i (*Dramen*), ed. Dieter E. Zimmer (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 2000), 563–78 [578]; Dmitri Nabokov, 'Nabokov and the Theatre', in *The Man from the USSR and other Plays*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (San Diego, New York and London: Bruccoli Clark, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1984), 3–26 [26].
[20] Vladimir Nabokov, *P'esy*, ed. Ivan Tolstoi (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1990). The same material was also published in the Simpozium edition as part of Nabokov's collected works in Russian (Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh* (St Petersburg: Simpozium, 1999–2000)).
[21] Vladimir Nabokov, 'Tragediia Gospodina Morna', *Zvezda*, 4 (1997), 9–98.
[22] Nabokov, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XV/i (*Dramen*). The translations are mainly based on the Russian galley proofs of the envisioned Ardis edition, as well as on some manuscripts.
[23] Vladimir Nabokov, *Tragediia Gospodina Morna: P'esy, lektsii o drame*, ed. Andrei Babikov (St Petersburg: Azbuka, 2008).
[24] Nabokov, *Plays*.

Given that Nabokov's dramas are not widely read, it is perhaps unsurprising that they are not very popular with stage performers either. During Nabokov's lifetime, *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* was never realised on stage, while *The Man from the USSR* was limited to only two productions in Berlin in 1927. *The Event* is the only play which could be considered a relative success, with four performances in a Paris émigré theatre in 1938. In the following years it became known also outside of Paris, but only in Russian émigré circles, while *The Waltz Invention* was not staged for thirty years.[25] *The Waltz Invention* reached a rather limited Western audience for the first time at the end of the 1960s in student productions.[26] The interest in Nabokov's plays and the staging of his novels has been more manifest in Russia, especially during *perestroika*, when formerly forbidden authors and playwrights gained prominence on the stage.[27] More recently, *The Event* was staged at the Nabokov Museum in St Petersburg and has also been adapted for the cinema by Andrei Eshpai.[28] Through the publication of the recent Russian edition of Nabokov's plays, the script for *The Man from the USSR* became for the first time available to Russian theatre practitioners and the play was performed at the Sfera Theatre in Moscow in 2009. Yet it has been the adaptations of Nabokov's novels which have been widely staged in Russia rather than his actual plays.[29]

[25] *The Event* was staged by Russian émigré theatres in Prague, Warsaw and Belgrade.

[26] The world premiere of *The Waltz Invention* was a rather modest affair at the Oxford University Russian Club under the direction of David Bellos in 1968 (see Véra Nabokov and David Bellos, misc. correspondence (1967–8), VN Berg; author's personal correspondence with David Bellos, 27 March 2002; Boyd, *American Years*, 529). A year later the play had its English premiere in Hartford, Connecticut (see Boyd, *American Years*, 576; 'Repertory: Nabokov in Embryo', *Time*, 24 January 1969). Since then the play has been staged only once more outside of Russia. In 1998, *The Waltz Invention* was taken up by the Strawdog Theatre Company, Chicago, under the direction of Nic Dimond (see Richard Christiansen, 'A Bizarre but Problematic Tragifarce', *Chicago Tribune*, 7 May 1998, 2).

[27] *The Waltz Invention* was directed, for instance, by Adolf Shapiro at the 'TIUZ' in Riga in 1988. For reviews see: G. Karpalov, '"Izobretenie Val'sa"', *Pravda*, 20 December 1988, 3; E. Matsekha, 'Nekto v serom zadaet zagadki: V. Nabokov na stsene Rizh. TIUZa', *Izvestiia*, 2 May 1989, 4; Roman Timenchik, 'Chitaem Nabokova: "Izobretenie Val'sa" v postanovke Adol'fa Shapiro', *Rodnik* 10 (1988), 46–8. *The Event* was staged, for instance, under the direction of Lev Rakhlin at the theatre studio 'Narodnyi dom' in Leningrad in 1989. For reviews see: T. Putrenko, 'Bednyi Nabokov', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 14 December 1988, 8; Ivan Tolstoi, 'Preodolenie steny: P'esy Vladimira Nabokova "Sobytie" i "Izobretenie Val'sa" v Leningrade i Rige', *Zvezda*, 7 (1989), 203–6.

[28] See Christine Engel, 'Andrei Eshpai: *The Event* (*Sobytie*, 2007)', *KinoKultura: New Russian Cinema*, 26 (2009) (www.kinokultura.com/2009/23r-sobytie.shtml).

[29] Andrea Tompa, 'Staging Nabokov', *Nabokov Online Journal*, 2 (2008) (http://etc.dal.ca/noj/volume2/articles/09_Tompa.pdf).