

Theatrical Performances in Petrograd of 1919-1920

Mass Performance Research Techniques

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Abstract—Theatrical performances, which emerged in the country after the Revolution of 1917 with the audience of tens of thousands of spectators, were an emblematic phenomenon of social and artistic way of life. The art of theatrical performances burst on the streets and squares, subjugating Petrograd historical architectural ensembles to the artistic design. The most prominent people of art of early XX century worked at these performances. To analyze theatrical performances in Petrograd, the Committee of Art's Sociology was established in the Russian Institute of Art History, whose members studied mass forms of theatre arts. This paper considers the Gvozdev's mass performance research methodology, analyzes critical and theoretical works of Gvozdev's school representatives, who concerned theatrical performances in Petrograd of 1919-1920.

Keywords—*theatrical performance; revolutionary theatre; Gvozdev's school of theatre studies; methodology; revolutionary art; Russian avant-gard*

I. INTRODUCTION

One hundred years ago the unique laboratory on making mass political performance, Theatre and Drama Workshop of the Red Army¹, was established in Petrograd. Having existed for one year, from March 1919 to March 1920, the workshop has affected the development of the form of theatrical performance deeply. In the workshop, V.E. Meyerhold has delivered “a number of brilliant lectures on theatre, solving again the issue of the Red Army Theatre, and carried out practical works with the Red Army men, having deeply affected the style of performances” [1]. Under the direction of N.N. Bakhtin, N.G. Vinogradov-Mamont, A.I. Piotrovsky, S.E. Radlov, N.A. Shcherbakov, etc. the stage versions of “Autocracy Overthrow”, “The Red Year”, “Bloody Sunday”, “The Sword of the World” and “The Fall of Commune” were performed both at special stages (Opera House of People's House, Ciniselli Circus) and open squares and parks of Petrograd, and fronts of the Civil War.

Aesthetics of political performance or “theatre of collective hero”², drama principles of working at the script,

¹ See: A.P. Shulpin, “Theatre and Drama Workshop of the Red Army. Amateur arts in Russia of the 20th century. Dictionary”, Moscow, Progress-Traditsiya Publ., 2010, pp. 432 – 434.

² The concept of the “theatre of collective hero” was introduced by A.R. Kugel in Note to the project of Proletkult theatre in 1920. The original

specific spatial and decorative design, ways of acting, and music finding generated at this period were reflected in subsequent world-known performances in Petrograd of 1920: “The Mystery of Emancipated Labour”, “To the World Commune”, “The Storming of the Winter Palace”. The eminent theatre directors, composers, painters, poets, actors and actresses worked at these performances, including N.I. Altman, M.F. Andreeva, Yu.P. Annenkov, G.I. Warlich, G.I. Gidoni, I.G. Grishashvili, M.V. Dobuzhinsky, N.N. Evreinov, A.R. Kugel, K.A. Mardzhanov, S.D. Maslovskaya, A.I. Piotrovsky, N.V. Petrov, S.E. Radlov, V.N. Solovyov, D.Z. Tiomkin, V.Kh. Khodasevich, V.A. Shchuko, etc. Subjugating Petrograd historical architectural ensembles to the artistic design, the art of theatrical performances burst on the streets and squares, presenting one of the aesthetic systems of the Russian theatrical avant-gard. This revolutionary art was not ignored by Petrograd theatre historians and critics, who applied particular methods of studying and recording mass performances.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

In 1920, in the State Institute of Art History (the Russian Institute of Art History at present), under the leadership of A.A. Gvozdev, a process of forming the method started, which was recorded in the art history as “Leningrad theatre school”. Expert in West European literature and theatre of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and modern period, theatre critic, and prominent scholar united a group of researchers at the theatre sector in the Institute of Art History. The methodology generated by Gvozdev's school enabled simultaneously to study both old-fashioned and modern performance and the history of European, Eastern and home theatre. The institute researchers worked simultaneously at the themes of European and Russian past and analyzed brisk theatre process, including the fields of music theatre, fiction forms and mass performances.

In 1922, the literally miscellany “The Green Bird” was published by the State Institute of Art History, where Gvozdev issued a detailed review of Max Herrmann's theatre studies work, professor of the University of Berlin, the founder of theatre studies as study in Germany. Gvozdev

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writes: “For the first time, we find here realization and carrying out of particular methods of special field of historical knowledge, namely the theatre history per se” [5]. Gvozdev defines the chief value of new work as determination of a scientific method of theatre history, which feature is methodology presented “practically as a specific research rather than theoretically as abstract discussion” [5].

Herrmann’s work is considered with the history of German theatre of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, particularly, the reconstruction of Hans Sachs’s play “Horny Siegfried” taken place on September 14, 1557, and performed by the German Meistersingers³. According to Gvozdev, Herrmann sets the theatre history two tasks: “first, the reconstruction of old-fashioned performances in all the details of their stage realization (stage, stage properties, décor, costumes and acting); and, second, critical use of iconographic materials (book illustrations to dramas, theatre engravings, pictures and drawings)” [5]. According to these two fundamental tasks of the theatre history, in the first part of the research, Herrmann carries out the scientific reconstruction of Nuremberg Meistersingers’ theatre, and in the second one, he represents critical review of book dramatic illustrations of XV-XVI centuries as the source of historical and theatrical knowledge.

According to Gvozdev, the unique accuracy of the reconstruction is reached through the simulation technique: “the content of each play’s stage direction is consecutively projected to the stage, which shape and dimensions are taken hypothetically at first based on scant documentary data, in other words, it is an attempt to place the main forms of actors’ action, stage properties and décor in particular space” [2]. All the arguments and hypotheses are either confirmed or disproved; the researcher continues his/her work only in case of determining secure indisputable basis. It should be noted that verifying Herrmann’s research techniques, Gvozdev analyzes critical essays on Herrmann’s work and works of seminarians of theatre studies institute, follows the development of new arts not only in Germany.

According to Gvozdev, the second part of the research “acquaints us more with the range of main methodological issues of the theatre history” [2]. The method of analyzing iconographic materials is at the center of attention, which may help to supplement the data on old-fashioned theatre. Herrmann finds it important to understand how accurately the picture, engraving or drawing reproduces truly theatre moment. Applying the method of analyzing iconographic materials, in his work, Herrmann should reveal truly stage element of the picture, leaving out picturesque moments by means of complicated combinations of theoretical research techniques.

Summing up the studying of Herrmann’s methodology, Gvozdev notes that the ideal way of the theatre history is “reconstructing the old-fashioned performances by director and philologist, equally experienced both in the methods of philological criticism and professional practice of theatre

³ See: M. Herrmann, “Research on the history of the German theatre of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance”, Transl. from Germ.; ed. by I.A. Nekrasova, St. Petersburg, RGISI Publ., 2017, p. 36.

<...> theatre historian should be aware of main forms and types of stage versions” [2]. Only coming closer to the theatre practice, taking into account adaptable techniques of historical and philological criticism, the theatrics historian may leave the stage of dilettantism.

On the one hand, the Theatre Department of the State Institute of Art History established by Gvozdev included historians and philologists, who chose the history of theatre of various countries for their research, and, on the other hand, it included people, directly taking part in theatre production and scientifically developing issues of theatre theory. Thus, the main approaches were determined in the Department: historical and theoretical. In contrast to German theatre studies institutes, where the work was carried out in an intimate circle by the experts in Germanic languages and literature, the Theatre History and Theory Department of the State Institute of Art History united the work of historians of Eastern, Russian and West European theatre, what enabled to apply comparative method in studying the issues of past and present. Moreover, Gvozdev’s approach was directed towards theory of theatre methods based on detailed comprehension of theatre tissue, performance’s flesh and its art forms. According to N.V. Pesochinsky, the significant difference between Herrmann and Gvozdev’s methods was in the fact that “Gvozdev and his adherents sought to describe theatre language (even that of the past historical epochs) at the level of action by means of material elements of the defined, not at all brought to them” [9].

In 1926 Gvozdev published the leading article “On changing the theatre systems” in the first issue of the Annals of the Theatre History and Theory Department of the State Institute of Art History. Considering iconography of European theatre of the modern period, he distinguished two types of stage: “box-set” appeared “in conditions of court festivals of Renaissance Italian aristocracy” [4], and “fair stage boards”, where several actors entertain the audience. According to Gvozdev, in both cases we can see a theatre with its typical elements: stage, actors and audience. However, it is a theatre of two different systems.

Gvozdev introduces a concept of “theatre system”, by which he means “correlation between a form of stage, type of audience, structure of acting and the nature of drama supporting an actor” [4]. Gvozdev defines the theatre system based on fair stage boards as “people’s theatre”. Considering the evolution of people’s theatre in West European theatrics from XVI to XIX centuries, Gvozdev just makes “outlines, which specification should become a subject of particular works” [4].

Having distinguished the main criteria of theatre system (a form of stage, audience, acting, drama), according to his methodology, in his article Gvozdev gives a detailed historical context, the main milestones of mass theatre development in the paradigm of the West European one. He analyzes drama, the evolution of the plots and actors’ professionalism. According to Gvozdev, “Russian theatre, which the October Revolution have set the tasks of great importance, will have to make a new theatre system for the broad masses” [4]. Gvozdev believes that it is “clear-eyed

understanding of historical destinies of the theatre and taking into account the century-old struggle between the systems of “court” and “people’s” theatres which should be changed by a new theatre system of revolutionary democracy as their higher synthesis that are at the same time the necessary prerequisite of successful development” [4].

Thus, Gvozdev vectors the research of people’s theatre embodied in mass performances in Petrograd of 1919-1924. Study of historical context and collection of documentary witnesses and sources on a performance were supplemented with the specific observations on the stage business, what contributed to theorization of theatre systems and identification of particular features of actors’ action. Gvozdev’s school representatives consider “performance as a system of vivid active figures rather than material constituents of space and mise en scene” [9]. The generated method of describing the director’s performance composition helped to discover the correlation between various levels of theatre action, and reveal “new opportunities of acting in director’s theatre <...> It was an uncommon example of criticism necessary to direction. In essence, both aspects of common theatre opposition were engaged in development of one area: new development of emancipated field of theatricality” [9].

As V.I. Maksimov notes, Gvozdev’s school was developing together with the new theatre of the 1920s: “it was not mechanical dependence. The dialogue was based on the fact that in any epoch innovation of the art sets the theorists the task of justifying the changes” [8]. This justification became possible, for the school had a theoretical platform, “from which a wide view of epochs and styles, languages and methods, and, above all, the nature of creativity opens” [8]. The school also understood that the research needs new means. In the 1920s the Committee of Art’s Sociology was established in the State Institute of Art History, whose experts engaged in direct analysis of theatrical performances in Petrograd, a new performance form of revolutionary art, applying the scholarly apparatus of Gvozdev’s school.

III. THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES IN PETROGRAD IN THE WORKS OF GVOZDEV’S SCHOOL REPRESENTATIVES

In 1922, in his work “St. Petersburg festivals”, A.I. Piotrovsky notes that in contrast to the group of Moscow theorists, “still waiting for emergence of mass festivals”, performances in Petrograd “have already been and, moreover, concluded already known <...> phase of their natural development” [11], which may become a subject of research for a theatre historian. Piotrovsky calls his work “an experiment of ‘heortology’ of St. Petersburg festivals of the summer of 1920”, the study of festivals, which subject is “description of ‘a ritual’” [11]. This article was the first one of the series of papers of the Theatre History and Theory Department of the State Institute of Art History, concerned with the theatrical performances in Petrograd.

In his brief sketch, Piotrovsky described “The Mystery of Emancipated Labour”⁴, “To the World Commune”⁵, “International Day in Krasnoye Selo camps”⁶ and “The Storming of the Winter Palace”⁷. The analysis of each theatrical performance starts with the reconstruction of the stage, scenography and disposition of the audience. For example, “clear evening, semicircular promontory of Stock Exchange Rostral Column, neighbouring quays and bridges turn black with the people. Stock Exchange front, the space between its columns, is covered with the canvas representing the fortress. Fanfares” [11]. The reconstruction of “To the World Commune” performance starts with digression on N. Altman’s less than fully realized scenographic design: “Natan Altman’s scene design has just remained in his pocket. And, after all, the artist wanted to cover the grey Stock Exchange pedestal with black, cover three last columns from the both sides of the uniform line of its ten ones with red fabric, make garden of green triangles and prisms at the centre, and hang a huge golden sphere above the classic pediment, and make a color correlate to the dramaturgic design of the festival in such a way, by differentiation between green, black and purple” [11]. As a practical man, being inside the production crew, describing the festivals and reconstructing a performance, Piotrovsky tries to give director’s context and record unknown facts for the purpose of making wider descriptive canvas, the history of the first mass revolutionary performances.

As a theorist, Piotrovsky uses the categories of “space”, “time” and “action” in his analysis, which determine the coordinates of research text, allowing to consider the evolution of director’s language in terms of four emblematic performances in a sketch. He managed to analyze the plots of theatrical performances, their development in the context of the history of mass performances. Describing the festival in

⁴ “The Mystery of Emancipated Labour”/ “Hymn to the Emancipation of Labour” is a mass performance performed at the Stock Exchange building on May 1, 1920. Organized by Political Department of Petrograd military district. Verses by I.G. Grishashvili. Directed by Yu.P. Annenkov, A.R. Kugel, S.D. Maslovskaya. Designed by Yu.P. Annenkov, V.A. Shchuko, M.V. Dobuzhinsky. Composed by G.I. Warlich. Performed by more than 2,000 actors and actresses.

⁵ “To the World Commune” is a mass performance performed at the Stock Exchange building on July 19, 1920. The original names: “The Struggle of Two Worlds”, “Two Worlds”. Organized by Petrograd Theatre Department led by M.F. Andreeva. Directed by K.A. Mardzhanov, N.V. Petrov, S.E. Radlov, V.N. Solovyov, A.I. Piotrovsky. Composed by G.I. Warlich. Designed by N.I. Altman. Written by V.V. Voinov, S.V. Luboš, S.E. Radlov, V.N. Solovyov. Performed by no less than 4,000 Red Army men, theatre youth and members of working-class theatre circle.

⁶ “International Day in Krasnoye Selo camps” is a theatrical military manoeuvre performed in the woods of Krasnoye Selo on August 2, 1920. Brief and supplemented version of “To the World Commune”. Organized by G.E. Gorbunov. Directed by A.I. Piotrovsky. Composed by N.M. Strelnikova. Performed by more than 2,000 Red Army men.

⁷ “The Storming of the Winter Palace” is a mass performance in Uritsky Square performed on November 7, 1920. Organized by D.Z. Tiomkin. Directed by N.N. Evreinov. Stages directed by: “white stage” – A.R. Kugel, N.K. Derzhavin, A.F. Klark, A.G. Movshenson; “red stage” – N.V. Petrov, N.I. Misheev, L.S. Vivien; “silhouette performance” – Andreev, Levitsky, Guzeev; “attack on the Winter Palace” – Mirimanov, Stepanov, Glagolev. Composed by G.I. Warlich. Designed by Yu.P. Annenkov. Written by V.V. Voinov, S.V. Luboš, S.E. Radlov, V.N. Solovyov. Performed by more than 6,000 participants.

honor of the Second World Congress of III International, "To the World Commune", Piotrovsky seeks to analyze actors' action: "on the same day it was an attempt to switch from illusive actors' action to the true one, "real". The "real" cars and cannons were introduced into the festivals. The troops, marched past, executed their "real" motion, the representatives of the "real" trade unions were introduced into the even evident illusive nations of the world procession, and the sham badges interchanged with the genuine workshops' emblems. Thus, in the first research on theatrical performances the author brings up one of the principal issues of mass performance theatre system: the correlation between the real and illusive in performance, the opportunities of stage time and scenes. The stage time may cover a thousand-year historical period in a performance; it may transfer from one century to another, from the present to the past, and vice-versa. These transfers are also possible in the scenes, since, for example, revolutionary events in Paris and Petrograd were represented in a performance.

As a practical man, Piotrovsky also researches into particular director's techniques and managerial decisions. Considering "The Storming of the Winter Palace", the researcher notes that the principle of contrapuntal action "has reached here the higher development at the multipartite stage. Unfortunately, at the same time it was radically undermined by the introduction of alternating illumination of the stages. While one stage is alive, another one is darkened. The first one dies away, the second one emerges from the darkness at the semi-shout, semi-gesture. The continuity of festive action, so happily found in the very first experiment, was broken here. It was glimpses of a film rather than the 'mystery'..." [11].

Later, N.N. Evreinov has responded to Piotrovsky's criticism. In his director's developments he tells the following about this episode: "Extremely complicated illumination system of two grand stages ("red" and "white" stages) was brilliantly designed by the engineer, Meisel, without application of soffits (inappropriate in the open air) and searchlights, disobedient to the task of instant light switching on and off. Comrade Meisel has managed with only thousand-candle lamps, in a twinkling illuminating the stage, where an action was starting, and at the same pace dying away at the stage, where the action was coming to an end. This instantaneity, together with the "obedient" light intensity, was very important for us, for we perfectly understood that instantaneous audience attention focusing on the action of one stage could be reached only by means of complete and instant switching lights. The performance has fully justified our intention and it may be explained as misunderstanding that one of the critics has not shared our "apperception" point of view, prompted by the psychology of theatre audience" [7].

Thus, in the first work of the State Institute of Art History on festivals, Piotrovsky appears both as the theatre historian, researching into the phenomenon of mass performances in the theatre context, and the theatre practical man, inspecting the director's techniques, generating a research approach to study the performances. The combination of historical and philological criticism methods and knowledge of

professional theatre practice in research allowed to describe director's composition of performances and correlate various levels of stage text.

Gvozdev's school leading work on researching theatrical performances in Petrograd of 1919-1924 is "Mass festivals" anthology by the Committee of Art's Sociology of the State Institute of Art History. The collective work, emerged due to the initiative of the Theatre History and Theory Department, was initially being carried out by Theatre Laboratory led by the post-graduate student, N. Izvekov. The main purpose of research papers included into the anthology was "research and fixation of pictorialism and performance nature of the festival in its past and present" [3]. According to the research techniques, the entire anthology was divided into three parts, which were complied with the chronological sequence of the material under consideration.

The first part was concerned with the issues of the history of mass festivals in the West. In the second part, Piotrovsky describes theatrical performances of the first years after the October Revolution in the name of spectator and participator of the events, gives a chronology of the performances, indicating the date, time, venue and occasion to which the festivals were timed.

TABLE I. EXTRACT FROM THE CHRONOLOGY OF LENINGRAD FESTIVALS MADE UP BY A.I. PIOTROVSKY⁸

Date	Festival	Performance name
11.03.1919	Autocracy Overthrow	The festival of Autocracy Overthrow was organized by the Red Army Theatre and Drama workshop
07.11.1919	The Second Anniversary of the October Revolution	Festive performances in theatres. "The Red Year" was performed by the Red Army workshop.
22.01.1920	Bloody Sunday	"Bloody Sunday" in People's House (the Red Army workshop).
23.02.1920	The Second Anniversary of the Red Army	"The Sword of the World" in Ciniselli Circus.
18.03.1920	Paris Commune	"The Fall of Commune" is a performance of the Red Army in the Opera House of the People's House.
01.05.1920	The Third May-day Meeting	"The Mystery of Emancipated Labour" at the Stock Exchange.
20.06.1920	Opening of the Rest Island	"Blockade of Russia" performance in the amphitheatre on Kamenny Island.
19.07.1920	The Second World Congress of III International	"To the World Commune" at the Stock Exchange.
08.08.1920	Krasnoye Selo Festival	The mass performance in Krasnoye Selo camps.
07.11.1920	The Third Anniversary of the October Revolution	"The Storming of the Winter Palace".

⁸ A.I. Piotrovsky, "The Chronicle of Leningrad Festivals of 1919-1924", Leningrad, Academia Publ., 1926, p. 84.

Describing “The Sword of the World”⁹ performance, among whose creators was the very author, Piotrovsky gives the extracts of reviews of the theatrical performance and sums up the aesthetic quests of this period: military parade as an integral part of the performance, stage version of the fight, banner lighting, symbolical rain of red stars – all these director’s solutions were reflected in subsequent Petrograd performances. It should be noted that the script of this performance was preserved in full due to Piotrovsky’s publication in the brochure of Political and Educational Department of Petrograd military district [10]. There are particular characters among the performance characters: People’s Commissar as “the embodiment of revolutionary mass energy”, White General as “any enemy of the revolutionary people” and the Three Wise Men. The collective hero is represented by male and female workers, Russian and German soldiers, the Red Army men, officers, kings, ministers and the Pope. The playwright identifies the action time as the Revolution.

The last part of the State Institute of Art History anthology was based on the summary of Leningrad performance records from October 1924 to October 1925 made by the Theatre Laboratory, which members were A.D. Avdeev, A.S. Gushchin, A.D. Diev, N.P. Izvekov, B.N. Kilpio, N.A. Lastochkin, S.E. Pallerstein, etc. In the anthology such issues as both of the aesthetics of performance in the works “The exterior life of mass festival”, “Festival decorating”, “Leaflet”, and of sociology, in “The audience of mass festival” article, were brought up.

The last theoretical work summing up the study of theatrical performances of the Theatre Sector of the State Institute of Art History was “Mass festivals” section in the History of Soviet Theatre of the State Academy for Art Studies in 1933, which in many respects replicates previously published texts. Therein, the authors, Gvozdev and Piotrovsky, generally character this period, point out some impact of festival aesthetics of the French Revolution upon the aesthetics of the Soviet performances as well as succession of the development of mass performance direction: from the experiments of Theatre and Drama Workshop of the Red Army through the large-scale monumental performances of the Civil War to the performances of TRAM (Theatre of Young Workers), being a vivid page of the Soviet theatre history of the next decade [6].

IV. CONCLUSION

Gvozdev’s school contribution to the study of theatrical performances is indisputable. For the first time, the theorists have addressed to the issue of recording and reconstruction of theatrical performances in the context of theatre history and theory. Taking into account the techniques of historical and philological criticism, mastering the experience of mass

⁹ “The Sword of the World” is a revolutionary performance in Ciniselli Circus on February 23, 1920. Written by A.I. Piotrovsky, directed by S.E. Radlov. Performed by the apprentices of Theatre and Drama Workshop of the Red Army, chorus of Political and Educational Department of Petrograd military district, theatre circles of Petrograd garrison, and brass band. Total 150 performers.

festival reconstruction consisted not only in logical description of theatrical performance, but also in particular ways of fixating composition in director’s score. Correlating between the form of stage, type of audience and their disposition, ways of acting, and the nature of drama supporting an actor was the aim which turned into a basis of methodology of studying the theatrical performances. What was called “content”, “idea” was suggested to reveal in art logic rather than existential one, in the features of composition, theatre language, and performance form rather than what characters say at the stage.

There are central tasks making up the performance research methodology which may be distinguished: logical description of the stage, scenographic solution and its coordination with Petrograd historical architectural ensemble; analysis of audience disposition towards scenes and actors at the stage; episode structure of drama, where in each episode the key event is revealed, for example, historical fact (revolt, battle, fraternization, etc.). Having described large-scale parameters of drama and its realizations in the open air, in the main part of research the authors proceed to particular director’s techniques and solutions, consider the features of acting the collective hero and other characters in detail. Such an approach allows to consider the phenomena of mass revolutionary culture in the discourse of art criticism, determining aesthetic opportunities of synthesizing various kinds of art in theatrical performances: music, choreography, painting, pantomime techniques, buffoonery and shadow theatre, pyrotechnic, water and light means of expression.

Formation of direction and study of theatre in the 1920s are a single and inseparable process. Both theatre practical people and theorists conceive the theatrics nature. Uniting into creative laboratories, scholars and directors were concerned with the development of history, theory and practice of theatrical performances, establishing the succession of mass performance forms and determining the innovation of Petrograd monumental actions. The very staging of mass performances is also in a sense comprehension of theatre its own nature, its opportunities in realizing art tasks in decorations of Petrograd architectural ensemble for the audience of many thousands. Aesthetically reinterpreted mass performance gains new director’s tools, art style, drama, which represented one of the most large-scale phenomena of Russian avant-gard. The aesthetics of Petrograd performances generated at this period was later spread in Soviet performance art.

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