

MEYERHOLD, DIRECTOR OF OPERA

Cultural Change and Artistic Genres

Dolja Dragasevic

Goldsmiths College

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## **Abstract**

**This dissertation on Meyerhold situates his theatre practice, and, notably, his work on opera in the context of the changing political and cultural climate in Russia during the period 1905 – 1939 and its impact on developing artistic genres. It studies the way different genres in his theatre interlocked with, anticipated or captured cultural changes in relation to the aesthetics of the World of Art group, Imperial Theatres and the Soviet Policy on the arts and theatre. Meyerhold's work encapsulated the main tendencies and problems of the Russian avant-garde at the time, and the educational role of the arts in relation to the goal of social progress. The newly developing relationship between art and Soviet society was complex, where artists learned from everyday life at the same time as the public learned from art. In this context, concepts such as proletarian culture and artistic synthesis, in respect of the role of the arts are of vital importance to the argument of the thesis.**

**Scholarly research on Meyerhold has predominantly focused on the director's work in dramatic theatre, not on his work on opera, a field that is one of the most important aspects of his practice as a whole. Meyerhold wanted to bridge the gap between the spectator and the performer, to create a unified theatrical experience by utilising all the arts as epitomised in operatic performance. Despite each genre presenting its own problems, which resulted in treatments of staging relevant to it, Meyerhold sought to bring theatre and opera together into an integrated performance – a spectacle set to music. The cross pollination between the arts in the theatre established new ways of perceiving and creating performances. His rewriting of the score and libretto for dramatic purposes significantly opened up new possibilities for staging opera. Meyerhold established new theatrical techniques drawn directly from musical terminology and structures. The director became an author of a production creating tightly constructed musical, theatrical and visual compositions on the stage, which sought to capture and commemorate the spirit of the age.**

**This interdisciplinary research analyses the aesthetic principles of music, art and drama, which have usually been separated in academic study. The methodology applied consists of an empirical and analytic study.**

## **Introduction**

**Vsevolod Meyerhold is a key figure in the theatre of the twentieth century. His theatre practice embraced and significantly stamped his mark upon the European culture of the first half of the twentieth century. The director's search for an artistic experience which could harness all the potential energies of artistic expression drew him towards the public arena of theatre and opera. His creative career and directing work was and remains inspirational to many practitioners and scholars.**

**Having fallen victim to the Stalinist purges and executed on 2 February 1940, his artistic legacy had been shrouded in secrecy for fifteen years in the Soviet Union. The official day of his rehabilitation 10 January 1955 by the Military Collegium of the Soviet Supreme Court opened the path to the restoration of his reputation and work in the country. This was a difficult path. Strict Soviet censorship lasting until perestroika resulted in the suppression of many key sources in regard to the cultural period studied. An interesting example is Eisenstein's 'secret' preservation of crucial documents from Meyerhold's library after the latter was arrested. Another example is that the first book on Vkhutemas (The Higher State Art and Technical Training Centre), *Vkhutemas* by Selim Khan-Magomedov, an institution equivalent in stature to the German Bauhaus, did not appear until as late as 1995. Although there is a considerable amount of scholarship on Meyerhold today, his legacy had been difficult to evaluate and restore, since for years he was persona non grata within the Soviet Union, and important archives were closed to scholars.**

After his rehabilitation, the first wave of scholarly study in the 1960s and 1970s commenced with the first full critical account of Meyerhold's theatre practice by Konstantin Rudnitsky in 1969, and was followed in the west, notably in the work of Edward Braun, Alma Law and Béatrice Picon-Vallin. During this period many original sources were published: A compilation of work by his contemporaries edited by L.Vendrovskaia, *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom (Encounters with Meyerhold)* in 1967; a two volume book including the director's writings, lectures, interviews, *Meierkhol'd: Stat'i, pis'ma, rechi, besedy* (1968) principle editor Alexander Fevral'sky; Braun's anthology, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (1969), and Meyerhold's correspondence with his contemporaries, *V.E.Meierkhol'd, Perepiska* (1976), edited by V.Korshunova and M. Sitkovetskaia.

The second wave of study after the release of the KGB files and other state documents since 1989 resulted in publication of further critical studies and primary sources. The chronology of events related to the director's rehabilitation have been published in *Meierkhol'dovskii sbornik: vypusk pervyi* in 1992, edited by A.Sherel'. Maia Sitkovetskaia's 1993 two volume edition, *Meierkhol'd repertiruet* is comprised of the director's documented rehearsals of the 1920s and 30s. The first volume of the book *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike*, a chronological compilation of reviews of his productions from 1892 to 1918, was published in 1997, while the second volume, covering the 1920-1938 period, appeared in 2000. Oleg Fel'dman's edition *V.E.Meierkhol'd.Nasledie. 1. Avtobiographicheskie materialy. Dokumenty 1896-1903* in 1998, consisting of autobiographical texts and documents was followed by his compilation of further original sources in *Meierkhol'dovski sbornik: vypusk vtoroi, Meierkhol'd i drugie: dokumenty i materialy* in 2000.

Contemporary scholars are increasingly attracted to Meyerhold's methodology as a director and its different aspects. Alla Mikhailova's book *Meierkhol'd i Khudozhniki (Meyerhold and Set Designers)* examines his work with artists-designers. The compilation of articles in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda (Meyerhold: Towards a history of creative method)*, edited by N.Pesochinsky and E.Kukhta analyse different elements of Meyerhold's technique. For example, Kukhta's 'Revizor' is concerned with the dramaturgy of his theatre. In Macedonia, the scholarship of Mishel Pavlovski's 1998 book *Chista Igra (Pure Play)* considers Meyerhold's training of actors. Robert Leach's recent book *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold* (2003) explores the relationship between the two acting systems of these practitioners. Béatrice Piccon-Vallin and Vadim Shcherbakov's edition of articles in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka (Meyerhold, direction within a century's context)*, following the international symposium on Meyerhold in Paris in 2000, demonstrate further research into the director's methodology. Articles by Nadezhda Tarhis 'O muzykal'nom realizme Meierkhol'da' ('About Meyerhold's musical realism') and Aleksandr Chepurov's 'Mizanstseny na muzyke' ('Staging set to music') have been of particular importance to the argument of this thesis. The former researches the musicality of his dramatic theatre in general, while the latter provides an analysis of Meyerhold's use of music in *Masquerade*.

Meyerhold's work on opera has been largely ignored in favour of his dramatic productions. Even the scholarly interest in Meyerhold's use of music tends to remain within the framework of his dramatic productions. Although there has been work conducted on Meyerhold's staging of opera by Abram Gozenpud and Isaac Glikman,

these studies tend to separate his operatic productions from his work as a whole. The methodology and ideas behind his operatic performances still require further research. This thesis argues that there is an inseparable link between his staging of dramatic and operatic performances. By looking at these two areas of his work as a whole, it is possible to detect the inner logic of his explorations and the way in which his artistic principles developed.

The primary focus is on Meyerhold's work in opera, since it illuminates his theatre practice and methodology as a whole. Meyerhold wanted to cross the divide between the spectator and the performer, to create a unified theatrical experience by utilising all the arts as epitomised in operatic performance. In both theatre and opera, he developed his use of artistic synthesis by drawing on the principles of music.

Due to the lack of access to archival material, there has been a tendency in early western scholarship to separate Meyerhold's work into two periods: before and after 1917. In my view, this obscures both the social and artistic significance of his work. The Russian Revolution, as well as Meyerhold's post-revolutionary theatre, did not happen in isolation, rather, it grew from and assimilated various aspects of both European and Russian socio-cultural and political tradition. Although Meyerhold's work has been viewed within its context, particularly the politics of post-revolutionary Russia, for example in the scholarship of David Zolotnitsky's book *Meierkhol'd. Roman s sovetskoi vlast'iu* (1999), the complex strands of cultural, social and historical discourses in his work still need to be analysed.

This dissertation analyses the aesthetic principles of music, art and drama, which have usually been separated in academic study and aims thereby to expand the generic and methodological research on Meyerhold's theatre. The methodology applied consists of an empirical and analytic study.

Meyerhold's operatic work is rooted in the cultural environment of the time and it can not be fully understood without it. This study also situates his theatre practice in the context of the rapidly changing political and cultural climate (1905-1939) and its influence on the developing artistic genres. It examines the way his genres of performance interlocked with, anticipated or captured cultural change.

Meyerhold was born in Penza, Russia on 28 January 1874.<sup>1</sup> He enrolled at Moscow University to study to law, but left it to pursue his interest in the theatre. After training to be an actor at Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko's drama school, he entered the newly founded Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). This artistic enterprise established in 1897 would make a significant mark on the course of twentieth-century theatre. Its founders, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, set out to create a theatre based on ensemble art, simplicity and naturalness in acting, and its productions of the plays of Anton Chekhov became their trademark. Although admiring Stanislavsky, Meyerhold protested against the theatre's obsession with naturalistic detail and its politically neutral attitude. It was Chekhov, in fact, who gave voice to his critical attitude: 'New forms are needed' proclaimed Meyerhold from the stage in the role of Treplev. Dissatisfied with himself and excluded from the newly shareholding acting body of the theatre, Meyerhold left the company in 1902 and set off to work in the provinces. After slavishly reconstructing almost all of the MAT's

repertoire in a very short period of time, he founded 'The Fellowship of the New Drama' in 1903. Immersed in the latest drama, the young actor turned director, started to develop his own unique signature.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the rapid social changes such as the hugely expanding economic market and urbanisation, were accompanied by the erection of a socio-cultural utopia both in Russia and the west. In Russia, however, the intelligentsia, characterised by their sense of moral mission and social responsibility, seized upon this with particular intensity. Many artists, who were strongly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, searched for an absolute truth in their work, aiming to rejuvenate the human condition, to create a cultural rebirth, to transform the world through the spirit of music. Their experiments with the integration of art forms and styles sought to reveal the 'substance' behind the visible reality and the link between ideas and cultures, both within their own tradition and between Russia and Europe. The heightened interest in art synthesis raised the stature of the theatre as the ideal public space in which to explore and combine its various facets and where the reforms in the audience stage relationship could address the need for human synthesis by a new kind of participation.

Music here gained a special prominence in this integration, since music provided the means to organise and harmonise the arts in both the dramatic and operatic theatre. Music became a guiding principle in Meyerhold's practice and in his formulation of the principles of the art of the director.



Feeling that the changing conditions of Russian society needed a new form of expression, Stanislavsky invited Meyerhold to head his newly founded Studio in 1905. Here the tradition of theatre studio was founded, committed to joint experimentation that would significantly influence twentieth century theatre. The 1905 Revolution disrupted Meyerhold's rehearsals and the Studio was closed. But the work conducted at the Studio was crucial to his creative development as it marked the beginning of his experiments into new methods of artistic synthesis and symbolism. Meyerhold returned to the provinces, but the unexpected invitation in 1906 of the famous actress, Vera Komissarzhevskaya, to join her theatre brought the young director to St Petersburg, the centre of Russian cultural life.

The first chapter examines Meyerhold's practice in relation to the aesthetics of the World of Art, a dominant movement associated with the city of St Petersburg. The World of Art members revolutionised the outlook on aesthetics of most of the Russian intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The group's focus on the integration of the arts, theatricality and stylisation significantly revived the art of performance. Meyerhold shared their artistic sensibilities and also contributed to the culture of the period.

The second and the third chapters study Meyerhold's staging of German and Russian opera at the Imperial Theatre in St Petersburg. The relevant social and artistic interest in these operas is considered. Meyerhold's merging of art forms in opera initiated operatic reforms, creating new styles and genres of performance. Guided by the score, the director synthesised all the elements of a performance and produced musical forms in the staging. His direction of the opera *The Stone Guest* and work with

Mikhail Gnesin on rhythmical reading with dramatic actors, demonstrated the director's experimentation with music and word. His work with contemporary composers, in turn, showed his vital engagement with the latest trends in music.

Meyerhold's theatre production of *Masquerade* (1917) studied in the fourth chapter, illuminated artistic principles and concerns that reappeared in the director's work throughout his career. He reformed the tradition of the play's performance, incorporated operatic principles in the staging and created a spectacle set to music. By fostering links between and emphasising common themes of Russian classics, Meyerhold explored the theme of Russia, its identity and destiny. Through his use of the image of the gambler and his representation of Russian high society of the 1830s, the director produced a unique commentary in the production.

The fifth chapter addresses what is happening in opera and culture in general in the years following the October Revolution. It examines how revolutionary ideals were incorporated into the new concept of proletarian culture. The primary focus is upon the avant-garde artistic movements that, broadly speaking, fused their artistic ideas with the ideals of political revolution. Meyerhold became a key figure in the creation of the Soviet institution of theatre. His dramatic productions were important for opera, since the development of soviet opera and drama drew from each other.

In post-revolutionary Russia, politics was changing at a dramatically fast pace. This provoked numerous explorations within the arts and stimulated different views in relation to the practices of both socialism and the arts. During the Civil War the focus was on agitation and propaganda, which sought to promote and educate the public in

the spirit of socialism. In 1921, the New Economic Policy (NEP) allowed a small form of free trade policy. This period was marked by a relative openness in the arts, but also tensions within the Communist Party, as elements of capitalism and socialism attempted to exist side by side in the economy. In 1928 Stalin launched his ambitious first five-year plan of rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation. In the course of the 1930s, the government centralised the arts with the aim of achieving a cultural hegemony and the avant-garde movement was brutally suppressed. Artists were to follow the rigid code of socialist realism, which meant a 'realistic' and positive representation of Soviet reality and its political aims.

Meyerhold's developing artistic principles, that involved a constant creation of new forms of theatre, emphasis on music, theatricality, stylisation, reforms in acting and methods of staging are examined in the sixth chapter and reflect the director's experience of, and his commentary on, the changing cultural climate of the 1920s. New theatrical terminologies such as 'musical dramaturgy', 'score of the performance', 'music-scenic events' are considered, as well as aspects of his dramatic productions that demonstrate the interrelationship of Meyerhold's staging of opera and drama and illuminate the critical points in his development as a director.

The last chapter, analyses his direction of the opera *The Queen of Spades* (1935), where the experience of his dramatic theatre transformed the art of opera. Meyerhold's cutting of the score and changing of the libretto significantly opened up new possibilities for staging opera. As was the case with Stanislavsky's work, his reforms in operatic conventions and styles of performance, founded the modern opera.

The main body of this research was taken from a range of original and secondary sources. The former included the collected writings of Meyerhold and his contemporaries, as for instance, Lunacharsky in a two-volume book *O teatre i dramaturgii (About Theatre and Dramaturgy)*. The collection of Meyerhold's scores with his own markings at the Bakhrushin museum made it possible to trace in detail his musical and conceptional vision of individual productions, as well as his work with composers. Sitkovetskaia's compilation of Meyerhold's documented rehearsals was of significant help in following his artistic logic, as were Miličević's and Braun's anthologies of Meyerhold's writings and speeches. The research draws on reviews of his productions and especially on the work of Meyerhold's contemporaries, M.Gnesin, E.Kaplan, B.Asafiev, A.Gvozdev and A.Fevralsky. The compilation of original documents, rehearsals and reviews regarding Meyerhold's staging of *The Queen of Spades*, in *V.E.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama: zamysel. voploshchenie. sud'ba* (1994) edited by G.Kopytova, have been of particular importance to the argument of this thesis.

Apart from the readings in Russian and English I have also drawn upon Bulgarian and Yugoslav criticism. This is due to the specific political nature and position of Yugoslavia, in which Russian culture was very influential. After the 1917 Revolution there was a significant migration of Russian intelligentsia to Yugoslavia. Meyerhold's assistant at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, Iurii Rakitin, settled in Serbia, where, as a director of the National Theatre in Belgrade, he staged over one hundred productions. Therefore, the books written there have broadened my perception of the period researched. These studies were in many cases in the original Russian, Serbo-Croat, Macedonian and Bulgarian and most of the translations are my own.

The transliteration of names have been adopted in this thesis in accordance with the Library of Congress System, except for all Russian family names ending in 'skii', which are in the text as 'sky'. ( for example, Piotrovskii - Piotrovsky). Some Russian names have standard form (for example, Meierkol'd – Meyerhold or Chaikovskii – Tchaikovsky) which are incorporated in the text, but not in footnotes. Edward Braun's standardised use of most of the names in *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre* (1998), have also been included in the text of this dissertation.

1. The dates in this thesis before October 1917 are according to the old Julian calendar

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Meyerhold in relation to the Aesthetics of the World of Art Group**

Meyerhold's theatre practice in its entirety cannot be fully understood without relating it to the aesthetics of the World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*) group and the concepts of great moment to this group such as form, stylisation and integration of all the arts together. The World of Art members looked to the past. This produced the driving force behind the ordering of the group's major aesthetic principles. Its revision of artistic forms inherited from the past created a contemporary interpretation of artistic tradition while questioning the meaning and role of art. It could be argued that the World of Art's concern with form created a cult of form, one to which Meyerhold responded with enthusiasm. The strong emphasis on the form and the integration of the arts expanded and tested the boundaries of each artistic practice. The cross pollination of the arts resulted in shifting genres amongst the different artistic disciplines. All these principles related to Meyerhold's aesthetics and created the musicality of his theatre, which in turn would make his direction of opera unique.

The founding members of the World of Art came from Benois' 'Society for self-improvement.' They all practised different artistic disciplines and pursued their own diverse interests: the main occupation for Dmitry Filosofov and Walter Nouvel was music, while for Alexander Benois, Leon Bakst and Konstantin Somov it was art and stage design. Sergei Diaghilev's involvement with music in the early years was followed by his interest in painting and theatre. Gradually other artists were included – first composers, then dancers and choreographers. For the World of Art members

and later for the Ballets Russes, opera was crucial to the artistic credo, particularly as it represented the ideal of an integrated art form. The Ballets Russes was a company created by Diaghilev which promoted Russian ballet in the West to triumphant critical acclaim. The *Saisons Russes* were annual events of Russian culture, ballet, music and opera that Diaghilev organised in Paris. After a series of Russian music recitals in Paris, he produced Modest Mussorgosky's opera *Boris Godunov* and eventually between 1909 and 1914 he mounted nine more operas and twenty two ballets, all of which were designed by artists of the World of Art group.

The aesthetics of the World of Art belonged to a larger conception of the silver culture. The phrase 'silver culture' refers to an upsurge of artistic activity and movements in Russia in the late nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth which the World of Art embraced. Subsequently, as Janet Kennedy writes, the *Miriskussniki* represented a model for change by introducing 'a new critical vocabulary and a new set of artistic models for the Russian public.'<sup>1</sup> The various artistic discourses such as the foundation of the Moscow Art Theatre or Mamontov's private opera company marked the silver era of the Russian culture; in turn, the culture bred its own particular 'silver creativity'. Meyerhold's career showed a broad range of 'silver aestheticism' at Stanislavsky's Studio and during his work in St Petersburg, where theatrical theory and experimentation combined. The influence of the movement of the time – symbolism with its distinctive aspects of artistic synthesis and the view of the enlightening role of theatre, was of particular importance to Meyerhold. Thus the development of the director's aesthetics is related to the 'silver' cultural discourses that he found most appropriate for theatre practice.



From the outset it is hard to trace the precise influence of the aesthetics of the World of Art upon Meyerhold's theatre practice. Meyerhold belonged to a different generation of artists and his career developed largely after Diaghilev's departure from Russia and the last issue of the *World of Art* journal in December 1904. However, there seem to have been points of amalgamation between both Diaghilev's and Meyerhold's artistic development. Their first recorded encounter took place in 1906. Lynn Garafola suggests that the meeting identifies Diaghilev's interest in the developments of symbolist experimentation.<sup>2</sup> During the same year Meyerhold expressed the hope that Diaghilev would build a new theatre. Up to 1914 most of Diaghilev's inspiration was Russian, or showed a Russian interpretation of western culture. Although the First World War and later the 1917 Revolution broke the ties between Russia and the west, Diaghilev followed the Russian movement in the arts. In 1923 he became interested in Meyerhold's and Tairov's productions. In the same year, he commissioned Prokofiev to write on the theme of Soviet constructivism and hoped to collaborate on this project with Meyerhold. The director was unable to get involved due to professional engagements in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Although both artists were strongly influenced by the silver culture, they moved beyond the original circle of the World of Art in their pursuit of the latest movement in the arts. Rudnitsky points out that in 1929 Diaghilev proposed a schedule for the new season that was to include Meyerhold's productions of *The Forest*, *The Government Inspector* and *The Magnificent Cuckold*.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately this season never became reality. Although these two artists were not to collaborate on a single artistic project, their art was certainly affected by each other. Meyerhold's work for the stage had also influenced some of the World of Art artists, notably its artist-designers and musicians, Golovin and Prokofiev, for instance, and, through them, the Ballets Russes itself.

## **History and aesthetics**

**During the late nineteenth century, the accelerated change in all aspects of life such as urbanisation, capitalism and the deconstruction of the Tsarist state sought its own forms of expression in art and theatre. Russia's industrial development resulted in an increased size of the urban bourgeoisie and the working class, laying the way for a formation of underground political organisations, such as the Social-Democratic Party in 1898 and the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1900. Tsar Nicholas II opposed any attempt for democratisation, but the weakening of his autocracy and monopoly on the arts opened the road for independent artistic enterprise. The growth of amateur activities and the gradual decline of the artistic monopoly of the recognised and traditional institutions resulted in the opening up of artistic culture. In 1882 Mamontov founded his opera company. This first Russian private theatrical enterprise engaged some of the most prominent artists – among them Alexander Golovin, Konstantin Korovin, Mikhail Vrubel, and musicians and singers of the day, notably Fyodor Chaliapin. Here, the great Russian tradition of theatrical design and artistic collaboration began; for the first time opera was seen as a fully integrated artistic spectacle. Most of Mamontov's artists were later members of the World of Art or participated in its exhibitions and artistic projects.**

**Although containing elements of modernism and symbolism in its artistic agenda, the World of Art movement was not confined to them, but openly assimilated and examined other artistic phenomena. The absence of any coherent policy governing the World of Art's aesthetic approach resulted in an eclectic mixture of artistic styles. Rather than adhering to a single aesthetic ideal, the artists of this group drew their**

inspiration from a variety of contemporary western trends represented by Vallotton, Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Beardsley, Whistler and Japanese prints, but also took motifs from Russian folk tales and history. In 1898 their first journal was launched. The journal attracted young people with broad cultural interests and who openly criticised the established artistic institutions, notably the Wanderers and the Academy. The former extended the didactic positivist philosophies of the Social Democrats in realistic depictions of historical and socio-political subjects. The latter was committed to rigidity and stiffness in art. Therefore, even though the *Miriskussniki* demonstrated a wide range of eclecticism in their art, the movement was still defined by a distinctive artistic agenda and sensibility.

The members of the World of Art strove to create national forms of art in relation to western artistic developments. The journal varied in content, discussing various artistic practices and movements. It familiarised its readers with the modernist culture of western Europe, for example, with the German Simplicissimus group, but also with European and Russian symbolism in general. It also focused on old and contemporary Russian art, particularly that of St Petersburg and Moscow. The content included the introduction of contemporary art forms of the west and philosophical debates regarding, for instance, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky and Chernyshevsky. Such elements as slavophilism, nationalism, westernism and cosmopolitanism were prominent in the journal's content.

These elements, in the Russian context, represented the promotion of St Petersburg artists, who were historically orientated towards the western art, and Moscow artists, who represented 'real' Russian art. The assumption of a 'real' Russian art usually

drew its inspiration from subjects rooted in the national culture, such as folk and fairy tales, and was embedded in the slavophile debate. Slavophiles idealised the Russia that had existed before Peter the Great, some of them believing in its potential to be the moral saviour of the world. They were against western influences that did not correspond to the notion of a Russian or even Slavic spirit. In its search for 'authentic' national expression, the World of Art members, especially Ivan Bilibin and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, had an interest in medieval and pagan Russia; the World of Art's interest in Moscow artists and the neo-Russian style found a rich vein of inspiration in peasant culture. Meyerhold staged Peter Potemkin's folk farce *Petrushka* with designs by Dobuzhinsky and Bilibin in 1908 at the Strand. However, even though the members of the World of Art aimed to create a national art, they were not confined to national artistic resources. The society's exhibitions and the journal succeeded in merging the two movements of St Petersburg and Moscow, thus striving towards a new cosmopolitan Russian art.

Meyerhold's theatre practice showed a distinctive merging of western and national forms of art. For instance, in his production of *The Fairground Booth*, the Russian imprint upon the dramatic form of *commedia dell'arte* was evident. As Spencer Golub writes, Sapunov's design of *The Fairground Booth* was essentially Russian:

Sapunov fascinated Meyerhold by the extraordinary combination of azure skies (under which Harlequin and Columbine were once born) with a touch of Russian philistinism and stagnation, which forced its way into the composition and linked it to contemporary life. Brought face-to face in Sapunov's design of *The Fairground Booth* were Shabolovka (a street on the outskirts of Moscow where Sapunov had spent his childhood years) and Florence, suburban Moscow and Tuscany, Russia and Italy. The ensuing 'alternation' with reality was bound to capture Meyerhold's imagination.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Sapunov and Meyerhold, by merging western and national aesthetics, created a distinctive national cosmopolitan form of art. Such aesthetic synthesis perhaps attempted to define a certain national idiom and identity that drew parallels with the west but was still markedly different. The question of defining Russian identity in the arts is a subject in itself, beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is important to emphasise that, throughout his career, Meyerhold explored the notion of Russian identity and history in relation to its cultural change. By merging different styles and genres, as, for example, *commedia* with Russian verse theatre in his production of *Masquerade* in 1917, the director created a new way of looking at tradition, raising questions about the condition of Russian society.

New artistic forms were sought to express contemporary concerns. By capturing the sense of contemporary life, artists re-evaluated and accelerated the development of Russian art. It was during Meyerhold's engagement at the Moscow Art Theatre that the young actor first embarked upon new developments in the theatre, and where Konstantin Stanislavsky's reforms for the theatre attempted to convey 'real' life. The repertoire of the MAT showed plays of Russia, past and present, but above all, as Wendy Salmond notes, Chekhov's plays encapsulated contemporary sensibilities:

It was the familiar banality of contemporary middle-class life, captured in Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1898) or *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) that struck a chord with the audience...The remodelling of new premises for the MAT in 1902 represented the theatre's own aesthetic, the foyer and stage became a backdrop against which the complexities of modern Moscovite experience were played out and where the Moscovites went to see themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The psychological depictions of contemporary life developed the theatre's aesthetics. The first World of Art exhibition was launched during the year of the MAT's premiere of *The Seagull*. From then on, until 1906, the society organised various exhibitions of contemporary Russian and western art. The exhibitions stimulated the

cultivation of new tastes and artistic sensibilities amongst a high proportion of the Russian intelligentsia.

The cultural changes bred a surge of artistic activity, whose interactions with social movements were at times strikingly germane and yet indirect. The year 1905 was a turning point in Russian history. After the incident known as Bloody Sunday, which saw a massacre of hundreds of dissatisfied protesting workers, strikes demanding better work conditions and civil rights spread all over the country. Although, in response to these events, a new constitution announced basic civil liberties for all citizens and an elected parliament Duma was formed, many Russians felt that these reforms were not enough. Diaghilev's *Historical Exhibition of Russian Portraits* in March 1905, under the patronage of Tsar Nicholas II at the Tauride Palace in St Petersburg, represented a striking summarising of tradition. Ann Kodicek and various scholars of the period stress that, 'in the arrangement of his historical portrait exhibition and its catalogue, Diaghilev engendered a new interest in portrait artists as well as their sitters, and a keen awareness of what portraits can tell us about our historic past.'<sup>7</sup> There were 2226 pieces of work hung in the exhibition which consisted of portrait painting and sculptural busts. In this extraordinary tribute to the past, Diaghilev peopled the gallery space with both artists and figures from the past, where a contemporary audience could mingle with and face them. This event provided a gigantic and inspiring backdrop to Russia's contemporary stage surrounding and facing it with its historical identity. The exhibition corresponded to the spirit of the World of Art, whose grand culmination of artistic tradition sought support in an amalgamation of cultures past and present. It was in this form that the legacy of the past strove to direct the evolution of Russian art. The accelerated cultural changes

created a sense that the whole history of art had to be summarised and re-evaluated in order to enhance the development of both art and humanity.

Spencer Golub notes that 'cultural retrospectivism and theatrical reconstruction were pursued in the name of social renewal,' and that 'beginning in 1890 Alexander Benois convened the World of Art group of painters to study and depict theatrical cultures of the past (especially those of Ancient Greece and Egypt, Louis XIV at Versailles, and Peter the Great at St Petersburg).'<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Meyerhold took a keen interest in the theatres of the past, therefore engaging, for instance, the theatrical principles of the *commedia dell'arte*, ancient Greek and Elizabethan theatres. He pursued his interest in ritual and Eastern forms of theatre, as he sought to bring contemporary theatre closer to its spiritual origins. Golub indicates that 'this investigation and re-establishment of theatrical practices, performance conventions and conditions were part of the larger project of discovering the source and essence of theatricality, and the personal and social will to transform.'<sup>9</sup> In that sense, the re-discovery of an innate human need for art and theatricality was related to the general conception of social revitalization.

A modernist hope for the rejuvenation of life and society through art coincided with the contemporary aspiration for popularising art. Janet Kennedy writes that Mamontov believed 'religion was declining and art ought to fill its place.' Thus he 'made an effort to popularise his operatic venture as a People's Opera.'<sup>10</sup> Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre was initially called the Moscow Popular Art Theatre. Stanislavsky believed that the theatre should fulfil a moral and educative role in society by enlightening and inspiring its audience. Ann Kodicek points out that

Benois, in his 1906 article 'Artistic Heresies', expressed regret that with a decline of religion there was no longer a unified cause to inspire all artists.<sup>11</sup> Hence, Benois and the members of the World of Art aimed to establish a contemporary purpose for art, which became related to educative and populist ideas. The main objective of the World of Art journal was to promote art in the public consciousness. However, the periodical only had about 1000 subscribers and, ultimately, it only scratched the surface: the majority of Russian people were not able to afford to see art. Art in Russia was developing within a small circle of artists and intellectuals. Nevertheless, the focus on the messianic role of art captured contemporary artistic sensibilities and principles.

Meyerhold's theatre practice demonstrated his aspiration that art should be a means of transforming society. With his company 'The Fellowship of the New Drama' Meyerhold searched for a new theatre in the possibilities that had been opened up by symbolist literature. He engaged the symbolist Alexei Remizov in the post of literary consultant. Symbolism, one of the dominant artistic movements during this period, also sought to reinvent and perfect the world through art.

By giving art a special place in society, the members of the World of Art asserted their cultural and social presence. Diaghilev believed that the aim of art should be a search for beauty and the duty of the artist is to find his individual and artistic self. Janet Kennedy describes how *Miriskussniki* examined art in connection to the unique talent of the artist:

*Mir Iskusstva* criticism tended to single out a particular artist. It attempted to elucidate his art and ideas about art, to show his personality and his art as an organic whole, and yet at the same time to inform the reader by means of a discussion of the artist of the nature of the age in which that artist lived.<sup>12</sup>



The criticism showed a way of perceiving artistic individuality in relation to the culture of the period in which that artist lived. Both Meyerhold and Diaghilev focused on *how* the artist abstracted reality, on how he/she treated the subject rather than concentrating on the subject itself. This asserted the supremacy of the individual artist and of imagination and creativity. As Ann Kodicek suggests: 'Art was approached in a manner that stripped away consideration of the art subject matter and still in the appraisal of the art object, looking beyond academicism to the unique talent of a particular artist.'<sup>13</sup> The focus on the individual, insistence on the authenticity of emotion and freedom of expression echoed a truly romantic legacy, which encouraged inner freedom, in the belief that underneath social conditions human beings are good.

There was an early modernist idea that art should uncover truth by reaching the notion of inner truth, which lies beneath the appearance of things. *Miriskussniki* advocated the belief in the freedom of art, since art for them was to be larger than life, and, as such, not anchored in the realistic representation of life. For this reason, they alienated their art from social and political reality. For them, as Diaghilev proclaimed, 'the great strength of art lies precisely in the fact that it is self-sufficient, self-purposeful, and above all, free.'<sup>14</sup> The freedom of art sought the autonomy of art. Pierre Bourdieu describes how the concept of the autonomy of art defines its field of production:

The evolution of the different fields of cultural production towards a greater autonomy is accompanied by a sort of reflective and critical return by the producers upon their own production, a return which leads them to draw from it the field's own principle and specific presuppositions.<sup>15</sup>

For the artists of the World of Art this introspective and critical return of art to itself indicated a search for forms of artistic expression that invoked a higher sense of life, an innate human need for art rather than a socially determined one. John Bowlit

comments that 'like the symbolists, Diaghilev aspired to transcend the impersonal conventions of socio-political reality and to reach the essential, spiritual plane of existence.'<sup>16</sup> Here he participated in the symbolist search for a 'collective individuality', the synthesis of nature and the supra-personal. Bowlit asserts, moreover, that the symbolists sought to discover the secrets behind appearances which they conceived of as essences: 'to attain the 'essence' of reality by penetrating to the roots of natural, organic cultures and hence to rediscover the real force and potency of life beneath the conventions of civilisations.'<sup>17</sup> After the 1905 Revolution, only a few artists turned to the social concerns of the day, namely Bilibin, Dobuzhinsky, Eugene Lanceray and Vladimir Serov. Meyerhold greeted the 1905 Revolution with enthusiasm, but his involvement with symbolism resulted in detachment from events outside the theatre.

The World of Art members were greatly influenced by Stanislavsky's view of art. Stanislavsky promoted a belief in the actor's moral mission; the notion of the theatre transformed in the name of truth and beauty was followed with the idea of artistic discipline, knowledge and service. His insistence on the actor's inner truth presupposed that truth exists. This moral aspect of his theatre contained certain social dynamics, which aspired to reveal truths to its audience. The romantic ideal of life-like presentation found its realisation in the theatrical realism of Stanislavsky. The name itself, the Moscow Art Theatre, emphasised the conception of a theatre being an artistic discipline. Militsa Pozharskaia points out that Benois and his friends 'burned with desire to see the art of living truth influencing the musical stage' and that 'years later Diaghilev would say that the principles of the Moscow Art Theatre were reflected in the aspirations of the *Saisons Russes*.'<sup>18</sup> For instance, Fokine reformed

ballet by introducing into it elements of dramatic truth and inner expression. *Miriskussniki* were against sloppiness of execution, provincialism in the sense of limited artistic understanding, and amateurism. Janet Kennedy observes correctly that, 'one of the central concepts of the *Mir Iskusstva* group was that of the cultured artists whose work would draw on the best of the artistic legacy of past centuries.'<sup>19</sup> Meyerhold shared this World of Art's viewpoints, insisting that artistic education, truth and inner expression were crucial for the development of new artistic forms. The evolution of new artistic genres or styles could only occur when a certain level of technique had been attained. The development of art depended upon the exercise of particular artistic techniques or codes.

The concept of the cultured artist seemed to be in opposition with the World of Art's endorsement of the freedom of art and the subjective perception of beauty. There was a distinction between a view of art/culture as accumulated knowledge and that which insists on spontaneity. It could be suggested that freedom in art only existed independently from the legacy of an artistic past. On the other hand, to be a cultured artist meant to obtain the specifics of artistic knowledge. Here, practice of art was related to artistic tradition. *Mirisskusniki* in their artistic credo encompassed a great spectrum of cultural knowledge, which inspired and underpinned their artistic practice. Diaghilev as well as Meyerhold expanded the boundaries of artistic disciplines and created new genres and forms of expression, yet both artists looked for artistic freedom in the particularities of a certain artistic field. Therefore, during this period, the relationship between the notion of free art, or freedom of expression, and the view of the cultured artist, or pre-determined aesthetics, seemed to have been ambiguous.

The question of what freedom of expression meant was therefore of vital importance in relation to the conception of an artistic tradition and culture. It could be argued that freedom in art can only be achieved through the knowledge of the particular code or technique which facilitated artistic expression. Meyerhold's training of the actor – biomechanics – encompassed the notion that the freedom of the body expressed dramatic substance, even so this freedom was deeply anchored in the idea of the disciplined body. Meyerhold believed that physical expression could be achieved through educating actors in expressive movement. His insistence on the education of the actor, and moreover, on the musicality in the staging predetermined and highlighted the strong sense of form in his productions. His student, Alexei Gripiich, wrote that 'Meyerhold sought a high emotionality from his actors, but this emotion was always supposed to be shown in actions, and therefore transformed within a clear form.'<sup>20</sup> This suggested that emotional spontaneity was required within a controlled theatrical form; for instance, a greater physical expressiveness on the stage could only be achieved through mastery of body movement, as a good piano technique is needed for the performance of certain piano works. Thus Meyerhold's emphasis on technique was related to the World of Art aesthetics in which the idea of freedom of expression was conceived as a controlled, not haphazard, expression.

During this period the general trend in the arts was to emphasise their formal values.

Victor Borovsky writes:

In those uncertain times all Russians involved in the arts were striving to foresee the fate of Russia. This produced a propitious situation for the arts and it became possible for artists to liberate themselves from the restrictions of conventional realism. Images conveying a multiplicity of meanings inevitably sprang out of this forced rejection of everyday life.<sup>21</sup>

Artists attempted to move beyond the 'realism' of everyday life, aspiring, through their conscious play with the form, to reach truths that would transform the experience of this same life. They investigated the effect of the material of art on its audience, believing that this would bring new perspectives of thought and experience. The strong sense of form, the physical characteristics of the work of art, emphasised the importance of style as opposed to a realistic representation in art.

Meyerhold affirmed a principle of stylisation, the purpose of which was 'to bring out by all expressive means the in-depth synthesis of a given period or phenomenon, to reconstitute their latent characteristic features.'<sup>22</sup> In his production of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Schluck and Jau* (1905) Meyerhold elaborated upon the principle of stylisation:

The production of this play was done in the style of a 'powder century'... In the third act the stylisation was heightened... The back curtain depicts a blue sky with fluffy clouds. The horizon is bounded by crimson roses stretching the entire width of the stage. Crinolines, white periwigs, and the characters' costumes are blended with the colours of the setting into a single artistic design, a symphony in mother-of-pearl with all the charm of a painting by Konstantin Somov. The rise of the curtain is preceded by a duet in the style of the eighteenth century. It rises to disclose a figure seated in each arbour: in the centre is Sidselill, on either side-the ladies-in-waiting. They are embroidering a single broad ribbon with ivory needles-all in perfect time, whilst in the distance is heard a duet to the accompaniment of harp and harpsichord. Everything conveys the musical rhythm: movements, lines, gestures, dialogue, the colours of the setting and costumes. Everything that needs to be hidden from the audience is concealed behind stylised flats, with no attempt to make the spectator forget that he is in a theatre.<sup>23</sup>

The detailed, stylised cultural reconstruction created a dense form of scenic reality where, life seemed to be condensed and honed. The comparison with Somov suggests an aesthetic affinity with this member of the World of Art, which sought to convey the allure of that irretrievable past. *Schluck and Jau* showed a colourful blend of settings and costumes, designs and actors. This synthesis was combined with the

play's musicality, a crucial element in Meyerhold's future productions. Since music cannot be narrowed down to a realistic conception of art, it played a crucial part in affirming the concept of stylisation. In his synthesised stylisations, Meyerhold sought to achieve the full potential of artistic expression so as to reveal the 'subtext', the hidden depths of a given art work.

Cultivation of the supra-personal created an interest in myth, ritual and play. On the stage, Meyerhold sought the essence or the 'soul of life'. He proclaimed in 1907 that 'just as the sacred ritual of Greek tragedy was a form of Dionysian catharsis, so today we demand of the artist that he heal and purify us.'<sup>24</sup> Leading symbolist theorists, such as Vyacheslav Ivanov and Georgy Chulkov had populist aims, promoting the idea that a unifying experience between performers and the audience should be formed. By creating this experience symbolists believed art could transform society, by arriving at certain form of catharsis, which would unite human beings. The look backwards into the past, into the origins of art and theatre celebrated the notion of ritual, where each distinctive artistic discipline had a special spiritual place.

*Miriskussniki*, such as Diaghilev and Golovin, were strongly influenced by Richard Wagner's belief in the supremacy of the total work of art. In 1850-1 Wagner had stated in *The Work of Art of the Future*: 'The supreme work of art is the drama. Given that it can be perfect, it can however, only exist when all the arts contained in it reach the highest perfection. This is the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or synthesis of all arts.'<sup>25</sup> The new theatre, opera and ballet strove towards the unity of drama, music, painting, dance and plastic art, towards a harmonising blend of all the sensations that these art forms produce. Kodicek emphasises that 'the achievement of the Ballets

Russes fulfilled the utopian aim of the group's aesthetic programme: a synthesis of all the arts through the medium of beauty.<sup>26</sup> In the integrated theatrical performances, the interlocking of themes and techniques between distinctive artistic practices resulted in the blurring of artistic forms. For instance, music attained a new theatrical dimension by striving towards the expression of dramatic truth while, simultaneously, Meyerhold, by incorporating the principles of a musical composition, transformed the art of staging through his use of melody and rhythm. Plastic art also blurred with the development of actor's art; new settings created new acting possibilities, while, at the same time, the art of the actor significantly influenced the evolution of stage design. Here, both Meyerhold and the members of the World of Art practised cross-pollination of the arts. The artists/designers transposed the images conveyed by their art in the World of Art journal into the theatre. Thus the journal became a vivid cultural icon of the time. The quest for artistic synthesis inevitably elevated the form of opera as the genre most conducive for encompassing all artistic practices.

The notion of artistic synthesis was also relevant to philosophical and social ideas.

Boris Zingerman writes:

The idea of the various syntheses was prominent in Russia at the beginning of the century. They wanted to harmonise nature and civilisation, the material and the spiritual, the west and the east, individualism and collectivism, and finally, life and art. (Under the influence of Vladimir Solovyev and the late Dostoyevsky a 'Russian idea' was formed which inspired to blend in itself the contrasts and conflicts in the European culture and subsequently to give a synthesis of the best of the worlds)... The idea of synthesis, taking on a national missionary character, elevated the integrated role of the theatre. In Russia, the profession of the stage director-artist, who could synthesise the word, movement, music, costumes and decorations, became related to social and philosophical ideas...<sup>27</sup>

Zingerman emphasises that the notion of an integrated art reflected the contemporary aspiration to harmonise diverse social and philosophical ideas. This also suggested

that this integration of the arts could more effectively uncover 'truths' than one form of art alone would have done, because without this synthesis only a partial representation of reality would be created. So it is of no surprise that at the beginning of the century, theatre held a special place for the Russian intelligentsia, and almost all artists working in the different fields of art went into the theatre, where the idea of the integration of the arts found its best place.

The theatre created the possibility of turning life into theatrical experience, into the world of beautiful and harmonious integrated art. Theatricality offered a detachment from reality – a way of transforming life through imagination, play and pretence. Since the appointment of Prince Serge Volkonsky as the director of the Imperial Theatres in St Petersburg, the members of the World of Art were variously engaged in work for the theatre. Diaghilev became an administrative assistant with special duties at the Imperial Theatre, where he edited the theatre's journal. The desire for theatrical experience was so strong that there was almost a cult of theatre amongst the intelligentsia and artists.

The blurring of social and artistic aspirations in the idea of synthesis was also evident in Meyerhold's view of art. In an article which he prepared for the journal *Mayak*, during the second half of 1901, he stated that 'art should not be split between the idea of art for the people and art for the bourgeois. There should be a single collective art for everyone.'<sup>28</sup> Meyerhold believed that in theatre different forms of art were supposed to merge in order to create a classless theatrical experience. This unified theatre aimed to integrate both social and artistic ideas.



The notion of a unified theatre would have a strong influence upon his theatre aesthetics. In 1906 Meyerhold read Georg Fuchs' *The Stage of the Future* which advanced the idea of the restoration of the theatre as a festive ritual. Meyerhold subsequently proclaimed in 1907:

The theatre today is split into tragedy and comedy, whereas the antique theatre was a single, unified theatre...I regard this fragmentation of the theatres as the obstacle which obstructs the rebirth of the universal theatre, the truly dramatic theatre, the festive theatre.<sup>29</sup>

His belief in the theatre as a festivity encompassed the idea of a universal theatre, capable of transcending the traditional dramatic distinctions between comedy and tragedy, in order to arrive in the realm of general 'truths'. Meyerhold argued that 'if the New Theatre is once again dynamic, then let it be totally dynamic. If the theatre is finally to rediscover its dynamic essence, it must cease to be theatre in the sense of mere 'spectacle.'<sup>30</sup> In aiming to resurrect the essence of art and theatricality, Meyerhold wished to achieve a synthesis of different genres. Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* similarly explored, by integrating different arts and heightening theatricality, the notion of a unified theatre that was a spectacle.

Even though Meyerhold aimed to find new genres, he in fact broke down and extended the boundaries of theatre. The director overrode the distinction between opera and theatre, but his productions still incorporated traditional generic definitions, such as 'comedy to music', 'musical satires', 'musical realism', or 'monumental musical tragedy' as discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis. Rather than eliminating a concept of tragedy or comedy, for instance, Meyerhold would create new genres by establishing new techniques and a blend of artistic disciplines.

Meyerhold's practice of mixing forms elevated the art of performance. Theatre came to be viewed as a distinctive artistic discipline, an artistic form subject to artistic interpretation. For the first time in theatrical history, the work of the director encompassed the idea of artistic interpretation. Through editing and interpreting plays, operas or ballets, artists re-formed a performance. Diaghilev edited Mussogorsky's score of *Boris Godunov* believing it to be a path to the true Mussogorsky. Irina Vershinina points out that, 'when staging *Boris Godunov*, Diaghilev included previously cut scenes and even asked Korsakov to write forty extra bars into the score in order to prolong the procession of boyars and priests.' His thinking, she argues, 'was based upon his interpretation of the opera and assessment of the audience's attention span.'<sup>31</sup> Meyerhold similarly produced 'edited versions' of both operas and plays. For example, for his opera production of *The Queen of Spades*, a new libretto was conceived, which drew on Pushkin's original, believing this to be the clearest way to the opera's meaning. The cutting or editing of dramas for instance, was pursued in the name of presenting the play for theatrical rather than for literal purposes. Certain elements in the production were stressed in order to create theatrical effects, the unexpected, and the element of 'shock'. More importantly, however, it emphasised the main themes in an attempt to convey the relevant artistic truths.

The aesthetic modes of the production, that is, the set, the music, the use of space, the lighting, the props and the actor, extended the confines of the dramatic whole. For example, in Meyerhold's theatre, music could express the inner state of the character or the main themes of the performance. Vershinina also notes that 'although a single aesthetic aim guided the staging of plays, opera or ballet, the genres presented different problems.'<sup>32</sup> While ballet sought to convey the 'visual music', the theatre

sought a blend of the visual and the musical, of the body and the text. By striving for an artistic unity, thus towards a harmonious blend between the arts, each form of art expanded its own artistic boundaries.

Meyerhold's reforms in the theatre explored the relationship between the diverse scenic elements and the spectator, which would constitute the dynamic whole. Both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold sought to produce that moment when the spectator suspends disbelief and is drawn into the action on stage. John Bowlit points out that 'for the *World of Art* theatre was an exercise in the use of intrinsic properties of a synthetic medium and not a cosmic force of social unification.'<sup>33</sup> Similarly, for Meyerhold, the theatre did not represent a mystical union. Robert Leach notes that 'he agreed with Bely that if theatre was a 'temple' it was so without a deity, potentially an absurdity – but was a flow of energy back and forth between audience and performance which was unique to the theatre.'<sup>34</sup> The reforms in the audience relationship in the theatre supported the idea of the organic existence of a performance in which the final product depended upon, and could be altered by, the audience. The response from the audience during a performance, their laughs or sighs, or their potentially palpable energy would inevitably affect the course of the production. These principles, which we now take for granted, represented revolutionary concepts when first proposed.

The notion of artistic synthesis in the theatre coincided with the symbolist mistrust of words. Symbolism investigated meanings through syntheses. Rather than accepting the literal meaning of the word, symbolist poets turned to melody, rhythm and colour in order to reveal the essence, the real meaning, behind the apparent meaning.

Meyerhold's theatre experiments similarly showed a dismantling of words; rhythm and music were often assimilated in a word. In this new theatre the director collaborated with designers and musicians in order not only to create integrated performances, but also to reach and express the metaphysical. Here the non-verbal forms of expression played a crucial part in reforming the art of the stage.

### **The Theatre of the Artist-Designer**

The theatre of the artist-designer came with abstract movements in the arts; stylised theatre depended on the artist-designer who deconstructed the scenic space rather than a life-like reality established upon it. Since his experiments at the Stanislavsky Studio, the development of art movements played an important part in Meyerhold's theatre reforms. Alla Mikhailova notes that 'the decisive influence on Meyerhold's progress as stage director was undoubtedly exerted by artist-designers.'<sup>35</sup> The contemporary interest in the poetics of ritual, folk and Eastern theatre, where the visual art plays an important role in the creation of the performance, also found a rich vein of inspiration in the theatre of the artist-designer. This particular, twentieth century phenomenon opened up new artistic frontiers where, for the first time, art had a great impact on the development of theatrical media. But whilst the theatre was transformed by different forms of art, it simultaneously asserted a great influence upon other artistic practices.

Theatre renewed and inspired some artists, notably Meyerhold's collaborators, Sapunov and Golovin, whose art embodied a new theatrical element even outside of the theatre. Gofman observes that in Meyerhold's theatre 'art could think driftingly, having primarily the task of emotional expression.'<sup>36</sup> In his theatre the concentration on emotional expression, rather than plastic description, paralleled the development of

plastic art in its quest to convey the internal essence, rather than the external characteristic of the subject depicted. The similarity of concerns between different art forms inevitably brought an alliance between them.

During his pre-revolutionary career, Meyerhold collaborated mostly with the artists of the World of Art. As Lynn Garafola indicates Leon Bakst, for instance, worked with Meyerhold on at least two occasions: 'In autumn 1906 both participated in the organisation of Komissazhervskaya's theatre and in 1908 in Ida Rubinstein's production of *Salome*, which Meyerhold directed and Bakst designed.'<sup>37</sup> At the Komissarzhevskaya theatre, Meyerhold pursued Symbolist experimentations. Spencer Golub describes how 'in a theatre repainted white to mark a new, non-representational beginning, Meyerhold freed Komissarzhevskaya and her company to explore the realm of the spirit conveyed in the new symbolist drama.' For this theatre of the soul 'Bakst designed a stage curtain featuring white nymphs dancing in front of the Doric columns of an Elysian temple.'<sup>38</sup>

The crucial influence on Meyerhold's theatrical aesthetics was that of stage designers, Alexander Golovin (1863-1930) and Nikolai Sapunov (1880-1912). Golovin, a leading member of the World of Art since its exhibition in 1898, and Sapunov, the Blue Rose artists, belonged to a different generation of artists. The Blue Rose artists, the Romantic-illusionists, rejected the decorative and descriptive illustrations and embarked upon the expression of the happening itself. Gofman states that: 'Sapunov's theatre is a place of magnificent romantic hope, high spirituality and the innocence of the soul; his art became a theatrical transformation into something different, unusual, expressing a hidden existence.'<sup>39</sup> The strong emphasis on spirituality, this sense of

mystery, was too far-fetched for most of the World of Art members. Nevertheless, as Bowlt states, 'despite the tendency to regard art as 'craft' rather than as 'religion'...the World of Art sympathized with the later, more philosophical poets such as Bely, Blok, V. Ivanov, and in turn, with the mystical painters, the Blue Rose.'<sup>40</sup> Meyerhold collaborated with Sapunov at Komissarzhevskaya's theatre and in the small theatre-studios. With Golovin, on the other hand, he worked on the grand stage of the Imperial Theatres.

In March 1905, Meyerhold became the artistic director of the newly founded Studio under the supervision of the Moscow Art Theatre, with Stanislavsky and Mamontov as co-directors. Meyerhold's work in the Studio moved forward the development of theatre art in the direction that was earlier pursued by Mamontov in his private opera enterprise. The un-realistic nature of opera and ballet advanced an exploration of theatricality and artistic unity; at the same time, the theatre was still strongly influenced by realism. Alla Mikhailova stresses that in the Studio Meyerhold's 'conviction that a full-fledged avant-garde theatre must move in step with the tempestuous progress of contemporary new drama and painting was born there and then.'<sup>41</sup> She indicates that, at the Studio, Meyerhold met Sapunov and Sergei Sudeikin and was awakened to the 'expressive potential of a production's visual sequence.'<sup>42</sup> With Sudeikin and Sapunov Meyerhold worked, for the first time, with painters who had no previous experience in the theatre.

In the production of *The Death of Tintagiles* in 1905, directed by Meyerhold and designed by Sapunov and Sudeikin, the collaborators sought new forms of scenic expressions. Macterlinck's plays with their themes, such as death, resurrection, anti-

action, suggesting that the human being is a marionette in the hands of fate, the notion of essence and beauty, were popular during this period. I.Vakar points out that, 'Maeterlinck's plays advanced an idea of a new theatre by concentrating upon the entirety of the scenic art and the musical, poetic 'sound' of the text, rather than upon the priority of the actor's play.'<sup>43</sup> In order to find a suitable technique to express the literary forms of the new drama, the designers and the director turned away from reproducing traditional clay models towards the drawing of a scenic plan, thus creating a new and unique visual language of scenic expression. The stage embodied a two-dimensional space, reflective of the painting itself. In *The Death of Tintagiles*, Sudeikin created a blue-green space where colourful costumes blended with the scenery. Sapunov opted for a palette of purple and grey in the fourth and fifth acts. The actors' figures and the colour patches of the painted scenery merged. All three collaborators strove for a harmonious unity between light and colour, costumes and scenery – between a declamatory and musical accompaniment.

The integration of the arts created new forms of expression, but also imposed its own problems. The influence of the MAT on the Studio experiments was still prominent.

Valery Bryusov, who was in charge of the literary section of the Theatre-Studio, wrote:

Give me either a realistic or a stylised stage. The island, where the action of *The Death of Tintagiles* is situated, is still not open to the travellers, but it is earth's island. We don't know to what kind of people belong the characters, in what language they speak, but they are people. Their desires are human desires...If you reject realism on the stage, then make your stylised theatre to the end... pictures-decorations showing castles, clouds or the moon are unnecessary...The movement, gestures and the words of the actors should be stylised, expressing what in life does not exist...Theatre-Studio did not dare to make a break from the tradition. To build a new theatre upon the foundation of the old is wrong. It must be built from its roots, changed from its roots. <sup>44</sup>

Here Bryusov, as Nikolai Pesochinsky and various scholars of the period point out, formulated a clear symbolist challenge to Meyerhold's theatre art: 'the rejection of theatrical conditions and traditions in the service of synthetic, inner, meta-conscious forms of the art.'<sup>45</sup> Meyerhold in his theatre practice, however close he was to the general conception of symbolism in this period, did not wish to reject the inner logic of theatre development stored in the European and Russian theatrical tradition. He aimed to renew the notion of theatre's spiritual journey, capable of uniting performers and its audience.

Bryusov's critique also indicated the difficulty of combining the realistic tradition of acting with the contemporary movements in the arts. The collision of different artistic disciplines created the problem of harmonising three-dimensional bodies of actors and two-dimensional painting. The focus on and priority given to a particular form of art in the theatre led to a lack of harmony in the artistic whole. Bowlit notes that 'a certain dissonance or extremism' is also often identifiable with the symbolic movement and the World of Art's concentration upon the form and composition. The intense focus 'on one or more specific artistic elements' contributed to a loss of balance and hence 'to a loss of aesthetic totality' (for instance, when poetry, or sound detracted from the visual).<sup>46</sup> In the Studio the over-emphasis on the visual aspect of a performance limited the actor. Here, plastic art imposed its own colours and rhythms onto the statuesque style of acting, rather than being created with the expressive potential of the actor's art. Alexander Gladkov states that later in his career, Meyerhold said that 'in the Studio he was trying to unite different elements in one artistic whole: symbolic literature, artist-stylists and young actors educated in the methodology of MAT.'<sup>47</sup> In the Studio Meyerhold came to believe in the impossibility of uniting the actor with



pure art and realised the need for a school for new actors, which would train them to meet the needs of the new drama and the new movements in the arts in general.<sup>48</sup> The creation of a new form of theatre would be facilitated by reforming the actor's art – the main element of the performance.

Since his experiments at the Studio Meyerhold advanced the idea of the primacy of a plastic actor in the theatre, who could embody the idea of a sculpture. In his production of *Sister Béatrice* in 1906 the design sharpened the perception of the actors' performance. The characters enhanced the expressive possibilities of the stage design. For this production the designer Sudeikin created a costume design which formed the illusion of a nun's blue dress and which was enhanced by the dark, colourless backdrop. Edward Braun notes that 'Maeterlinck sets the play in fourteenth-century Louvain, but again Meyerhold applied the principle of stylisation, seeking to imbue the legend with universality by creating a synthesis based on the style of Pre-Raphaelite and early Renaissance painters.'<sup>49</sup> The actors sustained movement and gestures inspired by these painters. The action was confined to the front of the proscenium where the actors' bodies appeared two-dimensional. The décor gave an illusion of a Gothic cathedral chancel. The church-like design supported the mystical quality conveyed in actors' characterisations. Mikhailova indicates that 'grouping the nuns on the stage, he strove for multiple uniformity, which was enhanced by their costumes; the defined and unrealistic gestures of each group did not break up the overall homogeneity.'<sup>50</sup> The uniform staging of the groups and movement demonstrated a form of depersonalised acting. The sculptural impersonation in the acting created a sense of an artistic tableaux on the stage.

Meyerhold tried to merge the design and the acting, leaving enough room for both artistic elements to develop through each other whilst staying faithful to their origins. Mikhailova states that 'the scenery had to be in accord with the system of acting, which must sustain the design and give it its *raison d'être*.'<sup>51</sup> With the exception of *Sister Béatrice*, symbolism did not enjoy great success on the stage. Perhaps the concentration on the visual side of the performance, namely the setting, costumes and grouping, produced lifeless and lethargic acting and could not hold the audience's attention. With Maeterlinck's metaphysical plays Meyerhold invented the 'static', and the 'motionless' – a mysterious theatre whose main components were long pauses, suggestive silence, statuesque and rhythmic movements.

This static theatrical genre was transposed to other art forms and performances. Kennedy points out that in Bakst's *Hippolytos* of 1902 the actors also assumed statuesque poses and spoke slowly, delivering their lines with long oracular pauses.<sup>52</sup> The audience's imagination was supposed to be stirred by the unsaid. This static approach to staging performers also transformed contemporary ballet. Lynn Garafola suggests that the style of the static, motionless theatre 'contained the germ of Nijinsky's most innovative ideas in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*,' and that, 'what *Faune* did was transpose to the dance stage the principles of Meyerhold's static theatre.'<sup>53</sup> Both Fokine and Nijinsky explored the elements of the 'static theatre', investigated the plastic statuesqueness of the dancers and sought to transmit the internal essence to its external form. In *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, Nijinsky's choreography was based on two-dimensional Attic vase painting. In aiming to convey a classic and pagan spirit, Nijinsky created a slow gestation of movement. There is also a great similarity in the costumes and the grouping of the nuns in *Sister Béatrice* with the characterisation of

the nymphs in the *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. The slow, motionless theatre, compounded by Nijinsky's angular grace for the figures of *Faune* created the effect of remoteness. The search for the spiritual gave a sense of ceremony and seclusion.

Symbolism also fostered the idea that a catastrophe was imminent. Bowlit describes that certain members of the World of Art believed that a radical social change was forthcoming:

Both emotional and philosophical conditions within the World of Art group fluctuated considerably: some shared the widespread belief in the imminent advance of some apocalyptic force which would destroy the old order, others were more pragmatic and could not support such a morbid worldview.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps, the divide between certain artistic sensibilities and the social order raised a sense of powerlessness amongst artists. In Bakst's *Hippolytos*, as Kennedy indicates, the ideas of an impending catastrophe and a mysterious feminine principle which governs events was sustained in the massive sculptures of Artemis and Aphrodite.<sup>55</sup> The idea of fate and the embodiment of fate as a woman was also explored in Maeterlinck's dramatic art. Meyerhold's static theatre may well have sought the spiritual, but it gave a poignant view of life.

The anxieties of contemporary Russian artists and the intelligentsia were further explored by the intimate theatres that sprang up around St Petersburg. Golub emphasises that 'the Russian theatre of small forms tried at first to protect their audiences of anti-bourgeois aesthetes and enlightened theatrical amateurs from the culturally status-conscious bourgeoisie, who sought admission.'<sup>56</sup> These unwanted spectators were called 'Pharmacists'. The name itself perhaps suggests a certain lack of perception caused by an absence of imagination. By excluding certain types of

spectators, the artists sought to affirm their own identity. Golub indicates that these small theatres 'invoked an outlet of personal and social anxiety, social criticism and fantasy,' and that 'many theatrical miniatures stressed inversion, fragmentation and the collision of competing realities and elitist and anti-elitist points of view.'<sup>57</sup> During his tenure at the Imperial theatres, Meyerhold, under the name of Dr Dappertutto conducted theatre experiments in the small theatre studios. Doctor Dappertutto meaning, 'Doctor everywhere', is a Mask from Ernst Hoffmann's tale, *Adventure on New Year's Eve*. Dappertutto is a magician who steals people's souls, a theatre-director or perhaps a shaman; the ritual of a New Year suggests a time in space where ordinary laws of life do not apply. Moreover, if the Imperial Theatres represented the accepted mainstream social rituals, the sub-cultural field of the small-scale theatre stood for subversion and introversion. In these small theatres Meyerhold, once freed from the constraints of traditional theatres, further developed his artistic principles.

The intimate theatre of Lukomore (The Strand) was founded in 1908 in St Petersburg. Its members included the World of Art artists, such as Bakst, Benois, and Bilibin, musicians, symbolist writers, the choreographer Fokine and Meyerhold. Iuliia Galanina states that this theatre club was intended to represent a Russian version of the *Urbettl*: 'For Benois Lukomore was a Russian cabaret invention.'<sup>58</sup> However, she notes that at that time Meyerhold emphasised the need for cultural spectators and indicated that the future of theatre lay in the creation of the artistic booth or *balagan*.<sup>59</sup> Meyerhold's transformation in the conception of theatrical art away from the symbolist drama led to a change in the perception of the actor's art. The director affirmed the primacy of an acting genre based on the principles of a *cabotin*, a combined singer-dancer-juggler-tumbler. The notion of a *balagan* theatre did not

coincide with Benois' view of a Russian cabaret. Lukomore was soon to be closed, partly because of the artistic incoherence between its members and also, according to Meyerhold, because of its club-like audience.

The tensions and ambiguities between developing theatrical techniques and aspirations were prominent in the intimate theatres. For instance, Meyerhold's revival of the artistic *balagan* or seemed to contradict his quest for a cultivated audience since *balagan*, for example, flourished in the market place and was a popular performance form. This glance backwards in time served as a romantic protest against the petty-bourgeois contemporary concerns. In the theatre club, *The Stray Dog*, (1913-1915) Meyerhold advanced his theory of the actor-*cabotin*, whose physical skills and use of mask would combine old and new forms of acting. After the *Stray Dog* was closed because of the illegal consumption of alcohol in it, Meyerhold, Pronin, Evreinov, Sudeikin, Boris Grigoriev and Nikolai Petrov opened the *House of Interludes*, (1916-19). Here, as Golub indicates 'the hall was depicted in the manner of Gozzi and Hoffmann, and a room was painted in a fantastic style by Sudeikin.' Meyerhold proclaimed that the theatre would represent 'underground classics.'<sup>60</sup> In these intimate theatres he explored various dramatic genres including one-act plays, musical numbers, burlesques and pantomime, and lay grounds for his training of the actor. His insistence on use of masks and physical skills in acting affirmed the importance of theatricality, of transformation conjured by imagination.

### **Renewal of the dance element in the theatre: the birth of the physical theatre**

The director's experimentation in the intimate theatres propagated his idea of a physical actor who was capable of conveying dramatic substance in performance.

Meyerhold and the members of the World of Art had a great interest in the renewal of the play element, carnival holiday and the *commedia dell'arte*. Diaghilev's ballets demonstrated a fascination with the *balagan*, neo-primitivism and cultural reconstruction. The World of Art celebrated the *commedia* in paintings like *The Italian Comedy* by Benois, and in Somov's many canvases of Harlequins and Columbines. Kennedy stresses that Benois corresponded with Stanislavsky about a revival of the *commedia dell'arte* at the Moscow Art Theatre, and 'he saw the *commedia dell'arte* not as a stage full of masked abstractions, but as the most living form of scenic art with a tradition of improvisation and robust humour.'<sup>61</sup> The anti-realist experimentations in the theatre affirmed the primary importance of the play element in the theatre.

The influence of *commedia* upon Meyerhold's aesthetics inspired new genres of performance. There were two periods during Meyerhold's tenure at Komissarzhevskaya's theatre: the first, static theatre of mood, and then from the staging of *The Fairground Booth* by Alexander Blok (30 December 1906), a grotesque 'puppet' theatre. It was through the image of folk theatre, with its booth-like architecture, that Meyerhold affirmed his principles of theatricality and the idea of role-play. Sapunov's theatre-inside-a-theatre set uncovered the physical material of theatre art and its stage effects. The exposure of theatrical technicalities and the *commedia* characters appeared to mock the symbolist mystery, revealing the theatrical show of life and art. As Bowlit argues, Meyerhold in *The Fairground Booth* exposed the total theatricality of life and suggested that, 'life is theatre and beyond its proscenium there is no other dimension.'<sup>62</sup> The design and the style of acting it supported represented a dismantling of theatrical conditions and tradition.

By changing the order of language, it was believed that art could reform the order of experience and so modify the conditions of social life. By staging the transposed *commedia* images on the re-arranged scenic space, Meyerhold confronted the tradition of perceiving and creating a performance. The unveiling of artistic traditions and technicalities reflected a belief in escaping from a false consciousness. Rudnitsky notes that the production of *The Fairground Booth* coincided chronologically with the wider European change in the nature of art. The exhibition of Picasso's picture in 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, initiated Cubism and destroyed the traditional concept of painting. Rudnitsky ascertains that 'there is a close connection between those two happenings.'<sup>63</sup> *Les Femmes d'Alger*, even though representing fragmented figures and rearranged faces, as Robert Hughes writes, 'is anchored in tradition, and its assault on the eye would never have been so startling if its format had not been that of the classical nude; three figures distort but echo the classical image of the late Renaissance, that is *The Three Graces*.'<sup>64</sup> In the re-arrangement of human figures, Picasso achieved an alternative sense of seeing and thus cast doubts on the very process of human perception. Both artists challenged the concept of artistic illusion and human perception, and thus, they shattered artistic conventions and traditions. The musical equivalent was the Paris premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in 1913.

The emphasis on theatricality and illusion, the primitive and ritualistic, related to contemporary artistic aspiration for social revitalisation. Rudnitsky stresses that the theme of a naïve and simple art in relation to complex contemporary life was prominent in art, such as in Picasso's circus depictions, Blok's *Fairground Booth* and

Stravinsky's *Petrushka*.<sup>65</sup> Meyerhold as far back as in 1903 staged Franz von Schönthan's play *The Acrobats*, which depicted backstage circus life and explored the notion of theatricality. Perhaps, artists saw in their clowns the reaffirmation of the infinite laws of theatricality, but also a return to the simplicity of life. The primitive also suggested a pure and innocent element in art, as it alluded to fundamental human conditions rather than socially affected ones.

Modernist feelings transformed the fairground spirit. The image of *balagan* suggested a way of future renewal, a way to freedom, which was, however, still untouchable. Pierrot in *The Fairground Booth* was not just an entertaining clown, but, also, a tragic one. Left all alone on the stage in the finale, his melancholic song suggested the solitary retreat of the artist who nobody understands. Golub notes that the performance captured 'the substantial insubstantiality and menacing tragic-force of the creative intelligentsia's inner and outer lives, suspended between social irrelevance and disabling fantasy.'<sup>66</sup> He also observes that Meyerhold and Sapunov's *balagan* was noisy and colourful yet disturbingly dangerous and ugly; still, in the symbolist hands '*commedia* and *balagan* darkened and became more ironically conscious of the unlimited human need to role-play and the artificially limited conventions of the dramatic genre and the theatrical performance.'<sup>67</sup> Through exploring the image of the *balagan*, the collaborators depicted the aspirations but also the limits of theatre and of the human being: a sense of restricted freedom, hindered possibilities, disorientation and self-doubt.

Golub indicates that 'duplicity and irony were often presented in Silver age culture in terms of ambiguous sexuality.' The idea of 'self-doubt', 'sexual perfidy' and 'gender



imprisonment' were often depicted.<sup>68</sup> Nijinsky's ballet *Jeux*, for instance, by portraying the erotic attraction between the two female tennis players as well as with the man, confronted taboos of homosexuality on stage. *The Faun*, also in its quest for authenticity, represented ambiguous sexuality: the awakening of sexual desire in the Faun, the teasing unavailability of the nymphs, was followed by the depiction of masturbation. Golub describes how the image of Pierrot or Harlequin was vivid in the artistic imagination of the time:

The doubling and inversion of sexual types was personified by passive, effeminate, decadent men (Pierrots) and masculine, libertine, predatory women (Columbine or Salome), not only in fiction but in painting and the scenic and costume designs of Bakst and Somov.<sup>69</sup>

The solitary, silent, figure of Pierrot suggested a notion of a lost soul in the face of the vulgarity of modern material existence. Meyerhold's identification with the image of Pierrot was manifested in his playing of the role both in *The Fairground Booth* and Fokin's ballet *Carnival*, as well as in Nikolai Ulyanov's portrait of the director as Pierrot. Through the images of *commedia* artists explored their own personal anxieties. Thus silver age culture used *commedia* to represent duality.

The principles in the dramatic images of *commedia* created a shift of genres between different art forms. For example, Fokine's choreography of *Petrushka*, suggested that the human soul is trapped in the cage of its puppet body. This was achieved by allusion to marionettes in the dancing. Meyerhold, on the other hand, was often criticised for turning actors into puppets or marionettes. The re-appearance of this theme on the dramatic stage is evident in his staging of the *Petrushka* story where actors took up the roles traditionally played by puppets. Here the theatre and ballet depicted the individual as a social and psychological phenomenon.

Meyerhold's interpretation of the *commedia* characters differed from its original conception. This dramatic form sprang up in northern Italy in the middle of the sixteenth century and its characters drew their inspiration from the social stereotypes of the day, such as servants, lovers and people of high social status. The actors improvised plays, usually farcical comedies of sex, greed and status. John Rudlin argues that Meyerhold's perception of *commedia dell'arte* in this period seems to have been distorted by his quest for the grotesque. The director's characters were sentimentalised figures of the types of the late eighteenth, trapped in a nineteenth century world of Gothic fantasy. The characters depicted were not just entertaining but gave a sense of romantic, nostalgic reminiscences of the past. Rudlin suggests that 'in his urgency to create a physical theatre capable of dealing with the metaphysical, Dr Dappertutto stole the pale shadow of *commedia* when what he had really craved was its original soul.'<sup>70</sup> Meyerhold's pre-revolutionary conception of the *commedia* was not in direct correspondence with social reality but for its true spirit it needed to reflect and comment on it. The new masks in acting, which portrayed certain social types, were created in his post-revolutionary practice.

Meyerhold's exploration of the grotesque style might have distorted the real *commedia*, but it certainly accelerated the evolution of his art. In his article 'The Fairground Booth' in 1912 he proclaimed:

Grotesque – this is a style which reveals the most wonderful horizons to the creative artist, 'I'. My personal attitude to life precedes all else. Everything which I take as material for my art corresponds not to the truth of reality, but to the truth of my personal artistic whim.<sup>71</sup>

Through the style of the grotesque Meyerhold further developed his principles of stylisation and theatricality, asserting the primacy of the individual artist – director, able to execute and achieve a unity of this style in the production. He pointed out that

the style of the grotesque aimed to subordinate the psychology of a character to a decorative task.<sup>72</sup> In this way, the actor, rather than inhabiting the psychological state of the character, physically displayed the necessary feelings and commented on the character. Moreover, the grotesque style is based upon the effect of exaggeration and contrast. This distortion of form creates a certain tension in the balance which holds the style together. Meyerhold's theatre of the grotesque, like Picasso's cubism displayed compact compositions with a feeling of tension between the form and the content. Both artists explored the notion of depersonalised and dislocated human thoughts and emotions.

After the staging of *The Fairground Booth*, Meyerhold searched for a theatrical style that drew on the plasticity of the actor rather than literary sources. As Braun indicates, the style of acting was changed: 'sudden switches of personality, disruption of illusion, the asides to the audience, all demanded a mental and physical dexterity, an ability to improvise.'<sup>73</sup> *The Fairground Booth* was at the root of the grotesque pantomime, which Meyerhold subsequently explored in all his experiments in St Petersburg studios, as in his production of *The Harlequin, the Marriage Broker* in 1911. Rudnitsky describes the style of acting in Meyerhold's theatre:

Meyerhold suggested that more than any dramatic form, pantomime is conducive to the revival of the art of improvisation where with the discipline of the musical score, the actor in a harlequinade needs to possess an acute sense of rhythm plus great agility and self-control.<sup>74</sup>

Meyerhold's fascination with the rhythmical movement of the body, where acting was subordinated to the elements of a musical form, was supported in his perception of *commedia* and in the pantomime. In 1913 he opened his own theatre-studio in St Petersburg, committed to theatrical exploration and the fostering of new actors. The studio's first-year curriculum included Vladimir Solovyov's course on the *commedia*

*dell'arte*, a technique vital to the training of an actor. The musicality in the movement of the actor also underpinned the idea of musical directing.

Thus Meyerhold's theatre sought from its actor a physical agility, musical ability for the execution of dialogue and a sense of rhythm. This purely sensory (not psychological) theatre, of physical and concrete sounds and images, of music and dance, developed its own language thus striving towards an experience for the audience that is beyond the logically explicable. While still working at Komissarzhevskaya's theatre Meyerhold suggested that 'the text is nothing but a musical score, the rhythmical movement on the stage...origins of the actor's art are in the dance.'<sup>75</sup>

The revival of the dance element in the theatre coincided with the World of Art's interest in the element of 'play'. Benois also believed that the future of the theatre as a whole depends on the dance: 'All of life and art are equated with the rhythms and beauty of the dance.'<sup>76</sup> Dance and rhythm were an integral part of primitive life. The dance element is also strongly felt in Stravinsky's music where the explosive rhythmic energy and sudden changes in accents transformed modern ballet. Stravinsky created ballets for Diaghilev's company. He composed the music for *Petrushka*, which shares the *commedia* and puppet theme with *The Fairground Booth*. Vershinina emphasises that the pizzicato of the last two bars tends to suggest an indeterminate tonality, as if warning us that the spirit of 'the eternal, unhappy hero of all fairgrounds in all countries has not died, and that everything may well begin all over again.'<sup>77</sup> The similar investigations into different artistic practices, as in Stravinsky's music and Meyerhold's theatre practice, inevitably brought an alliance

between them. Both artists explored, to quote Borovsky, 'the vital role played by the grotesque, the interest in the traditional Italian Commedia Del'Arte, the play-acting and the use of different masks hiding the actors faces, the subordination of the actors to the complicated counterpoint of music's rhythm and plasticity.'<sup>78</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that Stravinsky approved the appointment of Meyerhold as director of his opera, *The Nightingale*.

The reforms in ballet as well as in Meyerhold's 'physical' theatre were pursued in the hope of transmitting the internal essence of the image through its external form. Fokine's choreography affirmed that a new form of movement should be created for each ballet; dance and mimetic gestures are meaningless unless they are an expression of dramatic action. Choreography sought to find new ways of interpreting the depths of the music. The internal essence could be reached through depersonalised acting. In his 1912 article 'The Fairground Booth' Meyerhold wrote: 'The theatre of the mask has always been a fairground show, and the idea of acting is based on the apotheosis of the mask, gesture and movement is indivisible from the idea of the travelling show.'<sup>79</sup> Transfiguration of the ordinary adaptation of the world aesthetically can be achieved through masks which create a sense of a heightened, controlled life. Meyerhold perceived that in the mask the external captured the inner state of the character.

By bringing together distinctive artistic disciplines into a single unified performance, artists enhanced the merger between the arts. For example, Vershinina notes that Diaghilev staged the opera *Le Coq d'Or* also as a ballet and thus indicated 'the future course of a musical theatre based on the interaction of vocal score and dance.'<sup>80</sup>

Meyerhold's *Orpheus and Eurydice* similarly combined opera singers with ballet dancers. The focus on dramatic characteristics bred new artistic genres. Nijinsky in *Jeux*, for instance, invented the dance poem genre. The rejection of the nineteenth century three-act Romantic ballet resulted in these more concentrated forms of expression and brought a new freedom to composers and choreographers to explore a symphonic combination of dance and music. The new music for ballet expressed a variety of rhythm and style. Dancing strove to capture the essence of music. Painting searched for its own melody and rhythm in the attempt to connect artistic elements in an artistic wholeness. New music and ballet also found a rich vein of inspiration in the notion of 'rhythm'. For Meyerhold, the merging and the subsequent transformation of all these genres represented the path towards theatre's true calling, the creation of a unified performance in which all of these performative aspects would combine.

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75. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 46
76. Quoted in Kennedy, *The 'Mir Iskusstva' group and Russian Art*, p. 369
77. Vershinina Irina, 'Diaghilev and the music of the Saison Russes', as above, p.84
78. Borovsky Victor, *Stravinsky on Stage*, p. 17
79. Symons James, *Meyerhold's Theatre of Grotesque; the post-Revolutionary productions, 1920-1932*, (University of Miami Press, 1971), p.33

80. Vershinina, 'Diaghilev and the music of the Saison Russes', p. 73

## **Chapter 2**

### **Meyerhold and German Opera, 1909-1913: The Ideal of an Integrated Art Form**

The dimension of theatrical experience and discourse during the silver era of Russian culture opened up possibilities for art forms that in turn nourished and nurtured each other. In the theatre, the arts merged into one. Boundaries melted away, not only between painting, drama, music and dance, but also between acting and the development of other forms of art. For Meyerhold, the theatrical experience was supposed to extend beyond the traditional forms of performance into the concept of a total theatre – a new form of an integrated spectacle.

Encompassing music, literature, theatre and art, opera can be viewed as an ideal form of mixed disciplines. It could be suggested that, being freed from the shackles of stage realism, the directors turn to opera to explore new performative conditions and artistic possibilities. The grand architecture of the opera house, the size of its performance space, demanding acoustics and large casts usually differ from that of the dramatic theatre. Opera is also driven by music, which musicians, singers and composers have to communicate. Although there are certain dissimilarities between operatic theatre and dramatic theatre, both these public forms of art have a dramatic base and their own performers. The distinctly stylised qualities of opera, such as sung words, and the conscious integration of the arts involved in making it, made this form particularly attractive to Meyerhold and his aesthetic development. The year 1909 marked the first opening of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes and Meyerhold's debut as an opera director.

In Meyerhold's theatre the new ways of staging opera were related to the director's vision of the unity of space and time, his sense of theatricality and musicality, the conductor's interpretation of the score and contemporary aesthetics. Originally, opera was written primarily for singers and their wonderful voices. As the art of the composer developed, notably since Christophe Willibald Gluck's (1714-1787) reforms, opera became increasingly viewed as a genre encompassing dramatic and musical wholeness. Wagner further developed this art form towards the ideal of artistic synthesis, wanting opera to be a total work of art, a return to the integrity of the Greek ideal, which included a combination of mythic content, religious significance and community participation. His linking of the power of drama to that of music would create a new potency – one that he could build on. His ideas evolved with the advance in the role of the director, who could synthesise different elements of performance into an organic whole.

Meyerhold's direction of *Tristan and Isolde*, *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *Elektra*, showed the director's engagement with operas within the German operatic tradition, which included mythic subjects and explored the notion of an integrated art. Gluck was not German, but he spoke German and his influence on later German operatic practice could be in part traced through Wagner. His operatic reforms, such as the focus on dramatic fluency in his music, made a significant impression on Wagner, who would further develop the fusion between music and drama. In his staging of opera, Meyerhold aimed to create a blend of art forms and artistic coherence, which would fully embrace the stylistic elements distinctive to operatic art. This synthesis purported to strengthen and heighten the theatrical nature of opera, thereby enhancing its artistic truth. By seeking out the dramatic qualities in the music and realising these

in the scenic action the director dramatised opera, whilst simultaneously, creating a form of visual music on the stage. The actors-singers had to achieve a certain musicality in their performances and sustain the unity of the overall production. His collaboration with designers and conductors would also greatly enhance the concept of an integrated performance.

It was in opera that Meyerhold found his ideal performer who could embody the principles of stylised theatre. The great opera singer of the day, Fyodor Chaliapin (1873-1938), was for both Meyerhold and Stanislavsky the archetypal performer, inspiring their ideas about the scope of theatrical performance and the actor's technique. Chaliapin's natural gifts of a beautiful voice, striking physique and plasticity, were enriched by his sharp perception of detail and search for psychological truth. His great vocal capacity and breath control served to enhance the complexities of his interpretations. Victor Borovsky in his critical biography of Chaliapin writes how the singer introduced to the operatic stage the idea that each role has to be individualised and related to the environment around it, suggesting that singing was not a display of vocal skills, but a dramatised performance whose various elements were brought together into an organic whole.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Chaliapin reformed the art of opera by removing the artificiality associated with operatic singing and 'becoming' the role he was playing by living in the moment on the stage.<sup>2</sup> Chaliapin inspired Stanislavsky's view of naturalistic theatre, where the director promoted the idea that actors should inhabit or live their parts on the stage. For Meyerhold, on the other hand, it was important that Chaliapin exhibited on stage a heightened realism, as his art was larger than life and was always executed within a musical form. Thus the director wrote: 'In Chaliapin's acting there is always truth, not

life-like but a theatrical truth, which is always beyond life.’<sup>3</sup> Meyerhold perceived in Chaliapin’s art a celebration of the principles of stylised theatre: a heightened reality, unity between form and the individual interpretation, between acting and the sung word, through economy of gesture, flexibility of movement and a precise characterisation. He believed that the singer, since his art was not anchored in realistic representations of life, but was dependant upon giving physical and vocal shape to musical form, conveyed the truth that exists beneath the appearance of things.

By discovering where the links were formed between different art forms, artists sought to reach the hidden depths of art, to reveal its all-encompassing truths. This intensified interest in art synthesis aspired to improve the condition of a society, experiencing a painful period of transition. Rudnitsky correctly indicates that the period when Meyerhold worked at the Alexandrinsky and Mariinsky theatres was rich with revolutionary ideas: ‘The Revolution did not occur on the surface of everyday life, but in the subtext of the times, at the core, it was already happening. The genius of Meyerhold was drawn to its essence above the superficiality of appearances.’<sup>4</sup> Both in his experiments at the small theatre venues around St Petersburg and at the Imperial theatres, Meyerhold’s work was largely coloured and influenced by the crises and contrasts of the times. In the operatic spectacle, rather than in the traditional dramatic performance, the audience saw choruses representing their nation and its destiny, as in *Boris Godunov*, for instance. The turbulent era certainly sought some answers in the arts and created among audiences a deeper interest in their role. Music held a special place in this new awakening, since many artists shared Schopenhauer’s view, as expressed in *The World as Will and Representation* (1854), that music is the supreme



expression of the will. Music became the guiding principle in all of Meyerhold's experiments in artistic synthesis.

### **The Role of Music**

Music played a decisive factor in the development of Meyerhold's stage career. Music also held a special place in the artistic agenda of the members of the World of Art. Benois wrote that, for him, music was the basic element of all his associations with art.<sup>5</sup> It is also interesting to note that Benois, Somov and Diaghilev were all musicians, who attempted unsuccessfully to embark upon musical careers. Meyerhold and Diaghilev collaborated with the great composers of the day, and their acute perception of new music was to lead to major musical and theatrical innovations. Being a musician himself, a competent violinist, Meyerhold investigated the art of performance through the eyes of a musician, not only by incorporating elements of a musical score in his directing method, but also, by bringing into his theatre aesthetics certain specifics of a musical training; the rigorous technique and development of one's abilities for the performance of a given piece, attention to detail and precision, a feeling for form, rhythm, sound, melody and harmony. In short, the discipline of the execution of the musical score underpinned his theatre practice.

Meyerhold perceived the role of music as a vital guiding principle in the staging of a performance due to its ability to capture certain artistic essences. In his letter to Chekhov, as Edward Braun writes, 'Meyerhold envisaged a production in which music and movement would be used not simply as components of a lifelike scene, but as the means of pointing theatrically to what is truly significant in the action, the subtext, the unspoken dialogue of emotions...'<sup>6</sup> The director discovered music of the

words in Chekhov's plays as a means of revealing the subtle and essential substances of the drama. In 1904, he wrote to the playwright: 'Your play is abstract like Tchaikovsky's symphony. The director should capture it first by his ear...'<sup>7</sup> Meyerhold believed that the music of Chekhov's words creates the sense of heightened realism in his plays. Subsequently, in staging opera he aimed to bring out the hidden elements of drama, which he perceived were inherent in the music.

Music created the structure of a performance, a distinct time duration and rhythm on the stage. As Braun points out Meyerhold was influenced by Adolphe Appia, who argued in his book, *Die Musik und die Inszenierung*, (1899) that the musical composition in opera determines the organisation of the scenic space which should reflect the intellectual structure of the drama, in order for the production to 'attain the rank of expressive medium'. But 'as early as 1905 Meyerhold had discovered what Appia himself still denied', that the music can be used for the same purpose in staging dramatic productions.<sup>8</sup> Thus Meyerhold in *The Death of Tintagiles* created a precise organisation of sounds (for example, the sound of a tree, followed by laughter, then Tintagiles's scream), while in the production of the *Schluck and Jau*, as Rudnitsky notices, everything was supposed to be subjected to a general rhythm.<sup>9</sup> Braun describes the use of music in Meyerhold's productions following his work at Stanislavsky's studio:

Having isolated the text's inner dialogue, he would orchestrate it in terms of vocal rhythm, pauses, gesture, and movement; that is, he used music to determine precisely the time-duration and continuity in the drama...often actual music, but sometimes pure rhythms, and always with the rhythmical discipline reinforced by the purposely contrived spatial restrictions of the stage area.<sup>10</sup>

In approaching a text the director strove to find the music of its subtext, as the quotation indicates, which was then transferred onto the stage in the distinct tempo

and rhythm of the performance. This musical approach to staging supplied the means to organise all the different elements of the performance, to establish through rhythm and melody a relationship between gesture, space, colour, light, sound and dialogue. In this way, music provided Meyerhold's theatre with clear artistic form, proportion and technique.

Music, for Meyerhold, played a vital role in drawing the audience into the events on the stage. Alla Mikhailova highlights the fact that Meyerhold, when staging *The Death of the Tintagiles*, realised that 'the desired audience response could be effected by the action's rhythms, by vocal timbre, strategic pauses.'<sup>11</sup> The director observed that the sound and rhythm produced on the dramatic stage moved and absorbed the audience. Therefore, it became vital for him throughout his career to create a form of musicality in a performance, which was supposed to engross the audience more strongly than words or actions alone could have done. This musical approach to directing would also have an immense influence on his reforms of opera, where although the opera is driven by the music, the intention of the director was to reveal the score more fully in his staging and direction of performers.

### **Meyerhold's Debut as a Director of Opera**

Meyerhold was appointed to the post of theatre director at the Imperial Theatres on 1 September 1908 on the invitation of the Director of the Imperial Theatres, Vladimir Telyakovsky. As Borovsky writes, 'ignoring the active opposition of the majority of leading actors, the desperate outcries of the press and the disapproving silence of the court, he appointed the "decadent, anti-Christ and iconoclast" Vsevolod Meyerhold, principal producer of the Imperial Theatres.'<sup>12</sup> The engagement of the controversial

avant-garde director at this most prestigious cultural institution, after his scandalous dismissal from Komissarzhevskaya's theatre, was possibly due to the fact that the intelligentsia felt strongly that new life had to be brought to opera. The small cabaret theatres, such as *The Distorting Mirror* put on performances that parodied the opera genre, attacking the old operatic conventions and routines.

At the Imperial Theatres, Meyerhold strove to rejuvenate operatic art. In this conservative institution his art for the first time developed within the framework of an officially recognised and inherited artistic tradition. The director publicly acknowledged the importance of 'big' theatres and promised not to pollute them with fierce theatrical experimentation better suited to theatre studios. Rudnitsky notes that, at the Imperial Theatres, Meyerhold staged tragic and 'heavyweight' operatic works.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this is due to his search for 'big theatrical forms' capable of conveying a truly operatic spectacle. The high seriousness of German opera, which he staged, also showed Meyerhold's profound interest in large emotions and 'universal' concerns. Tragic operas offered him the possibility of exploring Wagner's notion that works of art should have integrity and meaning, and be central to life. It also reflected his conviction of the moral mission of the arts, which was supposed to play a crucial role in the creation of a better society.

Meyerhold's operatic debut on 30 October 1909 was Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The original premiere was in Munich in 1865. Wagner did not call *Tristan and Isolde* an opera or musical drama because it was not plot-driven, but represented a poetic meditation on the theme of love; the opera focused primarily on the love of its protagonists for each other. Wagner's libretto of the opera is after Gottfried von

Strassburg's *Tristan* (1210), which in turn is based on the old legend. The opera starts with Tristan taking Isolde on his ship to be the bride of King Mark of Cornwall. During their voyage they disclose their love for each other after drinking a love potion. Eventually, they are discovered by the King and Tristan is wounded by Melot. Tristan dies in Isolde's arms outside his castle, just before being pardoned by the King, and Isolde sings of the love she can now only fulfil in death. The opera's score expresses the development and the winning power of love whose only resolution is death. It draws the spectators into a mystical eroticism and renunciation, into an exclusion of the light of day in favour of the darkness of the night. The theme of eroticism and death was familiar to Russian symbolism. Braun indicates that Meyerhold's production of *Tristan and Isolde* was the product of a year's exhaustive study of Wagner and his background.<sup>14</sup>

*Tristan and Isolde* contained the evolution of Wagner's ideas. In this interior drama the orchestra plays an important part; the opera, by its nature, could be seen as a symphonic poem. The opera is not constructed in a classical 'introduction-development-conclusion' manner, but its score embodies a rich variety of leitmotifs and, as such, has a complex musical structure and dramaturgy. Wagner developed a scheme of constant melody in order to put into practice a technique of constant action and declamation, which broke away from the traditional use of arias. In this use of continuous flow of music and action, the composer aimed to create a sense of an 'infinite melody'. Wagner believed in the capacity of the orchestra to express the 'unspeakable', that is certain emotions and meanings only found in the realms of pure music, since they cannot be adequately conveyed by speech or song. Guided by the principle of dramatic action, a blend of music and drama would be created in which

the role of the orchestra plays as great a dramatic role as the chorus or leading performers. In the opera the tension of desire and eroticism is underpinned with the sense of internal melody, intertwined with chromatic tension, lines and crossings, flexible modulations, and rich and dense orchestration.

In this production, Meyerhold changed traditional aspects of the opera's performance, such as the style and design, in favour of new stage perspectives. He constructed a relief stage with platforms on different levels in the second and third act, which created broken lines and rhythms within the setting. Here Meyerhold was influenced by Georg Fuchs' theories, which promoted the idea of the reconstruction of the theatres of Ancient Greece and Elizabethan England.<sup>15</sup> This was a move away from Wagner's architectural conception of the Bayreuth stage, which resembled a classical amphitheatre, but had a covered orchestra pit. In support of the design in his article about the opera in 1909, Meyerhold indicated that Wagner wanted the stage to be a pedestal for sculpture, and this was viable when relief staging was employed, which suited the plasticity of the actor and opened up new possibilities for the staging of the action of a given drama.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the relief space created an opportunity for elevating certain scenes by staging them on the main platform of action, as occurred with the central love duet between Tristan and Isolde in the second act. Perhaps, the staging also made the actors appear grander when they were elevated above the usual stage platform. The relief stage represented a novelty in operatic art and enhanced the visual impact of the production. Isaac Glikman writes that the press published a line by one of the spectators present in response to this innovation: 'The floor was playing.'<sup>17</sup>

The sense of magic was also sought in the design of the costumes and setting. The director rejected the historical approach to theatre design, such as the depiction of helmets and shields, for instance, in favour of an inventive and colourful interpretation of ancient times.<sup>18</sup> Braun writes that in *Tristan* 'prompted by the medieval colouring that he perceived in the orchestral score, he and his designer, Prince Shervashidze, turned to the thirteenth century of Gottfried von Strassburg and recreated the highly formalised style of his miniaturist contemporaries.'<sup>19</sup> The rich colourings and patterns merged ancient and medieval visual characteristics in the design. This amalgamation was closely related to contemporary aesthetics as it depicted the sense of an irretrievable and fantastic past.

Meyerhold's innovative stage design and his disregard for some of the composer's instructions challenged the conventions of the nineteenth-century opera tradition. Braun points out that Meyerhold moved away from Wagner's stage directions, believing them to be weak in comparison with the composer's music.<sup>20</sup> For instance, a vast sail was visible from the beginning of the opera contrary to Wagner's instruction that a ship should appear later, thereby changing the development of the opera's symbolism. The pictorial depictions in the scenery were also changed: the park, for example, was cut in the second act to the disappointment of some critics.<sup>21</sup> This particularly represented a move away from the romantic fascination with the synthesis of music and nature. The sea in the first and third acts was metaphorically placed in the auditorium, as demonstrated by the performers' use of eyeline. By changing the actors' focal point, the director aimed to dissolve the barrier between the stage and the auditorium in order to bring the audience closer in to the stage action. These scene changes were pursued in the belief that the music would stir the audience's

imagination more strongly than the literal and the pictorial representation in the setting.<sup>22</sup> By employing relief staging, changing Wagner's stage directions and reforming the tradition of opera's performance, Meyerhold drew the internal power of the composition closer towards the elements of its score.

Meyerhold took his cue for the staging of *Tristan and Isolde* from the music, where he perceived the seeds of the drama lay. For him, the music represented the basis of the dramatic action and the guiding principle in achieving an integrated stage performance. In the score, the themes of confession, the love potion, the love song, death, torment, judgment, suffering and freedom from death, are all leitmotifs which appear and disappear. In parallel with these leitmotifs, Meyerhold aimed to convey musical phrases in the acting, setting a distinct rhythmical tempo in the performance.<sup>23</sup> Glikman points out that 'he created a diverse rhythm of action, dynamic and stillness, which was determined by the character of the music.'<sup>24</sup> For instance, in the first act after the drinking of the love potion, the love duet was performed with great passion, where the singers were in almost completely stillness, only changing their poses in rhythmical unison with the score. This static acting aimed to convey the overwhelming feeling of love in the score, expressed, for instance, in the development of the gaze of love leitmotif and its recurrence in the opera's culminating moments, as in the secret meeting of the lovers in the second act and the scene of the death of Isolde. This contrasted with more dynamic scenes where a more rapid movement was sought, as in the finale when Kurwenal defended the bridge against the King's army.<sup>25</sup> Thus, by finding dramatic qualities, that is Wagner's 'inner dialogue' in the music, Meyerhold directed his actors-singers in accordance with the rhythmic and melodic line in the operatic score. The production



achieved a musical feeling in the scenic form, in the development of themes and connecting passages.

In *Tristan and Isolde*, the director brought the concepts of sculpturally posed acting and statuesque groupings into opera, which he had already explored when he staged Maeterlinck's plays. He pointed out that, in the spoken drama, actors mime the emotions while, in the opera 'the music has the power to suggest' the state of the character. Therefore, he insisted that, 'the operatic artist must observe the principle of economy of gesture, because he need employ gestures only to supply what is missing from the musical score, or to complete what has been only half-said by the orchestra.'<sup>26</sup> According to Meyerhold, opera singers should direct the audience's attention and lead them to experience the depth of the music; gestures should add to or highlight the emotions and thoughts which were inspired by the language of the music. The singers would blend the elements of music and drama in opera, since their movement would grow from the dramatic elements inherent in the score. In this way, in *Tristan and Isolde*, the movement encapsulated a new sense of dramatic importance and artistic order, since gestures came to symbolise the elements in the music, which gave both the plastic art and music an extra impetus. The performers' poses produced an illusion of a sculpture, creating a stage tableau, which was as if 'frozen' immortalised under Wagner's 'infinite' music.

Telyakovsky did not like the sculptural poses in acting, since it moved away from the realistic portrayal of character. In his diary he wrote: 'in act two and three where Tristan and Isolde slide and move around the stone their poses are often unnatural.'<sup>27</sup> However, it was precisely by embracing the stylised combined force of music and

drama in opera, that Meyerhold reformed the art of the opera singer and sought to reveal the full power of the genre. In his article about *Tristan and Isolde*, Meyerhold wrote that 'pantomime is an opera without words'<sup>28</sup> indicating the link between movement and music and emphasising the importance of theatricality. In the opera pantomime became a principle factor of the production, where the sung words were supposed to be harmonised with the movement, since both these elements depended on the music. The relationship between the movement and use of space on stage and the musical score represented a revolution in opera. No opera director before Meyerhold had transformed music into plastic terms in order to enhance the merger of musical and dramatic ideas.

In Meyerhold's theatre, acting drew from, and was synthesised with, all other components of the production. The director pointed out that performers acting in harmony with the stage organisation and the musical score become a work of art in their own right.<sup>29</sup> The rhythmical amalgamation between the human body and music showed the revival of the dance element in the theatre and was also inspired by Wagner's view of the crucial role of rhythm in performer's art. Wagner had stated in *The Art-work of the Future* that 'by means of rhythm does dance become an art...Rhythm is the natural, unbreakable bond of union between the arts of dance and tone...'<sup>30</sup> Thus, through rhythm, movement and sound can unite to produce an all-encompassing art. Meyerhold believed that Wagnerian synthesis could only be achieved with the advancement of a new actor-singer. Since the opera singers should interpret the music in plastic terms, they should also be dancers, trained in movement and physical plasticity. The emphasis on dance and rhythm, suggested that rhythm could reveal the substance of the drama and produce a sense of artistic truth.

Meyerhold sought to unify all the elements of the art of the opera singer into a single dramatic whole. He thus moved away from realistic acting in opera or a pure vocal display, believing it to be a crude deformation of the operatic form because it distorted the unity between what is happening on the stage and music. He stated that music drama must be performed in such a way that the spectator never thinks to question why the actors are singing and not speaking.<sup>31</sup> By embracing the stylistic elements of opera, Meyerhold aimed for a stylised theatrical truth, which would create a credible reality of its own. The blend of music, drama, the staging and acting, would in turn create this distinct operatic reality. It is interesting to note Chaliapin stated in an interview in London in 1938 that 'in opera one should sing as one speaks.' For Chaliapin this meant that, when singing, it 'is indispensable to understand the sense of the words one utters and the feelings that dictated the choices of these words.'<sup>32</sup> Here the link between opera and drama is reinforced through the sense of dramatic truth sought in singing. The breaking of the boundaries between dramatic and operatic theatre was also apparent in Meyerhold's radical approach to staging *Tristan and Isolde*. In contrast to the conventional routine of focusing on the vocal interpretations of roles, Meyerhold gave a physical and dramatic shape to musical form.

The notion of a unified and organic performance was enriched in the newly developing collaboration between the director and conductor. At the turn of the twentieth century, the artistic and social role of the conductor had changed in that he had now become a star. As the orchestra became more complex so the art of the conductor developed. As the scene became more compound, involving new plays, design and lighting possibilities, the art of the director was created. In opera these new

stars had to meet. In *Tristan and Isolde* Meyerhold for the first time collaborated with a conductor, Felix Mottl from the Bayreuth theatre, who replaced Eduard Nápravník, the principal conductor of the Imperial Theatres. Abram Gozenpud writes that Nápravník at best showed indifference towards Meyerhold's work. The reviewers noted that the conductor's interpretation of music was academic, stable.<sup>33</sup> This was contrary to Mottl's expressionist performance, which sustained greater dynamism and passion.

Meyerhold integrated the art of the conductor in the staging in order to achieve an organic blend between the music and the scenic action. The collaboration between the theatre director and the conductor enhanced the concept of a rhythmical production. Valery Bebutov, Meyerhold's disciple, recalls that in Mottl's performance the orchestra was stronger (perhaps due to the closed orchestra in Bayreuth) and the production finished fifteen minutes earlier than usual. Meyerhold taken by Mottl's magic art, made scenic corrections in rehearsals, so as to bring together the performers' actions with the performance by the great conductor.<sup>34</sup> Thus Meyerhold, in response to the conductor's interpretation of the music, adjusted the rhythm and tempo of scenic action in order to synthesise the staging and the score. In opera, where the stage and the performers are rhythmically organised, the change of tempo is possible only through the collaboration between the director and the conductor. Different rhythms, which can be related to the changes of tempo in performance, generate new musical and dramatic meanings. As such, the altered tempo in the score and the staging produced a new interpretation of the opera. Since music and rhythm provided the basis for the staging, the director's profession became tied to the art of composition. Here the interpretation of a given composition, or the score, was

supposed to reveal the meanings of a given opera or drama and was related to the overall staging of it.

Thus, by integrating the art of both conductor and opera singer into the staging and the design, Meyerhold's operatic debut demonstrated a true quest into the nature of artistic synthesis, based on the power of music. Braun stresses that 'Meyerhold's *Tristan and Isolde* must be acknowledged as probably the first attempt to free the composer's conception of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' from the banal conventions of the nineteenth century and give it credible theatrical form.'<sup>35</sup> In conveying the integral connection between music and drama, between rhythm, shape and plasticity, Meyerhold abolished operatic conventionality and pointed in new directions. By creating the link between the music and the staging Meyerhold achieved a sense of the piece's wholeness. As one reviewer aptly perceived, 'opera attained a new sense of harmony and rigorousness in performance, by being submitted, not only to the art of the conductor but, also, to the theatre director.'<sup>36</sup> Thus Meyerhold transposed his principles of the director's art into opera insofar as he merged different elements of performance into an integrated whole. On the other hand, Wagner's opera opened up a whole new dimension to Meyerhold's work in the theatre, where staging was approached in symphonic-like terms, that is the dramatic action was built up in relation to different leitmotifs rather than being determined by traditional dramatic structures.

### **Golovin and Meyerhold: Traditionalism and Escapism**

The process of staging *Tristan and Isolde* was an important step towards mounting his most acclaimed success at the Mariinsky theatre, the operatic production of *Orpheus*

*and Eurydice*, premiered on 21 December 1911. The opera's story is based on the classical myth of Orpheus. After his wife's death he follows her to Hades in order to return her to life, the condition being that he would not look at her until they reached the upper world. Orpheus is unable to resist her pleas and fatally turns his eyes upon her. At this very moment Eurydice falls dead, Orpheus is about to commit suicide, when Amor appears announcing that the Gods are touched by his love and thus are returning Eurydice to him. In the finale, Amor brings Orpheus and Eurydice to earth and the chorus salutes the lovers and the power of love. *Orpheus and Eurydice* was premiered in Vienna in 1762. This was the first creation in musical culture where the main elements of the musical drama were included; the music was integral to the verse and the continuity of the drama, since it was created from the elements of the drama.

Meyerhold's *Orpheus and Eurydice* was designed by Alexander Golovin and choreographed by Fokine, artists whose work were integral to Diaghilev's company. With the exception of *Tristan and Isolde*, in all his operatic productions at the Mariinsky Theatre Golovin's designs were an integral part of Meyerhold's artistic output. The designer's own expertise enhanced the director's conception of the design and overall staging of the performance. Golovin's feeling for colour, shape and patterns, his mastery of composition and style, became constant features in his collaborations with Meyerhold. In his article 'Gluck's Orpheus: Artist Alexander Golovin and Director Vsevolod Meyerhold Speak About Their Plans,' Meyerhold acknowledges the artist-director collaboration in this way:

It takes a very long time if both of them seek to bring all the component parts in line with a single creative concept ...Their cooperation is very difficult because they have to work out a unified design of the production, define a

guideline for every scene and weld the artifice of every scene to the chain of the artist's integral concept.<sup>37</sup>

It was specifically in *Orpheus* Meyerhold emphasised that Golovin's design showed the basis for the staging and the director and the choreographer should be willing to be guided by it.<sup>38</sup> Golovin had planned staging of *Orpheus* since 1908 and his designs were certainly a vital component of the production, which reached the stage three years later.

In *Orpheus* the stage was divided into two parts: the forestage with painted scenery and the upstage without any, and with additional varied playing levels. The 'empty' proscenium, covered with an ornamental carpet, became an important playing area. For the two stage parts two curtains assisted the scene changes in running efficiently. As Braun indicates: 'Golovin's settings incorporated a richly embroidered pink, orange, gold and silver front curtain and gauze act-drops to facilitate uninterrupted scene changes.'<sup>39</sup> This method of dividing the stage into two parts was employed in their earlier production of *Don Juan* (1910) and also later in *Masquerade* (1917). In all these productions, the stage was transformed into a multifaceted space, capable of presenting a variety of rhythms and angles.

Golovin's colours and rhythms merged with the other elements of performance. His stylisation of the antique costumes and his celebration of colours created a feast for the audience's eyes. A contemporary reviewer observed: 'It was a whole symphony of colours. Everything is thought through, stylised and finished in accordance with the inner requirements of the artistic logic and expression.'<sup>40</sup> The use of musical terms to describe the effect of the design was also employed by other reviewers. The newspaper *Rech'* described the beauty of the design as well as the organic blend of

music, setting and staging: 'The setting of the first act – at Eurydice's grave is evoked through soft and elegiac tones. The husband is tender and beautiful in his sorrow, and the grouping is tender and beautiful'<sup>41</sup> The tones in the design corresponded to the tones evoked in acting and the staging of the crowd. The musicality of the overall design, the soft yet dynamic movement, created through colours and patterns, corresponded to the sound of mournful and passionate music. The design, the visual music, was an integral part of the production and greatly praised as such.

The stylisation in the design showed the current attraction to different cultural epochs. Being a World of Art member, Golovin explored different periods and styles, engaging with Meyerhold in the artistic movement of theatrical traditionalism. This aesthetic approach to staging classics represented a way of revealing the distinctive style of given authors and various epochs. It was, for the first time, on the large scale in the production of Molière's *Don Juan* at the Alexandrinsky theatre that Meyerhold, as Rudnitsky indicates, 'employed the principles of stylisation, in other words, the principle of recreating the style and atmosphere of a particular epoch through the help of the characteristic qualities of the art of that epoch.'<sup>42</sup> In *Don Juan* the collaborators established a stylised version of the epoch in which Molière lived in the design and actors' performances. In *Orpheus* they sought to recreate the artistic characteristics of the period in which Gluck lived. Meyerhold described how their production of *Orpheus* was performed in the version published in 1900 by A. Durand et Fils:

This version was based on Gluck's revision for the Paris opera written ten years after its first performance in Vienna (1762). With the role of Orpheus, composed originally for contralto, adapted for tenor.... At the Mariinsky Theatre the work was viewed, so to speak, through the prism of the age in which the composer lived and worked. Everything was designed in the style of antiquity as it had been conceived by artists in the eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup>



Both artists often set the play in a different period in order to enhance what they considered to be the distinctive qualities of the work. The investigation into different theatrical styles, conventions and periods meant a synthesis of that reality rather than a reproduction of it. This approach to directing classics was employed in various interpretations of operas and plays, indicating that theatrical traditionalism was recurrent in different performances.

Traditionalism represented a way of establishing a relationship between the past and present. The past was re-created from a contemporary aesthetic viewpoint that usually explored a synthesis of different artistic styles. In *Tristan and Isolde*, for instance, the mix of ancient and medieval aesthetic created a unique imaginative reality, while in *Orpheus* collaborators once again departed from ethnographical truth as they merged the style of eighteenth century with that of antiquity. This suggested that the director interpreted the main ideas of *Orpheus* as corresponding to the stylised eighteenth-century view of antiquity. This stylisation, moreover, drew its inspiration also from other sources. Braun describes the eclecticism in the design:

The critics variously identified the inspiration of Poussin's pastoral landscapes (the opening scene at Eurydice's tomb), Gustave Doré's illustrations for Dante's *Divina Commedia* (Orpheus at the threshold of Hades), Botticelli's *La Primavera* (the Elysian Fields), and only Watteau from the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

By drawing on variety of artistic sources, the collaborators sought to furnish the production with a powerful means of expression. By synthesising artistic characteristics from these sources, they related Gluck's art to other artistic discourses. The integration of different styles presupposed that there are 'universal truths' contained in each style, as well as in the meanings of a synthesised art work. By

merging different artistic styles, the collaborators wanted to establish links between different periods that the contemporary audience would understand.

Traditionalism strove to elevate the main ideas and principles behind a certain art work. The search for the subtext in art, combined with the emphasis on the artist's individuality and inner expression, once again demonstrated a quest into the notion of inner truth. In staging operas, Meyerhold took into account that composers did not have the option of integrating their art in accordance with the level of contemporary stage possibilities and aesthetics.<sup>45</sup> Hence it was viable to reform the tradition of opera's performance. It could be suggested that both the director and designer wanted to elevate the 'true' Gluck by penetrating to the core of the composer's art, rather than focusing on the antique myth alone. In exploring antiquity through Gluck's eighteenth century, as well as relating it to other artistic sources, the collaborators searched for the basis of his creativity and thinking. Perhaps, only in this way was it possible to comprehend fully the subtext of an artwork, the way the composer or writer created and thought. By examining the process by which an artwork was created, the collaborators interpreted the opera's ideas and meanings in relation to current stage possibilities.

The architectural space in *Orpheus and Eurydice* opened up new possibilities for operatic reforms in the staging of the chorus and ballet. Their movement was choreographed in relation to the overall design, which provided the setting for exploring new ways of mixing different artistic disciplines. Fokine and Meyerhold brought the members of chorus and ballet into a single unified group. The mix of vocal and dance elements, traditionally separated, was now possible due to the

transformation of the stage into a dynamic multifaceted construction, which was capable of carrying the new ballet and the actor-singer. Braun indicates that Fokine's treatment of 'the chorus and corps de ballet as a single homogeneous mass created effects no less spectacular than those achieved with Golovin in Stravinsky's *Firebird* for Diaghilev a year earlier'<sup>46</sup> In both cases the collaborators created a distinct dramatisation of the performing ensemble. In *Orpheus* the similarity of gestures and movement in the mass blended the members of the chorus and ballet dancers. This was especially true of the scene in Hades, described by Meyerhold:

When the curtain rose the entire stage was covered with motionless bodies. Groups in the most unnatural poses, as though frozen in mid-convulsion, clung to the lofty cliffs and hung suspended over the abyss (open traps in the stage floor) wracked by the ghastly torments of hell. As the chorus sang 'He who strays here, knowing no fear...' the entire mass made a single slow movement, one awful concerted gesture. It was as though some monster of unimaginable size had been disturbed and was ominously raising itself up. A single gesture that lasted for the duration of the chorus' long phrase. Then after freezing for a few minutes in a new pose, the mass began slowly to curl up and then to crawl about the stage. All those who represented the Shades – the whole corps de ballet, the whole chorus of male and female voices, all the students of the theatre school, plus hundreds of extras – were all crawling, changing places. Some climbed from the traps up onto the cliffs, others slid into the traps. The mass of performers was crawling all over the stage. They were all exhausted from finding no place to rest.<sup>47</sup>

This movement in contrast to the lyricism of *Orpheus*' music produced a terrifying effect. Rather than elaborating upon a display of vocal or dance skills, the collaborators provided the whole of the performing ensemble with a precise dramatic function and in this way enhanced the dramatic elements of the score. The interlocking of musical and visual elements contributed to the sense of the opera's unity. By utilising and merging the elements of both genres of performance, Fokine and Meyerhold furnished a strong sense of theatricality, as they translated the movement of the music into the movement on the stage.

In *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Meyerhold was still exploring the economy of gesture, slower tempos and contained rhythms of movement, interspersed with the melodic line of the score. Yelena Katulskaya, who sang Amor, described the unity between the staging and the music:

In the first scene of the opera the setting represented an overgrown clearing framed by dense trees. It was dominated by a huge tomb in which Eurydice was laid to rest. Surrounding the tomb were maidens in mournful poses grouped picturesquely in the manner of Greek sculpture. The lighting, suggestive of dusk, created a mood of deep peace mingled with grief. Near the tomb stood the bowed figure of Orpheus. The opening chords from the orchestra stirred the depths of the soul with the austere beauty of the melody and the richness of the harmony. I can hardly recall a production that compared with the Mariinsky's *Orpheus* for the organic blending of all its elements: music, drama, painting, sculpture and the wonderful singing of Sobinov (as Orpheus).<sup>48</sup>

Meyerhold, once again, used the economy of gesture in order to open up the way for the music to move 'the depths of the soul'. The solemn and spare movements were also related to the intense emotionalism of the music expressing Orpheus' grief and sorrow. In *Tristan and Isolde*, Meyerhold directed performers' movements in a rhythmical unison with the music, while in *Orpheus*, there was in places a complex amalgamation between the movement and the score because, as Braun points out, 'Fokine frequently moved the chorus in counterpoint to the orchestra.... But in both cases it was the music rather than any consideration of 'realism' or operatic convention that dictated every movement and gesture.'<sup>49</sup> As was the case with *Tristan and Isolde*, *Orpheus and Eurydice* achieved a distinct musical form in the scenic space, which supported the dramatic unity of the production.

Although Meyerhold strove to abolish operatic conventionality, as in the staging of the chorus, he also used certain distinct opera characteristics to augment the dramatic ideas of the performance. The emphasis on operatic characteristics, namely its concert

qualities, further enhanced the concept of stylisation. For instance, in the finale, the trio of Orpheus, Eurydice and Amor was sung as a concert item facing the audience.<sup>50</sup> This suggests that the director incorporated into operatic reforms experiments he had already conducted since *The Fairground Booth*, where the theatre within a theatre set, played with the notion of theatrical illusion. In the opera finale, Meyerhold broke the theatrical illusion of the performance by emphasising the concert and vocal qualities of the piece. This highlighted the musical nature of the operatic form and possibly enhanced the transformation from the underworld to the light of day. The emphasis on the musical qualities of the piece, which are characteristic of the operatic genre, supported the stylistic elements of the opera as well as the thematic development of the drama.

*Orpheus and Eurydice* was a great critical success. Alexander Glazunov believed that the production was one of the most important events in musical culture during this period.<sup>51</sup> However, the historical treatment of the opera and the problematic notion of artistic truth contained in it, created diverse responses in the press. Benois wrote that 'artists, when staging the opera, thought about the eighteenth-century style...they thought about splendour, grace, flirtatiousness...and they completely forgot that Gluck would have sacrificed all this for truth in the expressed feeling and strict beauty.'<sup>52</sup> Benois believed that the production failed to capture vital characteristics of Gluck's art because the opera's interpretation departed from the original work. The struggle between the author and director, and thus the question of how much the stage director can change the original interpretation of the author, was at the forefront of the debate. Golovin and Meyerhold were often criticised for their stylistic eclecticism and for changing the period of opera. Nevertheless, *Orpheus and Eurydice* marked an

important step in the rejuvenation of the operatic performance and in the development of the notion of total theatre.

The reforms of opera were also stimulated by the development of contemporary music. *Salome* by Richard Strauss (1864-1949), premiered in 1905, represented a clear break from tradition, particularly since the opera was constructed on the basis of one continuous act, which was unusual for its time. Its structure and score anticipated the composer's next opera *Elektra*, which had its premiere in 1909. This two-hour opera was performed without an interval. It is a tragedy in one act; the music is expressionistic, dissonant and conveys an obsessive intensity. A sense of a constant crescendo is felt throughout the score. The text is by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, after his drama (1903), based on Sophocles' tragedy. Elektra mourns the death of her father Agamemnon, who was killed by her mother Klytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. She wants revenge and, when her brother returns to the Palace after years in exile, he fulfils her wish by killing their father's executioners. In the opera's finale she dances in exhilaration, collapses, and dies. The opera's distinctive musical voice is particularly audible in the loudness of the scoring and its violent harmonies.

Meyerhold's *Elektra* was the opera's premiere in Russia on 18 February 1913. The music stirred controversy within the highest musical circles. Glazunov wrote in

*Birzhevye vedomosti*:

How can the audience understand Strauss' *Elektra*? We – experts – don't understand this opera.... I must say, the sounds in this work bring associations of a castle of birds.... In my view, in *Elektra* there is no healthy music, even though on the surface the opera is composed with temperament.<sup>53</sup>

Meyerhold, on the other hand, declared in the same paper that for those artists who worked with Wagner, this opera was only a move forward.<sup>54</sup> The director acutely perceived that the opera presented new developments in the integration of music and drama. *Elektra* is one of the last works of late romanticism in European music and also follows the German tonal tradition, particularly Wagnerian principles of music drama, which uses leitmotifs to express operatic themes. Wagner believed that the orchestra should create a harmony between various musical ideas and individual characters, as well as extend the dramatic ideas into the realms of a symphony. Strauss in *Elektra* blended all sorts of tonalities into a continuous orchestral texture, which illuminated the progression of the drama while expressing 'the inexpressible'. The dynamic intensity in orchestral writing is particularly powerful in some of the descriptive passages reflecting the mental states of the characters, as when Clytemnestra confides in her daughter, describing the nightmares that haunt her, the music becomes atonal for the moment, revealing the queen's psyche. Both Strauss and Wagner employ a large orchestra whose dramatic function is similar to that of an ancient Greek chorus. The orchestra follows a distinct line of thought in relation to the individual characters portrayed and comments on their actions. In *Elektra* Strauss moves away from the classical tradition by interpreting Greek art through the employment of new registers, sounds and colours in music.

This avant-garde opera primarily represents extremes of individual psychology removed from any social implications, and is concerned with violence and terror. Both Rudnitsky and Braun suggest that Meyerhold's productions of *Elektra*, *Orpheus* and *La Pisanelle* participated in the general mood of escapism that overtook St Petersburg during the pre-Revolutionary years.<sup>55</sup> The strong aestheticism of these

performances predominantly focused on individual experience rather than on social engagement.

The production involved modernism and the elements of the Art Nouveau movement, the exotic, the archaic and the mystical. *Elektra* was framed by an ethnographical design based on the collaborators' perception of Minoan culture. Meyerhold and Golovin investigated the historical context of the play in relation to archaeology. Telyakovsky wrote in his diary on the 2 February 1913 that *Elektra's* 'decorations are wonderful, done in accordance with the last archaeological findings in Crete...but there are traces of style moderne in places...some actors' movements are comical.'<sup>56</sup> The performers depicted the poses found on Minoan relics and vases. The imposing setting of Agamemnon's palace dominated the stage. The antique patterns and colours on the palace and costumes created a sense of formal order in the design. The collaborators were criticised for the scenery which overwhelmed certain elements in the music; the formalised antiquity in the design and the staging did not complement the expressionist score which was in part atonal. Most scholars, including Rudnitsky, support the view that the production created a sense of aesthetic extravagance and artistic dissonance insofar as the musical language did not correspond to its visual whole.<sup>57</sup>

Glikman, in contrast, approves of Meyerhold's stylisation in the production for its brevity and innovation. He believes that the director created a tragedy suffused with an antique aura. For instance, the characters' extravagant choreography of hands was true to the spirit of ancient tragedy because in Greek theatre a 'dance of hands' is an important form of expression. He points out that some critics, such as Koptiaev,



regretted that the character of Elektra in the production was not a hysterical, but tragic persona.<sup>58</sup> This suggests that the director highlighted the tragic elements rather than being purely taken by the overtly expressive qualities of the music and the character. Glikman further stresses that, in *Elektra*, Meyerhold started to develop his theory of contrapuntal movement through the relationship between the music and the staging.<sup>59</sup> The antique atmosphere helped to 'calm' and give order to the passionate and violent libretto and the music.<sup>60</sup> This resulted in a static and more complex characterisation as the characters developed their own rhythms in relation to the rhythms of the score. In other words, there was a dynamic counterpoint between the elements of music and the actor's plasticity. Characterisation and the staging were directed in terms of its dialogue with the music rather than pure correspondence with it. It was precisely this dialogue that created the meaning in the overall conception of the performance. Moreover, Glikman points out that Strauss himself was overcome by the production, seeing no disparity between the music and the staging.<sup>61</sup>

There are difficulties in researching the precise impact of this production and its relevance to Meyerhold's developing aesthetics. There are only a few documents about the production, probably because its run was limited to three performances. The production was withdrawn because it coincided with the celebration of the Romanov's three hundredth anniversary. The Romanov Tercentenary was marked by street festivities and Royal processions. It became the culminating point for the Empire in a time when industry and economy were rapidly expanding. Since the drama depicts the murder of a King and a Queen, its realisation on the stage was not considered appropriate for a royal celebration. Meyerhold, rather than exploring any possible socio-political references, was immersed in creating an aesthetic link with a

bygone age. Braun notes that the director admitted years after that Golovin and he made a mistake by being carried away with the design and paying 'insufficient attention to the music.'<sup>62</sup> The overtly formalised setting and interpretation of characters most probably did not convey the expressionist character of the music and Elektra's obsession and hysterical qualities. However, the praise of the acting and singing and the description of the successful final curtain call in *New Times (Novoe vremia)* suggests that the production did achieve a certain impact.<sup>63</sup> The 'dance of hands' in the opera was also important since it was connected to Meyerhold's development of acting methodology. In later productions such as *The Government Inspector*, the movement of actors' hands sustained a dance-like quality, a powerful expressiveness. This emphasis on the movement of hands is also a vital component of Eastern theatrical traditions. It could also be argued that the experiments in the contrapuntal relationship between the staging and the music were important since this was directly related to the director's innovations in his post-revolutionary productions such as the opera *The Queen of Spades*.

Strauss' *Elektra* was the last opera by a German composer staged by Meyerhold. During his operatic career, the director only staged German and Russian opera. The influence and the relevant points of interest in these opera are partly related to the cultural epoch. The high seriousness of German operas demonstrated in *Tristan and Isolde*, *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *Elektra* explored philosophical issues that Wagner considered vital to society, such as the tensions between good and evil, between the physical and spiritual, between selfishness and love. The interest in myth coincided with the period's quest into the rudiments of art, thought and feeling. These issues were underlined in Wagner's philosophy of musical drama in his concept of

*Gesamtkunstwerk* or 'universal artwork', which presupposed that by integrating the arts it was possible to uncover 'universal truths'.

Meyerhold embraced this view, which resulted in innovative staging of operas and the development of characterisation based on the director's interpretation of the score and his vision of total theatre. In *Elektra*, even though there might have been a disparity between the staging and music, Meyerhold demonstrated new ways of interspersing art forms in opera, while the experiments in acting and movement were directly linked to his developing aesthetics. In *Orpheus*, the mix of ballet and chorus members showed a merging of traditionally separated forms of artistic practice. In both *Orpheus* and *Tristan*, by finding dramatic thoughts in the music and transferring these onto the stage, in his direction of the performers and the use of space, Meyerhold created musical forms in the staging and reformed the art of the opera singer. By exploring the relationship between the hearing of the music and the visual space in which the drama unfolds, Meyerhold suggested that opera should be seen to be heard better. In the true Wagnerian tradition, the director emphasised the music in a dramatic setting in order to reinforce dramatic content and expression. By synthesising the arts, as well as different historical styles, Meyerhold aimed to reveal the links between different periods and diverse art forms. This integration of the arts was supposed to create a charged spiritual experience of theatre that would fully envelop its audience.

For Meyerhold there was no real divide between theatre and opera. The focus on the physical mastery of the body to express both musical and dramatic substance suggested that opera singers were supposed to develop their art like dramatic actors.

As in Chaliapin's art, theatre and opera merged, bringing concepts such as stylisation, reality, technique, form, interpretation and inner and artistic truth together. The opera singer became an artist. The operatic production – an artistic composition, moulded and transformed into an organic whole by the director.

Thus German opera offered the possibility of examining 'universal concerns' reinforced by the director's ability to integrate the arts. The popularity of Wagner's music and his theoretical works during this period was particularly strong, coinciding with the symbolists' interest in myth, artistic synthesis and belief in the enlightening role of art. In August 1914, Russia entered the First World War. Victor Borovsky describes the impact of the war on Russian life:

In a world which had visibly run amok, stifling the voice of reason, calls for new sacrifices and for new victories, grew increasingly vociferous. The simple and normal language of human emotions lay buried under official jargon.... The bitterness of defeat mingled with admiration for the brave defenders of the homeland, produced a very sobering effect. Sad reflections upon the future invaded drawing rooms, literary debates, card games and festive gatherings. There was a general mood of expectancy, fear and uncertainty.<sup>64</sup>

The war provoked anti-German sentiment in Russia. Patriotism became the fashion. The planned season at the Imperial Theatre that included Wagner's compositions was interrupted. All works by German composers were banned. Although politics interfered, the lessons learned in 'German classes' were preserved.

It was perhaps fortunate for Karl-Theodor Kasimir that at the age of 21 in 1895 he 'became' Russian in name and in faith by renouncing his Lutheran religion and becoming an Orthodox Christian. This act, Braun indicates 'affirmed his perception of himself as essentially Russian, as well as contriving to avoid conscription into the Prussian army. This step also facilitated his marriage, the following year, to a local

Russian girl, Olga Munt.<sup>65</sup> Thus Karl-Theodor became Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold, now capable of mounting Russian opera on the Imperial stage during the war years despite his German origin. It was precisely his staging of Russian operas that further enriched his theatre practice.

1. Borovsky Victor, *Chaliapin: A Critical Biography*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998), pp.405-421
2. *ibid.*, pp.441-444
3. *V. E. Mejerholjd o Pozorištu*, (ed. and trans.) Miličević Ognjenka, (Belgrade: Nolit, 1976) p.99, also in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, (ed. and trans.) Braun Edward, (Methuen: 1998), p. 82
4. Rudnitskii Konstantin, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), p.217
5. Kennedy Janet, *The Mir Iskusstva group and Russian art 1898 –1912* (London: Garland, 1977), p.341
6. Braun Edward, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, (London: Methuen, 1998), p.24
7. Quoted in Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 38
8. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, pp.89-90
9. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 63
10. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.89
11. Mikhailova Alla, *Meierkhol'd i Khudozhniki*, (trans.) Bessmertnaia Elena, (Moscow: Galart, 1995), p.52
12. Borovsky Victor, *Chaliapin: A Critical Biography*, p.261
13. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 127
14. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in the Theatre*, p. 86
15. *V.E. Mejerholjd o Pozorištu*, pp. 104-105, also in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 89
16. *ibid.*, pp. 99-112
17. Glikman Isaak, *Meierkhol'd i muzykal'nyi teatr*, (Leningrad: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1989), p.94
18. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, pp.90-91

19. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, pp.91-92
20. *ibid*, p.90
21. Koptiacv Aleksandr, 'Vozobnovlennyi *Tristan*', *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 01 November 1909, also in Braudo Evgenii, 'Liubov' i Smert' (*Tristan i Izol'da v poemakh Srednevekov'ia i v muzykal'noi drame Rikharda Vagnera*)' *Apollon*, 1910, No 4 in *Meierkhol'd v russskoi teatral'noi kritike 1892-1918*, (eds.) Pesochinskii N., Kukhta E. and Tarshis N., (Moscow: Artist.Rezhisser.Teatr, 1997), pp. 176/188
22. *V.E.Mejerholjd o Pozorištu*, p.107, also in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.90
23. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 81, also in Koptiacv, 'Vozobnovlennyi *Tristan*', *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 01.11.1909 in *Meierkhol'd v russskoi teatral'noi kritike*, p.175
24. Glikman, *Meirkhol'd i muzykal'nyi teatr*, p. 94
25. Auslender Sergei, 'Peterburgskie teatri' *Apollon*, 1909, No2 in *Meierkhol'd v russskoi teatral'noi kritike 1892-1918*, p. 186
26. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p.86, also in *V.E.Mejerholjd o Pozorištu*, p.99
27. Teliakovskii, 'Iz dnevnikov V.A.Teliakovskogo' in *Meierkhol'dovski sbornik: vypusk vtoroi, Meierkhol'd i drugie: dokumenty i materialy*, (ed.) Fel'dman Oleg, (Moscow: O.G.I., 2000) p.77
28. *V.E.Mejerholjd o Pozorištu*, p. 102
29. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 85
30. Quoted in Bartlett Rosamund, *Wagner and Russia*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.99
31. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 87

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35. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, pp.94-95
36. Auslender Sergei, 'Peterburgskie teatri', *Apollon*, 1909 No 2 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1892-1918*, p. 186
37. Quoted in Mikhailova, *Meierkhol'd i Khudozhniki*, pp.59
38. *ibid.*, p.59
39. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 112
40. Arabazhin Konstantin, 'Na pire zvukov i krasok' (trans. On the feast of sounds and colours), *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 21 December 1911 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1892-1918*, p. 235
41. Azov Vlad, 'Na general'noi repetitsii *Orfeia i Evridiki*', *Rech'*, 20 December 1911 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1892-1918*, p.234
42. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 131
43. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 106
44. Braun Edward, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 113, also in Glikman, pp. 139-140
45. *V.E.Mejerholjd o Pozorištu*, p. 107
46. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.115
47. *ibid.*, pp. 115-116



48. *ibid.*, p. 115
49. *ibid.*, p. 116
50. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.148
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52. Benua A., 'Khudozhestvennyye pis'ma. Postanovka *Orfeia*', *Rech'*, 30 December 1911 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1892-1918*, (Moscow: Artist.Rezhisser.Teatr, 1997) p.241
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55. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.120
56. 'Iz dnevnikov V.A.Teliakovskogo', in *Meierkhol'dovski sbornik: vypusk vtoroi, Meierkhol'd i drugie: dokumenty i materialy*, p. 98.
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64. Borovsky, *Chaliapin: A Critical Biography*, p.405
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## Chapter 3

### **Meyerhold and Russian Opera, 1911-1918: The relationship between music and the word**

The late nineteenth century was the great age of nationalism in Russia, a period in which opera sought development through recourse to national musical and literary traditions. The question of what constituted Russian opera was related to national ideas. Even though the Imperial Theatres were supposed to stage national plays, Diaghilev wrote in 1910 that not enough Russian operas were being staged.<sup>1</sup> This was largely due to the fact that traditionally the management of the Imperial Theatres supported the staging of foreign opera. Both Meyerhold and Diaghilev strove to revitalise Russian opera. Their reforms brought to the fore questions regarding the concept of national art and Slavism. National art implies created and shared products of culture, such as theatre, music, visual art and literature, by individuals who belong to a nation defined by political boundaries. In theatre and literature the term always involves an expression of the national language and can often include subjects drawn from the country's history. These national cultural products are also in some cases explicitly concerned with capturing the notion of a unique, such as essentially Russian consciousness. In the Russian context, a search for an authentically Russian identity free from western influences is referred to as Slavism.

By drawing on national artistic resources, Meyerhold enriched his own art. Rudnitsky points out that, when working on Russian classics, the plays of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Ostrovsky, Meyerhold searched for a national expression of this 'great

verse tradition.<sup>2</sup> The librettos of Russian opera are mainly based on classical verse dramas or depict epic tales. Operatic art offered enormous scope for examining the condensed style and structure of the verse in terms of its relationship with music. Meyerhold's work on Russian opera produced further experimentation with verse theatre. His involvement with the Russian operatic tradition showed a re-evaluation of Russian culture and history.

Russian opera sought to define and convey the concept of a national spirit. Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857), the founder of the Russian operatic style, brought folk tunes and songs into opera and changed its chromatic and rhythmic line in order to bring Russian qualities into this genre. Following Glinka's creation of Russian opera, the famous group of Five was formed in 1862. This group of Russian nationalist composers under the leadership of Balakirev were involved in the creation of Russian musical idioms. Dargomyzhsky, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Cesar Cui and Rimsky-Korsakov were all concerned with making Russian opera a truly national drama, which would express the fundamental 'Russian soul' by drawing on the roots of Russian life. Their literary leader was Vladimir Stasov, a writer and a critic, who believed in the power of the Slavic spirit. It is important to note that the term *dusha* does not suggest the same level of mysticism as it does in its English translation into the word 'soul'. Victor Borovsky describes the specifics of the term in Russian context:

For Russians, the word 'dusha' has far wider and deeper implications than the English word 'soul'. The term is common in literature from Pushkin to Pasternak, from Dostoyevsky to Chekhov, in Stanislavsky's theoretical works and in the practical training of actors, in ordinary conversation between ordinary people, in Russian thinking and in Russian usage, it assumes dozens of subtle shades and can convey a state of mind and explain actions.<sup>3</sup>

To comprehend the multiplicity of meaning conveyed in this term, in the Russian context, is indispensable to an analysis of Russian cultural thought and arts, since it is deeply ingrained within them. In order to create a musical expression of this term, the group of Five absorbed folk tunes with the scope to appropriate and create new melodies and harmonies, which were different from the musical language of western opera. Glinka wrote only two operas, *Ivan Susanin* (1836), and *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), but this had played a decisive role in the development of Russian opera. *Ivan Susanin* foresaw a whole series of operas based on historical subjects and epic tales, while, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, on the other hand, celebrated the fantastic and the irrational.

Meyerhold's production of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Snow White or the Snow Maiden* in 1917 designed by Korovin, followed the musical and subject form of *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. The opera draws on the typical Korsakovian characteristics – nationalism, orientalism, and elements of magic and fairy tale. It includes melodic recitative, folksong, choral dance scenes and vivid orchestration. Although Meyerhold had staged the 'irrational' on the dramatic stage in *The Fairground Booth*, in the opera the 'irrational' appeared differently as it merged with the Russian operatic tradition of fantasy. It might have been expected that the director would seize the opportunity to explore the folk and magic elements of the opera. But as Glikman writes, he staged the opera in a very short period of time, having to adapt it to an already completed design, which was finished without his assistance. The production passed off without making any significant impact.<sup>4</sup>

Meyerhold's debut as a director of Russian opera was *Boris Godunov* by Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) on 6 January 1911. *Boris Godunov* follows the tradition of *Ivan Susanin* in that this national drama, almost an epic, represents Russian history with choruses, processions and isolated songs. It concerns the reign of Tsar Boris between 1598 and 1605. Boris had obtained the crown by murdering Tsarevich Dmitry, the young heir to the throne. He is challenged by the pretender Dmitry, whose growing support abroad is being emulated by the Russian people. The Tsar dies and in the Kromy Forest, after the pretender's triumphal advance on Moscow, the simpleton prophesises the dark days ahead for Russia. Boris' personal drama, his guilt and his tragedy, and the immense social drama of the people are the two main lines in the musical development of the opera. Throughout the opera the composer derived his inspiration from Russian folk-song, colourfully conveying the life of his people.

Being one of the most important operas in the Russian musical repertoire, *Boris Godunov* stands for the best of the national artistic heritage and its subject is deeply ingrained in Russian history. Its musical language is composed by one of the founders of the Russian operatic style, whose own libretto is after Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*. Anthony Arblaster gives an analysis of politics in opera and, where *Boris Godunov* is concerned, argues that Mussorgsky made Boris the murderer of Tsarevich Dmitry because he wanted to suggest that history repeats itself.<sup>5</sup> Thus the opera embodies political allegories in which the composer wanted to see 'the past in today', a pertinent national history. Godunov's rule coincided with the so-called 'Times of Troubles', of famine, epidemics, starvation, invasions and the new organisational strength of the Church. Mussorgsky's own time witnessed social and political changes, such as the emancipation of the serfs

in 1861 and the political decline of the nobility. In this context, the relationship between the Church, the State and its people, between the ruler and the ruled, ingrained in the development of Russian cultural thought, represent a relevant subject, which makes this opera a truly national drama.

National dramas attempt to portray, in the depiction of the masses, the concept of a Russian soul and humanity. Arblaster writes that 'To discover an authentically Russian musical idiom was to identify yourself with, and give a voice to, the long-suffering, oppressed but still great and good Russian people' and that 'The heyday of Russian opera – 1870-1900 – coincided roughly with the period of populism, when intellectuals looking for a hope of radical change placed their faith in the people.'<sup>6</sup> Arblaster emphasises the importance of the massed choruses in *Boris Godunov*. Even though at the beginning of the opera, the people passively accept the course of history, they gradually begin to revolt and in the scene of the Kromy Forest, they are ready to fight to defend their rights. In this opera, the chorus – 'the great and good Russian people' – is at the centre of the action and the crowd scenes are the most important.

Rudnitsky writes that, when staging *Boris Godunov* in 1911, Meyerhold was chiefly interested in the mass representation of the Russian people.<sup>7</sup> The opera was a re-staging of Diaghilev's 1908 Paris production, directed by Alexander Sanin and designed by Golovin. Chaliapin played the bass role of Godunov with great success, thus popularising the opera in Russia as well as abroad. Meyerhold revised Sanin's work for the St Petersburg production. This could have been the ideal opportunity for him to work with his favourite performer, but their relationship remained distant. Braun points out that 'in the context of Meyerhold's artistic development *Boris*

*Godunov* must be seen as an opportunity lost, all the more tantalising given the unique regard he had for Chaliapin's genius.<sup>8</sup> Chaliapin had already created the role in Paris, so Meyerhold had to accommodate this in his own production. It is hard to imagine, that at this stage, both artists would submit themselves to any strong directorial demands other than their own. But it is plausible that during the opera's rehearsals and run the director observed and analysed the art of the great singer. Having no more than a month to rehearse, and perhaps due to his difficult working relationship with Chaliapin, he concentrated on the re-working of the crowd scenes. The incorporation of his theatrical principles into the staging of *Boris Godunov* certainly transformed the contemporary way of directing it. Meyerhold consciously interpreted the theme of the mass-crowd in his earlier performance of *Sister Bèatrice*, and later in *Orpheus*. The idea of a mass being one entity, which acts as one, was also explored in *Boris Godunov*.

Rather than defining individual characters within the chorus, as was beginning to be popular during this period particularly since the naturalistic reforms by the Moscow Art Theatre, Rudnitsky notes that Meyerhold devised distinctive groups of people, such as the boyars or blind pilgrims.<sup>9</sup> Mussorgsky divided the chorus into several groups, which converse and debate with each other. This was reflected in Meyerhold's staging, since different musical lines corresponded to each group. The director employed an economy of gesture and created a sense of a uniform, distinctive movement for each group. However, Rudnitsky points out that the uniform movement of a crowd is a familiar device on the operatic stage. He indicates that this was novel and exciting in Meyerhold's dramatic theatre, but in opera it was routine and had lost its expressiveness.<sup>10</sup> Opera was used to large uniform choruses while on the dramatic

stage this was not so easily justifiable. Nevertheless, Meyerhold's use of the crowd showed a new way of incorporating operatic conventions, or, perhaps, an old routine carried new meanings at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The non-individualistic approach to the treatment of the masses created a sense of a depersonalised humanity, which proved rather controversial at the time. Lynn Garafola stresses that the theme of the mass as 'an agent of history and its victim, the subject and object of a materialist fate' displays certain parallels with the manipulation of ensembles in Nijinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*:

Like Nijinsky, Meyerhold transformed the ensemble into a mass of depersonalised humanity, blocks of generic figures mortared with violence. In the first scene, the Moscow bailiffs flogged the people into submission with a brutality that called forth the patriotic indignation of the right-wing press.<sup>11</sup>

In *Sacre*, Nijinsky rearranged the arms of the dancers, choreographed virtually impossible movements and created a sense of lifeless people who only exist in groups. Thus this treatment of the crowd scenes and the transformation of the human body into the conceptualisation of depersonalised humanity, was seen in different genres of performance.

The production, above all the portrayal of the chorus in *Boris Godunov*, provoked debates in the press, particularly since the opera embodied national qualities both in the subject depicted and in the musical language. The press picked up on the question of Russian history, 'truth' and national expressions. For instance, Aleksei Suvorin in *New Times* (06 January 1911) attacked Meyerhold for not being able to capture the spirit of the opera:

He should not have staged a difficult and Russian play such as *Boris Godunov*. For the opera's production he should have a Russian soul in order to feel it...It



is necessary to have Russian beauty in costumes, groups, gestures, movements. Meyerhold's production shows little of that.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the critic implied that Meyerhold was unable to convey the Russian soul of the opera because he was not Russian. This deserves a further critique, particularly since the very concept of Russian soul can hardly be defined. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it was Meyerhold's politics in the treatment of the masses that stirred the criticism of his apparent lack of 'Russian understanding'. The author of the article further writes that the costumes of the chorus are not colourful enough, and that in the tavern scene the line perspective of the design is weird. Benois in *Rech'* (9 January 1911) claimed that Meyerhold's staging of the chorus resembled a parody of static crowds being shunted from left to right, while Diaghilev's production in Paris was full of life. He suggests that the choir was lifeless, not realistically represented and that the coronation scene was reduced to twenty five people.<sup>13</sup> For Benois, the reduced chorus meant that the production failed to capture the spirit of the grand Russian opera. Thus the non-realistic approach in the treatment of the masses and the design in some scenes undermined certain values and became intermixed with the problematic concept of national expression.

Russian operas are concerned with authenticity and artistic truth – tasks not too far-removed from Meyerhold's and the Moscow Art Theatre's credo. These were the guiding elements in such operas as *Boris Godunov* and *The Stone Guest* by Alexander Dargomyzhsky. Meyerhold's production of *The Stone Guest* premiered on 27 January 1917 at the Mariinsky Theatre. The opera is a vivid example of the composer's experiments in the word-music relationship as a way of capturing its artistic truth.

*The Stone Guest* concerns the legend of Don Juan who was killed by the statue of the man he murdered. The opera's libretto is based on one of Pushkin's 'little tragedies' and includes the whole of Pushkin's poem apart from two songs. Music follows not only the precise sense of Pushkin's text, but also its natural inflections. By composing the music for a dramatic text, rather than to a libretto, Dargomyzhsky transformed operatic conventions. He moved away from creating grand ensemble or chorus numbers to the formulation of a distinctive operatic recitative. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the operatic form inevitably had their own effect on Pushkin's text. For example, the verse line was lengthened in time. As E. Ruch'evskaia indicates: 'Pushkin's little tragedy, a work of chamber character, was transformed by Dargomyzhsky into a grand three-act opera. The characteristics of the chamber genre, however, did not disappear, but became more heightened.'<sup>14</sup> The composer created a unity of form, music and words, where operatic recitative, its musicality, enriched the psychological and literary elements of Pushkin's classic.

In interpreting Dargomyzhsky's opera, Meyerhold utilised a romance genre in its performance. Although routinely sung in the manner of grand opera, Meyerhold reformed this tradition in order to bring the production closer to the heart of Pushkin's verse and thus to the true spirit of the opera. His friend and collaborator in these years, the pianist, Vera Alpers, states that he decided that all recitative and dialogue should be performed within the form of a 'little romance'. Meyerhold claimed that before the discovery of this form, *The Stone Guest* was boring and monotonous.<sup>15</sup> This romance genre suited both the chamber nature of the opera and the writer's definition of a 'little tragedy'. Perhaps, in the earlier interpretations of this opera the style of grand

operatic singing and the sense of detachment it created was unsuited to its original form.

In *The Stone Guest*, Meyerhold heightened the integration of the verse and its musical idiom. Rudnitsky points out that 'the opera was supposed to ring true, without the excess of operatic indulgences', in bringing to the fore Dargomyzhsky's musical lines which corresponded to Pushkin's verse.<sup>16</sup> Originally, the opera was composed with the aim of expressing the poetry musically rather than subordinating it to different compositional demands. However, in opera, the rhythm, melody and intonation of the text is defined by the music, while in the dramatic theatre these verse elements are open to interpretation. In opera, verse is more or less fixed within the musical form, but performers can still achieve a unique interpretation of this musical-poetical text. In the production, the focus upon the romance genre emphasised the heightened qualities of the verse form and further merged word and music. Pushkin's verse was perceived more strongly, as both the intimacy and the theatricality created by the director suited the writer's style.

Rudnitsky suggests that, in *The Stone Guest*, Meyerhold came closer to his main task of creating a poetic-verse Russian theatre.<sup>17</sup> In this theatre, the music supported the musical, condensed and stylistic elements of the verse. The stylised characteristics of opera gave scope to the exploration of the potential expressiveness of the verse form, which was freed from the realistic tendencies of the dramatic theatre. Rudnitsky stresses that, for Benois, the production's stylistic elements hindered the psychological qualities of the drama. Benois wrote that Meyerhold should have started developing his characters from the psychological elements in the text. He

observed that, rather than 'inhabiting' the character, in the true Stanislavsky tradition, actors appeared to be like marionettes.<sup>18</sup> However, Meyerhold's characterisation was built precisely on the expressiveness of the verse form in its relation to the music. The director sought to develop the form of verse theatre that would fully embrace its stylistic qualities, such as its musicality and rhythm. The composer and music critic, Aleksandr Koptiaev, particularly praised the performance of I. Alechevski as Don Juan where 'passion, mood, poetry, style, voice – all came together', and M. Cherkasskaia as Donna Anna, 'who was especially successful in performing Dargomyzhsky's recitative.'<sup>19</sup> This suggests that Meyerhold succeeded in creating all-encompassing performances, where characterisation and the unity of the production were based on the formal elements of the verse and music. The director would further develop this in his staging of Lermontov's verse drama, *Masquerade*.

The staging and Golovin's design also supported the romance genre of the performance. The breaking up of operatic conventions was apparent in the blocking of *The Stone Guest*. The size of the stage space was reduced, a theatre within the theatre was created by means of a raised platform, which was defined by a small black curtain. This raised platform was connected to the proscenium by a few stairs. As Rudnitsky writes, 'the action attained a chamber quality as it was purposely concentrated upon the small platform, in contrast to the usual operatic convention of using the entire stage.'<sup>20</sup> This use of space presented new and effective possibilities. For example, during the final scene, the movement of the statue made a huge impact on the audience. Here a staircase corridor was created, connecting the downstage area with the raised platform. The stage was dark. Don Juan swiftly descended, on the right hand side of the narrow corridor, facing the audience. The statue – his death –

slowly descending behind him. The reviewer Koptiaev wrote that this was very frightening.<sup>21</sup> The shortened and darkened stage reduced the possibilities of his escape. The setting and the relationship it created between the performers emphasised the chamber nature of *The Stone Guest* and the intimacy of the romance genre. Within this condensed space a particular type of theatricality was created.

The sense of a powerful theatricality toyed with the notion of stage illusion. This was conveyed by the use of 'proscenium servants', that is, actors who changed the sets between the acts and whom the director had employed earlier in his production of *Don Juan* in 1910. The lighting was also used to great theatrical effect. Koptiaev wrote that 'before the beginning of each scene the auditorium is darkened, then full lights are brought up, for one second both the auditorium and the stage are lit, and then again the lights are brought down.'<sup>22</sup> Through this use of lighting, Meyerhold challenged the audience's expectations and united both stage and auditorium. As was the case with *Don Juan*, in *The Stone Guest*, the play with stage illusion was created with the aim of giving the audience a stronger experience of the momentary nature of a performance, as well as bringing them closer to the events onstage.

Thus the sense of exaggerated theatricality and stylisation was apparent in the design – the raised platform and the overall staging. Meyerhold said in an interview before the premiere that, 'in *The Stone Guest* it is as though we see before us the 'masquerade' Spain that the poet pictured in his imagination, reflecting all the aspects of Russian taste in the 1830s.'<sup>23</sup> Rather than reproducing a literal image of Spain, Meyerhold drew inspiration from the powerful sense of theatricality, which he believed was ingrained in Pushkin's perception of Spain. For example, this was

evident in the staging of Laura's romance in Act I, scene two, accompanied by the small orchestra, which was situated on the stage itself.<sup>24</sup> Her romance, with Don Juan's lyrics, includes Spanish musical motifs with its distinct thirds. In this scene Laura, a young actress, entertains her guests and her lover Don Carlos. She is passionate and full of life, hopes and dreams, while the pragmatic Don Carlos warns her of the coming of old age. This is followed by the entrance of Don Juan, his killing of the angered Don Carlos and his amorous reunion with Laura. The theatricality evoked in the staging of the orchestra celebrated Laura's ability to live in the moment, providing an ironic comment on her 'love' for Don Carlos. It conveyed a celebration of artistry itself, the evocation of the magic of the Spanish night and passionate women; the territory of Don Juan.

The sense of theatricality corresponded to the theatrical nature of the romance genre, and the psychological and supernatural elements in the play. According to some reviewers, Meyerhold underlined the superstitious elements of the legend. Koptiaev pointed out that 'the figure of the Commander was emphasised.... In the third scene at the graveyard the statue is placed in the middle of the stage.'<sup>25</sup> The image of the Commander symbolised death and mystery. Meyerhold believed that the statue should be played by an actor, 'because the immobility of the live body, personifying marble, is there to produce in the spectator that specific theatrical horror, which Pushkin expects to be achieved through the magic of the drama...'<sup>26</sup> Thus Meyerhold's key for staging the opera was the strong sense of magic and theatricality found in Pushkin's writing. Don Juan plays with the notion of death in duels, confessions of love and in the invitation of the statue to the house of Donna Anna. His great verbal prowess

celebrates the magic of beauty and poetry. In this way, the use of heightened theatricality in the production suited the opera's dramatic ideas.

The sense of horror and magic sought in the staging led the director to utilise once again his sense of the grotesque, for indeed this style can produce the effect of fright or a sense of the unknown. In the staging of the Laura's romance, for instance, the notion of play and its lightness was set beside the sense of heaviness, that is mourning and death symbolised by the black curtain. The play of contrasts created the effect of the grotesque, an ironic commentary on Laura's situation. The intimacy of the smaller stage, the focus on the romance genre with the constant presence of dark colours perpetuated a sense of foreboding and claustrophobia. To some critics, such as Andrei Rimsky-Korsakov, Meyerhold's stylisation obscured the opera's themes. The music critic believed that the director's theatricality was too overwhelming: instead of 'simplicity, colourfulness and freshness', there is an 'impression of suffocating dustiness'; instead of life there is aestheticism.<sup>27</sup> Rimsky-Korsakov found the director's stamp on the opera excessive. However, it was precisely this effect of an overwhelming, yet light and dense theatricality that Meyerhold sought to produce in his production. The image of dark and romantic Spain contrasted with a sense of a heightened artificiality, toying with the romantic themes of love and death, thereby creating the impression of life's fragility. The elements of the grotesque underlined the dramatic irony ingrained in Pushkin's language. The tragedy of the free Renaissance lover, of the death of his beautiful and enchanting poetry, was thus approached through a multiplicity of angles and perspectives.

Meyerhold's interpretation of *The Stone Guest* transformed the tradition of its performance and its place in operatic history. The established romance genre for its performance fitted the opera's form and content. This was the opera's second production at the Mariinsky theatre, while its premiere at the Bolshoi theatre in 1906 in Moscow was not successful.<sup>28</sup> The chamber and recitative character of the opera was very unusual at the time and its very adaptability to the stage was much doubted. Telyakovsky wrote in his diary on 30 January 1917 that the 'public does not understand *The Stone Guest*...the auditorium is half-full.'<sup>29</sup> However, Braun indicates that the production represented 'a clear homogeneity of libretto, musical score and scenic interpretation which was received enthusiastically by the public and the great majority of critics.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Braun argues that 'for the first time on the Russian stage since the work's premiere in 1872 Meyerhold had demonstrated the theatrical viability of *The Stone Guest* and its right to a place in the operatic repertoire.'<sup>31</sup> This suggests that Meyerhold's reforms in the staging of the opera achieved an artistic coherence which was otherwise lacking and was perhaps still ahead of its time. The success of the production was also indebted to Alchevsky's interpretation of Don Juan, a singer who was an acclaimed interpreter of new music. The success of the performer was in part due to Meyerhold's conception of the unity of the overall production which guided his direction of opera singers. In interpreting the opera, the director re-examined the relationship between the stage and the auditorium, created a powerful form of theatricality and highlighted the correlation between word and music. The use of chamber presentation and recitative became increasingly popular in twentieth-century opera.



The relationship between music and word was a strong feature of Russian opera as well as of Meyerhold's theatre practice. In his studio in St Petersburg, Meyerhold worked closely with the composer, Mikhail Gnesin, especially in the years 1913-1914. Their aim was to achieve a certain musical language in the dramatic performance which would transcend the declamatory style of the language itself. In his work with Meyerhold's students, Gnesin sought a musical language in the declamatory nature of the words. His experiments were important to Meyerhold's development of a stylised theatre, which was strongly based on the elements of music. Rudnitsky stresses that in stylised theatre the text is musically and rhythmically organised. The term poetry is applicable to it because the stylised theatre is a condensed, heightened, organised form of action.<sup>32</sup> So it is no surprise that the collaborators examined the relationship between the spoken verse and music in order to create a heightened form of expressiveness on the stage. For years they planned a collaborative staging of a Greek tragedy, possibly because it was in this form of drama that musical and dramatic elements were powerfully combined. In the studio Gnesin focused on the Greek choruses and transformed their verse with different rhythms, intonations and melodic lines.

The amalgamation of music and drama demonstrated Meyerhold's and Gnesin's research into the origins of theatrical art. Their experiments with Greek choruses represented a return to the ideal of a Greek theatre and a search for its appropriate representation on the stage. Irina Krivosheeva, a student at the Studio, recalls that Gnesin's idea of a musical reading came after seeing a production of *Hippolytos* in 1902 at the Alexandrinsky theatre. Here Gnesin perceived that the reading of Greek choruses was non-musical and this was the reason for words losing meaning in the

performance. Subsequently, he came to believe that the new theatre could emerge in conjunction with a new reading of drama which was based on the ancient Greek declamatory style.<sup>33</sup> In the antique stylised theatre, the words and the plastic movements of the actors were built on rhythm and this also, perhaps, further infuses the drama with meaning; the voice emerges from the rhythm, conveying the substance of the text.

At the Studio, both Gnesin and Meyerhold searched for ways of freeing the word, which had been impoverished by realism, from the conversational style. Hence, their aim was to underline a heightened theatricality in the word. By merging the musical and dramatic elements, the collaborators sought to enhance the theatrical possibilities of the drama. In Gnesin's words, these efforts were related to the collaborators' search for a new truth in art.<sup>34</sup> Music was supposed to rediscover the deeper meanings of the drama and to envelop its full expressive potential.

Gnesin's aim was to establish a technique of musical reading in drama, a musically and rhythmically organised execution of the given text. His lectures included a study of musical rhythm, its expressionist and emotional aspect in music, words and verse; melody and its expressive potential (as in pauses, changes of tempo and volume). He taught the actors the laws of rhythm and melody in relation to the reading of verse. Here, students learned to mark the verse with musical signs and notes, consisting of accents, half accents, pauses, and so on. Gnesin investigated the musical characteristics of the word itself, thus, eventually, composing a melodic and rhythmical line to the spoken verse.<sup>35</sup>

Meyerhold and Gnesin searched for special forms of dramatic text, that would embrace the musical line of the spectacle as well as its sense. Musical reading was supposed to keep the drama's meaning at its heart and not correspond to an operatic recitative or melo-declamation accompanied by music. S. Bondi, Gnesin's assistant, believed musical reading represented an interesting kind of art; 'the reading is built upon the laws of musical art, but does not transform the word into a song or a recitative, does not stop being a word but it is still not less musical.'<sup>36</sup> Actors were supposed to follow the musical notes composed by Gnesin, which were related to the accents in the spoken words. The established metric and rhythmical pattern of the music determined the lengths of the syllables. A distinct freedom of rhythmical and musical interpretation was possible within this set melody of word accents. For instance, the notes related to word accents determined the register of that particular syllable, but, also, allowed space for interpreting the melody of the rest of the word. The composed music was supposed to strengthen the artistic effect of the word, particularly in verse, since verse is a rhythmic and melodic organisation of words. The technique of musical reading created new possibilities in exploring the blend between drama and music.

In all these experiments, the composer aimed at a musical and literal blend by means of declamatory readings, an emotional and musical exactness in the unison of the chorus. When staging the chorus from *Antigone* Bondi recorded that: 'first the chorus (ten students) studied the melody by singing it, accompanied by the piano' then they worked on translating the singing into words, keeping the verbal and intoned character of the line and 'following all the nuances, directions by the composer.'<sup>37</sup>

Verigina, a student at the Studio, recalled that Gnesin, in his musical directions to the

chorus, composed musical intonations on melody that allowed a harmonic blend between spoken verse, which had in itself a preconditioned melody, and other accompanied lines.<sup>38</sup> Thus musical reading was accompanied by music, which enriched its musical effectiveness, and its melodic and rhythmic possibilities. Here characterisation was built on music in relation to the overall performance:



In Gnesin's score for the performance of *Antigone*, the musical accompaniment created a harmonic support for the spoken, mournful melodic modulation of the voice.<sup>39</sup> The above composition shows how the music in the spoken verse contributed to the depiction of the character portrayed; the length of vowels, the timbre, the tempo and the musical key – all these elements determined the characterisation of the role. In Gnesin's score, there are places where actors freely interpret the melody of the text without musical accompaniment, but still follow the composer's rhythm. This suggests that Gnesin created a distinct rhythmical composition for the overall

performance. The general rhythm and tone sustained the sense of musical order and underpinned the dramatic unity of the performance.

Gnesin's rhythmical composition sought to integrate and interact with the other elements of the performance. Meyerhold had also explored in *The Death of the Tintagiles* the rhythmical reading of the words, which not only expressed the state of the character, but also created a general framework for the production.<sup>40</sup> The reading corresponded to the sound of the piano: clear and precise without any vibrations. Rudnitsky notices that with this rhythmical reading the overall tone of the production moved forward, in which the sound pre-determined general intonations and rhythms.<sup>41</sup> The actors' words became not solely related to their individual interpretations of characters' experiences, but were an integral part of the rhythmical conception of the performance. In this way, musical composition synthesised all the elements of a production into a single whole.

By bringing literature and music closer together in the word, new acting possibilities were created. Gnesin's education of the actor built upon the principles of musically organised words and brought new possibilities for creating a technical system for training actors. In 1908 Meyerhold pointed out that dramatic actors often felt that the director's conception and musical forms limited their performance: 'It's disappointing that actors do not follow notes.'<sup>42</sup> Once again he gave Chaliapin's art as an example, since it does not move away from the composer's score, but, instead, enriches and creates new musical colours and meanings. This suggests that, for Meyerhold, set musical forms help to enhance dramatic art. Gnesin's class was dismissed after a year due to a change of circumstances and disagreement between collaborators. Gnesin

was unable to work during the war. In a letter to Meyerhold on 1 September 1914 he wrote: 'People do not need art right now!... now there are other fruits – grenades, which are not in harmony with our apricots.'<sup>43</sup> Here Meyerhold did not share Gnesin's view. Nevertheless, the collaborators extended the actor's vocal range by training their ear (and inner ear) to produce precise vocal notes, tones and rhythms and by this new discipline stimulated both their vocal imagination and vocal expressiveness. The musicality, the elements of melody, tonality and harmony and the rhythmical emphasis on the word also necessitated a new plasticity from the actor.

Meyerhold held movement classes which focused upon the musical and rhythmical capacities of the body. He taught his students that the word requires the actor to be musical: 'Pauses remind the actor about the time scale which is important to her/him, nor less than to the poet.'<sup>44</sup> The fusion between the musicality of the body as well as of the word opened up new possibilities for developing the actor's craft. The transformation of musical laws into an acting craft elevated the role of the theatre by bringing into it new elements of technique and artistic proportion.

The possibility of investing words with new musical meanings corresponded to the spirit of the time, a symbolist search for a hidden reality behind the appearance. Scriabin was a follower of Strauss and of metaphysical ideas and theosophy. He searched for ways to express through musical notes the essence of the human spirit. The composer was overwhelmed after seeing one of the Studio's showings of musical reading in drama. Bondi recalls:

During this time Scriabin was planning a grandiose creation for his orchestra, soloists, chorus and dances which, according to his plans, would be performed in the course of few days on the banks of the river Ganges, as a result of

which, he was assured, a full transformation of the world would happen. He liked our musical reading so much that he wanted to include us in his score.<sup>45</sup>

At last the mystical composer seemed to have found a valuable parallel to his own aesthetics, which sought universal artistic meanings and expressions through artistic synthesis. The merger between a musical and literary genre gave both artistic disciplines new significance; rhythm, melody and meaning could be encompassed in a word, and a word at the same time could become a musical expression in itself. The cross pollination between the physical characteristics of these art forms enhanced the effect of each art practice. The fusion of word and music was to create more complex concepts in performance in terms of characterisation and overall staging than word or music alone could have done.

Gnesin's work at Meyerhold's studio coincided with the director's involvement with opera. It is hard to imagine that the music and movement classes conducted in the Studio did not influence Meyerhold's direction of operas. On the contrary, the director's productions of Russian opera had significantly contributed to his own views on a stylised, integrated theatre. The generic crossing in Meyerhold's dramatic theatre is, to an extent, related to the mix of genres in his operatic productions, such as his experiments in the relationship between music and word. The search for unity of the aesthetic principles conveyed in the score, the staging and the design, between the theatricality and musicality, are pertinent both to his dramatic and operatic theatre.

It was precisely in the development of the relationship between music and word that Meyerhold believed to be a true way forward for Russian opera. Productions such as *The Stone Guest*, *The Marriage* and Prokofiev's *The Gambler* are vital for understanding Meyerhold's perception of the role and aesthetic possibilities of opera

as well as of dramatic theatre. By finding new artistic solutions and possibilities for the relationship between the music and the word, new concepts of performance and a new form of acting would be created, which would in turn significantly contribute to his search for an all-encompassing, integrated theatre.

In 1917 Meyerhold started rehearsing *The Gambler* by Sergey Prokofiev, a chamber opera after the story of the same name by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The opera is set in a fictitious gambling town, where people are obsessed with money. Aleksei, a young tutor of modest fortune, is in love with Polina, the General's ward. Having won a fortune at the roulette table he offers it to Polina to settle her debt, but the latter throws the money in his face, feeling that this is not a gift from a man in love but from a gambler. For indeed, the opera finishes on Aleksei and his feverish recollection of his success at the roulette table.

*The Gambler* follows the tradition of Mussorgsky's musical formula on the relationship between the word and the music.<sup>46</sup> In this opera, Prokofiev developed Mussorgsky's experiments insofar as the score is based on speech melody. The composer had moved away from traditional tunefulness in conveying the prose, that is, the speech between the characters, in favour of a relief-like musical manner, which conveyed a variety of mood and complex characterisation, particularly in portraying the central characters' conflicting emotions and the people's financial obsessions. Daniel Jaffe, in his biography of Prokofiev, indicates that the singers complained that the roles were unsingable in this ultra-realist drama.<sup>47</sup> However, it was precisely the composer's innovations in the merger between word and music, that Meyerhold found most appropriate for the development of the operatic art. Alexander Fevral'sky points



out, that years later, when talking to his students about *The Gambler*, the director expressed his high opinion of this opera:

The thing here is the beginning of the creation of a new operatic art...Prokofiev went further than Gluck, Wagner...he cut off arias, he does not have never-ending melodies like Wagner...but he immersed his characters all the time in the declamatory forms. This has no connection with any operas until now – the text is prose, a continuation of what Mussorgsky did...Prokofiev creates a free recitative, which requires a dramatic actor...here the actor stops being simply a singer, but has to pronounce the words as wonderfully as in a song.<sup>48</sup>

The resemblance between a free operatic recitative and Gnesin's aesthetics of musical reading in drama is apparent; both require a dramatic actor who can pronounce the words musically. Mussorgsky created a melody motivated by meaning, which underlined the sense of the organic development of opera. Similarly, in *The Gambler*, the focus is on the wholeness of the piece rather than on individual arias. The concept of music motivated by meaning parallels the notion of acting motivated by meaning, which was one of the fundamental elements of the Moscow Art Theatre's aesthetics. The concern with the whole of the piece rather than isolated numbers echoes the theatrical principles of the Moscow Art Theatre and of Meyerhold's theatre, in particular.

The notion of music in prose is related to Meyerhold's vision of the enrichment of operatic art through the synthesis of word and music. The opera's recitative mirrored Meyerhold's search for the dramatic heightening of the word, the artistic synthesis created a profound realism, giving a sense of an enhanced theatricality on the stage. The director sought to capture the notion of truth in the merger between the music and the word, the drama's essence, by moving away from the literal representation of life.

The merging of literal, dramatic and musical elements resulted in a distinct generic development in Meyerhold's opera and theatre. His student Aleksandra Smirnova recalls he often said that it was important to work on the music and not under it.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that the staging evolved from the music rather than being purely determined by it. Fevralsky indicates that Meyerhold directed *The Gambler* production as organised in accordance with the music, that is, as a spectacle set to music (*spektakl' na muzike*).<sup>50</sup> Here, it is important to emphasise that, in Meyerhold's aesthetics, it seems that the opera and dramatic theatre moved closer together to form a distinct genre, a spectacle set to music. Within this form a development of other synthesised genres was possible, such as a comedy or romance to music. In relation to his engagement with Russian opera and its literal tradition, the breaking of the boundaries between dramatic and operatic art created new possibilities in a national expression, where the fusion of word and musical idiom was deeply ingrained.

### **Meyerhold and Composers**

Meyerhold's work with contemporary composers showed the director's engagement with latest forms of musical expression. The director collaborated with, and influenced, some of the leading contemporary composers, notably Prokofiev. Fevralsky states that their artistic relationship began in 1917 when Meyerhold was to direct *The Gambler*. At that time Meyerhold suggested to Prokofiev that he write another opera, *The Love of Three Oranges*.<sup>51</sup> *The Gambler* was postponed because of the February Revolution and was soon after dropped from the repertoire, as the singers complained about Prokofiev's 'cacophony of sounds, with its incredible intervals and enharmonic tones', which made it impossible to learn their parts.<sup>52</sup> This innovative opera sustained a high emotional intensity and energy throughout, with its

unexpected combinations of sounds and strange forceful rhythms. Subsequently, although Meyerhold attempted to stage it on several occasions, notably in 1928 and in 1934, the political climate ensured that the opera was not produced in Soviet Union during the composer's lifetime. Dostoyevsky's psychological realism, as well Prokofiev's musical language of the opera, with its lack of clearly recognisable characterisation, were in no particular favour with the predominant culture of the time. The second edition of the opera, written for the 1929 Brussels production, had its premiere in the Soviet Union in 1963, while the first edition as late as in 2001 at the Bolshoi Theatre. However, since their meeting and up to the end of Meyerhold's life, both artists kept in close contact. Glikman indicates that, when revising the opera, Prokofiev consulted Meyerhold: 'The director's suggestions found expression in the gambling atmosphere and the defined individualisation of the gamblers' characters.'<sup>53</sup> Meyerhold's influence on the composer, with his suggestions on tempo, rhythm and colour of music in relation to characterisation and the scenic action, was evident in their collaboration.

Prokofiev's opera *The Love of Three Oranges* showed principles of Meyerhold's theatre art. In 1914, the Studio published the first issue of the magazine *The Love of Three Oranges*, in which Carlo Gozzi's play of the same name was included. Meyerhold, Solovyev and Vogak freely adapted and translated Gozzi's play. Braun states that the libretto of Prokofiev's opera, which he composed in 1919, was based on this version.<sup>54</sup> The story is set in a mythical land. The King orders entertainment in order to cure the Prince from melancholy. The wicked witch is offended by his laugh and the Prince has to go and find the three oranges. Upon finding the oranges, three princesses come out of them. The first two die of thirst, while the third one is helped

by a member of an audience with water. However, she is turned into a rat by the wicked witch's servant. Then the good magician restores the princess and the couple get married. Influenced by Meyerhold's theory of drama, the composer showed elements of *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, stylisation, the grotesque, the interweaving of the comic and the serious, of wry and tender music, and the circus technique of slapstick and acrobatics. *The Love of Three Oranges* represented a primitive version of Opera Bouffe. In this way, this 'low-genre' opera, encompassing the elements of street theatre and having at its heart an ensemble singing, almost suggested a 'democratisation' of opera, since, traditionally, operatic form and its status implied a superiority of artistic purpose, in contrast to the popular mass genres, which were considered to be 'low'.

These ideas corresponded to Meyerhold's experiments at small theatre venues in St Petersburg. The libretto and music of *The Love of Three Oranges* show different levels of reality, a dilution of illusion and heightening of theatricality. For example, the chorus-audience comment throughout the play and demand 'give us lyrical Romantic love' or 'give us tragedy'. The opera toys with different genres: tragedy and romance for instance, and also with the idea of opera or theatrical performance itself. It teases out the notion of theatre-court entertainment. It questions the concept of a passive audience – in short, it challenges the conventional audience relationship and it plays with the traditional perception of a performance, through exploring the relationship between life and art. The opera finally reached the Soviet stage on 18 February 1926. It was directed by Sergey Radlov, Meyerhold's disciple.<sup>55</sup> At that point in time Meyerhold's theatre was at its zenith.

On 30 May 1918, Meyerhold produced Stravinsky's opera *The Nightingale* on the former Mariinsky stage. Dighilev premiered the opera in Paris in 1914, which was staged by Benois and Fokine. Although the opera was new, it still emerged from a Russian operatic tradition taking the fantastic for its subject. The story of *The Nightingale* is based on Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale, which depicts the internal power, beauty and goodness of nature. The nightingale sings to a poor fisherman when the imperial court arrives to ask her to sing for the Chinese Emperor. In Act III, Death is at the Emperor's bed, having taken his crown. Nightingale appears and sings. When Death asks for more singing, Nightingale continues to sing but on the condition that Death returns the crown to the Emperor, who is then restored to health. Stravinsky's music uses the Chinese pentatonic scale, the harmonic alchemy of the Chinese march and the twitterings of the nightingale. The influence of Eastern theatre is strongly apparent.

Rather than exploring the elements of theatrical magic in the production, Meyerhold directed his performers in a static and formal way. The nightingale symbolises the power of art and it might have been expected that Meyerhold would fully embrace the magical qualities of the theme. Braun indicates that Stravinsky's input into the opera 'had the same qualities of oriental exoticism and naïve theatrical magic as the *fiabe teatrale* of Carlo Gozzi.... However, Meyerhold's production, through undeniably innovative, was curiously formal in its conception.'<sup>56</sup> He created a divide between the singing and the moving elements in the performance in the parts of the Fisherman, Death and the Nightingale. As Braun points out, he involved pantomime actors performing the action which was simultaneously sung by the opera singers dressed in rich Chinese costumes; the singers' notes were visible on the stage, the soloist and

chorus were still and statuesque whilst the pantomime artists acted out the drama. The remaining parts were not doubled and were performed by singer-actors.<sup>57</sup> The formal staging of the singers emphasised the concert qualities of the operatic genre. Glikman indicates that Meyerhold in this production de-dramatises the opera and stages it as a costumed musical happening.<sup>58</sup> The doubling of the parts showed a form of anti-action since a distance was created between the performers and the characters they were supposed to portray.

In *The Nightingale*, Meyerhold explored how action could be dismantled in the division between the movement and the voice. The new ways of staging opera showed Eastern theatre influences and different categories of performance. For instance, in Kabuki dance drama the singers and the musical ensemble accompany the action onstage and are aurally and visually integrated with the actors. The experiments into the notion of theatrical illusion and characterisation were related to the new ways of juxtaposing and emphasising the aural and visual elements of the opera.

Meyerhold's innovations on the operatic stage were part of the general cultural movement at the time. As Borovsky points out, Diaghilev's production of the opera also employed the separation of performing roles, while, 'this method was first tried out in the production of Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel* in the spring of 1914.'<sup>59</sup> The doubling of roles or the de-dramatisation of opera brought new perspectives on its representation. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* explored forms of action that were being born out of the music itself, rather than being based on traditional plots and dramatisations. In *The Nightingale*, the opera singers resembled concert soloists, while the pantomime artist displayed musical actions in motion. The

doubling of the parts sustained an element of the grotesque, since the split representation of roles conveyed a paradox and multiplicity of meanings.

*The Nightingale* and *The Love for Three Oranges* represented new artistic tendencies, which played with the notion of theatrical illusion and truth. The theme of art, music or performance became an increasingly important subject in its own terms. Stravinsky claimed not to be a composer but a creator of music; musical material was viewed as an isolated object, capable of being moulded and transformed. By finding a resolution to a musical problem, which occurred at the beginning of each composition, the composer constantly created something original. Rudnitsky stresses that Meyerhold later in his career indicated that in 1906 he became the director-creator.<sup>60</sup> *The Fairground Booth* was premiered in 1906. Here the breaking of theatrical illusion and the experiments in theatre form opened up a whole new range of generic developments, in the search for new levels of understanding. In staging *The Nightingale*, Meyerhold openly dismantled and experimented with the conditions of the operatic form. Both Meyerhold and Stravinsky rather than purely interpreting an artistic product, expanded the boundaries of their own artistic media.

This pure investigation into the form of theatre and opera moved towards the creation of hybrid genres. Artists created self-referential genres by deconstructing the core of art works. Even though Meyerhold experimented with the notion of theatrical illusion, he never rejected the inherent logic of a performance. For instance, in his next opera, *Fenella*, which he mostly supervised, the director was concerned, as Glikman writes, with preserving the illusion of the event in the staging, which was to be in accordance with the music.<sup>61</sup> Rather than purely discarding or accentuating the characteristics of

opera, the director aimed to envelop the full potential of the blend between all the elements of performance to establish new forms of expression in acting (as the new recitatives, for instance) and bring the audience closer to the action on the stage.

The performance of *The Nightingale* was not a success. Nikolai Malkov wrote in *Theatre and Art* that Stravinsky's opera represented French commercialism and not real music.<sup>62</sup> By that time the October Revolution had taken place and a Civil War raged throughout the country. The values of the old order and its art were violently shaken as a whole set of new social and cultural relations were in the process of being formed. Malkov believed that the audience would be unaffected by the production as it was far removed from contemporary Soviet reality.<sup>63</sup> It is not surprising that the experiments in the operatic form, above all, the subject depicted did not echo in this time of great historical upheaval. Art Nouveau's fascination with the exotic and the decorative could not relate to the new society. However, the reforms of tradition, the experiments in rhythm and form both of music and performance as a whole created a sense that all artistic tools, conditions and assumptions were being shaken. It was perhaps in this form that new art reflected, participated or foresaw social change.

Meyerhold wanted to create theatre in opera by intensifying the dramatic qualities of the form, but nevertheless preserved certain operatic characteristics, particularly elements of spectacle. In *Boris Godunov* his uniform treatment of the crowd scenes brought politics into opera, which collided with or opposed certain aesthetic ideas. The reforms in operatic conventions and routines resulted in new ways of staging opera as well as in development of new genres, such as the romance genre in *The*



*Stone Guest*. Here, the emphasis on the blend between the music and the verse supported the unity in the performance and enhanced the art of the opera singer.

In *Boris Godunov* and *Orpheus* Meyerhold employed styles of acting and staging that were similar to Nijinsky's and Fokine's choreography. The affinity with the members of Diaghilev's company was apparent in the shifting styles between the impresario's and Meyerhold's productions. In summary, the re-staging of Diaghilev's production of *Boris Godunov* by Meyerhold and the Russian premiere of *The Nightingale*, after the opera's premiere in Paris produced by Diaghilev, suggest that both artists were part of a similar cultural movement that sought to re-define and enrich the concept of Russian culture.

Thus the reforms in Russian opera were connected to a concept of national art both in content and style. Meyerhold's production of *Masquerade*, which opened one month after the premiere of *The Stone Guest*, demonstrated further experiments with the notion of national culture and the romantic verse form. As was the case with *The Stone Guest*, the production's heightened unity of theatricality and musicality challenged the divide between theatre and opera, creating a unique interpretation of the play and commentary in performance.

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## Chapter 4

### Opera and early theatre principles in the case of *Masquerade*, 1917

Meyerhold's staging of Russian opera was organically linked to his work on Russian classical drama. His production of *Masquerade* showed the interweaving of themes and aesthetic principles between theatre and opera. The performance demonstrated important principles of Meyerhold's theatre, such as the reforms in the stage-audience relationship, emphasis on stylisation, theatricality and artistic synthesis. In the true tradition of grand opera, it involved a cast over two hundred, including Alexandrinsky's actors and drama students, as well as those of Meyerhold.

The performance was a big spectacle set to music. The use of music in the production was closely linked to the director's approach to staging. It was composed by Alexander Glazunov, and is kept in the form of a piano score with Meyerhold's own markings at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art.<sup>1</sup> The interlacing of different musical leitmotifs in the score broadly reflected the director's multiple layering of actions and themes in the staging.

When staging the play, Meyerhold thought as an opera director in a dramatic theatre. He used operatic terminology, such as *arioso* or *aria* for instance, when demanding a particular vocal tone and tempo from an actor. This was evident in scenes where music grew from the verse form rather than from the composed score. Meyerhold's rehearsals during the production's revival in 1938 show how he directed actions, speeches and dialogues in relation to a particular rhythm, timbre and tempo. Although

the revival included some adjustments to the original production and there is a considerable gap of time between these two productions, the rehearsals are a vivid documentation of Meyerhold's unique use of music in his particular acting methodology. Even though score changes for different revivals demonstrate how the play was modified, such as the removal of mystic qualities associated with pantomime scenes and music, which were subsequently cut for the 1938 production, it is plausible to believe that certain musical principles, evident, for instance, in the director's approach to verse, were shared in both productions. It was Meyerhold's direction of dramatic actors in their use of verse that included certain operatic principles, such as various suggestions to the creation of vocal music and the execution of speech melody. It is interesting to note that *Masquerade* was in rehearsal during the same period as Meyerhold was working on Prokofiev's *The Gambler*.

Throughout his career the director experimented with the Russian verse theatre and was concerned with enriching its dramatic form. The documented rehearsals of *Masquerade* in 1938 show that he sought to augment the dramatic execution of the text by employing principles of rhythm and melody. He had earlier explored these principles with Gnesin in his St Petersburg studios. These syntheses between the word, and the music were, perhaps, not only to enrich the dramatic effect of the word, but also to explore the deeper resonances of the verse form, the musical meaning beneath the literal sense of the word. The merging of word and music, on the other hand, paralleled the development of the literary-musical amalgamation in the operatic theatre.



*Masquerade* was written in 1836 by Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), the great Russian lyric poet, novelist and dramatist. It follows the tradition of Russian romantic tragedy of the 1830s and 1840s as exemplified by Pushkin. The play illustrates the life of St Petersburg court society and offers a critique of contemporary customs. It concerns Arbenin, a Russian Othello, who having rejected his sinful gambling past, believes he can find happiness in family life, in his love for his wife Nina. In the course of intrigues and deceptions mainly created by Shprikh and Kazarin, Arbenin becomes convinced that his wife is unfaithful to him and eventually he poisons her. *Masquerade* represented in Alla Marchenko's words, the writer's 'first effort to reveal the secret of St Petersburg – fatal town, where the passing of the glittering, but trivial and superficial century, created many dangerous whirlpools, invisible to the normal eye.'<sup>2</sup> Marchenko points out that Lermontov created a symbolic image of the city, where everyone hides their real personality under masks. Its inhabitants are depicted within the two symbolic levels of the town – the public masquerade and the underground gambling house. The image of a gambling house here is apt since the players usually need to hide their intentions in order to win.<sup>3</sup> St Petersburg society is also reflected in the image of the masquerade, which depicts the idea that human beings are dualistic, a pertinent theme of Russian romanticism.

After seven years of preparation, Meyerhold's *Masquerade* was premiered on 25 February 1917 at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. Braun writes:

Planned originally for autumn 1912, it was put back to November 1914 to coincide with the centenary of Lermontov's birth, but then postponed owing to the outbreak of war. Now in 1917 Meyerhold was warned that any further delays would mean the abandonment of the whole costly enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

Within a few weeks, the most grandiose and expensive performance of the Russian Imperial Theatres was finally ready for its audience. The cost of the production was

reflected in the design, which showed the extravagant splendour of Imperial Russia. After seeing the production a reviewer, N. Petrov, wrote that 'such a wide range of designed furniture and props the Russian theatre, I think, never saw before...three thousand in gold this performance had cost. The scale of this artistic scheme was grandiose.<sup>5</sup> The long awaited premiere attracted Petrograd society. Alexander Kugel commented in *Theatre and Art*: 'At the entrance to the theatre stood tightly packed black lines of automobiles. All the rich, all the aristocratic, all the prosperous Petrograd Pluto-, bureau-, and homefronto-crats were present in force.' Kugel disapproved of the production's splendour:

I was horrified. I knew – everybody – knew – that two or three miles away crowds of people were crying 'bread' and Protopopov's policemen were getting seventy roubles a day for spraying those bread-starved people with bullets from their machine-guns.<sup>6</sup>

To Kugel, the production represented a complete detachment from the events on the streets. Its lavishness, strong aestheticism and themes, were all associated with Imperial Russia, the old order that was now being questioned and attacked. It seemed that Meyerhold had contradicted his social commitment so prominent during the post-revolutionary period. Ironically, the premiere coincided with the revolutionary movement happening on the streets.

The government of Tsar Nicholas had been weakened by Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and Bloody Sunday; the outbreak of World War I in 1914, repeated military reverses, and the famine and suffering of the civilian population. Now, by the beginning of 1917, the revolutionary climate was well established, and the day after the premiere, the February Revolution began. There was shooting in the streets, disorder, danger, shortage of bread: most of the workers in Petrograd and Moscow were striking for higher food rations.<sup>7</sup> After several days of demonstrations

in Petrograd the government ordered troops to open fire. Many of the soldiers refused to suppress the insurgents. Nicholas was forced to abdicate and a provisional government led by Kerensky was established. After ten years of forced exile abroad, Lenin returned by train to Petrograd.

Indeed, in the new social context, tradition was being re-examined, but it was also used to affirm the new public order. The last premiere of the Imperial Theatres was a true farewell to its patrons and supporters. It depicted the world of its audience in displaying social types and the visual aesthetics of Imperial Russia. Like a true court theatre, it demonstrated the wealth and the influence of the patron. However, this time, its grand aesthetics did not affirm the status and authority of the ruler, but, rather, its creators used its principles in order to provide a relevant social commentary. The vivid display of rich visual characteristics depicted a society preoccupied with the appearance of things. The endless variety of colours and patterns, colouring the life of the high society and tragic notes, sounding clearly in the production, gave reason for contemporaries to see *Masquerade* as the 'magnificent funeral of Imperial Russia.' Contrary to Kugel, Rudnitsky believes that the premiere had deep resonances within the social moment. He asserts that, the production became the requiem of the Empire, a solemn and ugly, tragic and fatal funeral of the world that was perishing at that very time.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the performance depicted a unique vision of the Empire and its destiny, with its powerful associations with the city of St Petersburg, the cultural and political nucleus of all Russia.

## **Farewell St Petersburg – Palmyra of the North – Venice of the North**

In the year 1703, a city was created on the delta of the Neva in the Baltic whose islands, divided by canals, drew on architectural plans inspired by Venice and Amsterdam. This magnificent creation became the capital of all Russia. Its founder, Peter the Great ordered the nobility to move into St Petersburg, build beautiful houses, and acquire the dress, tastes, and social customs of the west, thus creating a unique western-Russian amalgamation. The city inspired many artists and writers and its atmosphere and inhabitants became a central theme in works such as *The Queen of Spades* by Pushkin and *Masquerade*. The World of Art movement was also strongly identified with St Petersburg as well as some of Meyerhold's most prominent productions such as *The Government Inspector* in 1926 and the opera *The Queen of Spades* in 1935.

In Russian society during this period a strong desire evolved to examine the concept of national culture, which particularly related to nineteenth century Russia and the city of St Petersburg. Alexander Kamensky notes this when discussing Vsevolod Petrov's essay on the World of Art movement:

Petrov aptly links the creative endeavours of the World of Art members with what he terms their "educational" work. Again the author shows how profoundly this work reflected the basic interest of Russian society, inasmuch as their attraction for Russian culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century directly mirrored the growing national awareness characteristic of Russia at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the heightened interest in Russian history and culture was part of a developing national discourse at the time, which also gave the arts a strong educational value. Questions regarding national identity often occur in transitional societies, where the concept of national culture is related to the notion of nationhood, that is, to the general

values, standards and knowledge shared by people of the same country. Nineteenth-century Russia greatly interested Meyerhold throughout his career, possibly, because it was during that time that Russian culture flourished with writers such as Pushkin, Gogol and Turgenev, and composer Mikhail Glinka.

The music in the production conveyed the spirit of Lermontov's period and was inspired by Glinka. Meyerhold originally commissioned Mikhail Kuzmin, a composer who wrote the music for *The Fairground Booth*, to write the score for *Masquerade*.

However, his music did not satisfy the director. Aleksandr Chepurov writes:

This was possibly due to the fact that Kuzmin's music clearly expresses the conflict between the grotesque, the lyrical and a dark religiousness. This music is more characteristic of the silver century, rather than Lermontov's period. This is why Meyerhold turned to Glazunov who inherited the best traditions of a Russian symphony and was most influenced by Tchaikovsky's symphonies.<sup>10</sup>

Meyerhold commissioned Glazunov to write the score because his music was strongly linked with the Russian romantic tradition. The play began with musical silence in the gambling house, which was broken by the lively waltzes, mazurkas, quadrilles and gallops in the following masquerade scene. The score employed a grand symphony orchestra and the production was constructed in almost symphonic lines, interweaving the subtle variations of intimate chamber scenes, and linking episodes and the powerful crescendos of majestic events, all culminating in the sombre requiem of the finale. The music and the magnificent set demonstrated a distinctive stylisation of the golden period of Russian culture, that is, the years when the play was written.

A new way at looking at tradition sprang from the urge to view one's place within the context of time. The collaborators wanted to reinforce links between certain classics of Russian culture in order to re-examine the concepts and values that this culture

embodies. Militsa Pozharskaia indicates that they 'wanted the spectator to feel the blood connection between Lermontov's play, with works such as *Nevsky Prospect* by Gogol, *The Gambler* by Dostoyevsky and *The Queen of Spades*, whose hero had a similar destiny to that of Arbenin.'<sup>11</sup> These works are associated with the city of St Petersburg and present characters that are obsessed by the gambling house, being incapable of any self-sacrifice. Both Dostoyevsky and Pushkin had a passion for gambling. The tragedy of jealousy and intrigue could be applied to both Arbenin and Pushkin's fatal destiny. The writer was killed by Georges d'Anthès in defence of his wife's honour, in a duel at the age of 37. Lermontov also died in a duel, which was provoked by scandalous intrigues in society. Arbenin's jealousy and downfall is similarly aggravated by an intrigue. The themes in these plays are thus related to the historical period in which they were written and to their own creators. Yuri Yuriev, who played Arbenin in the production, indicated that the director wanted him to underline the author's characteristics in the part. The actor wrote in his notes: 'Arbenin is autobiographical, regardless of the individual traits that Lermontov gave to his hero.'<sup>12</sup> Thus Meyerhold reinforced the close relationship between Arbenin and Lermontov. In the production further links between certain nineteenth century Russian classics were established by drawing on the aesthetic characteristics of the period.

In approaching Lermontov's play Meyerhold and Golovin demonstrated a synthesis of different styles, particularly the style of nineteenth century St Petersburg – motifs of Russian Empire style and Venice of the eighteenth century. Braun indicates that, shortly after Meyerhold and Golovin read Pavel Muratov's *Italian Images*, the director wrote:

In my opinion the romanticism that colours *Masquerade* should be looked for in the surroundings that Lermontov discovered when he read Byron from cover to cover as a student in Moscow. Isn't it eighteenth-century Venice that appears between the lines of Byron's poetry in which revealed to Lermontov the world of fantasy and magic dreams that envelops *Masquerade*? 'The mask, the candle, and the mirror – that is the image of eighteenth-century Venice', writes Muratov. Isn't it masks, candles and mirrors, the passions of the gaming tables where the cards are scattered with gold...those intrigues born of tricks played at masked-balls, those halls 'gloomy despite the glitter of candles in the many chandeliers' – isn't it all this that we find in Lermontov's *Masquerade*? Isn't it this very Venetian life 'imbued with the magic that always lies hidden in cards and in gold' that shows through the images of *Masquerade*, hovering on the borderline of delirium and hallucination.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the director perceived that Lermontov was influenced by the style of eighteenth-century Venice and the poetry of Byron. This view provided the springboard for the integration of these two styles, showing the connection between a particular western aesthetic with that of Russia. The presence of the city of St Petersburg was also apparent in the design, as for instance, in the scene of the Baroness' house, where, Pozharskaia writes, through the windows a winter landscape of St Petersburg, 'trees covered by snow, and behind them a house in the style of Peter's architecture', was visible to the audience.'<sup>14</sup> Here the feeling of the cold air and frost contrasted with the heat of the characters' emotions, a Byronic passion.

Interest in the mask coincided with the period's fascination with troubadour Spain. Meyerhold pointed out that 'Lermontov wrote under the influence of Spanish drama...he swam, like an artist in effect.'<sup>15</sup> As was seen in *The Stone Guest*, the director believed that it was the powerful sense of theatricality perceived in the image of Spain by Pushkin and his contemporaries, which made Spain so attractive a theme during the 1830s.

Both the opera and his earlier dramatic production of Molière's *Don Juan* in 1910 demonstrated an overt exercise in theatricality – the director mounted a theatre-within-theatre set and created 'proscenium servants'. However, the genres presented different problems and subsequently resulted in different stage treatments. The opera was viewed as a romantic tragedy in accordance with the tone set by Pushkin's verse play – 'a little tragedy' and Dargomyzhsky's music. In *The Stone Guest* he emphasised the chamber nature of the opera, and aimed to create a sense of intimacy in the production, moving away from the opera's traditional performance. On the other hand, in staging *Don Juan* he underlined the comic elements apparent in Molière's play. Here, 'proscenium servants' highlighted a sense of comedy in actions such as hiding under the table when the statue of the Commander appeared, or picking up Don Juan's scarf when it fell on the floor. Actors exhibited a dance rhythm, lightness, and grace in their movement, distinctive of the period in which Molière lived and the lustre of the Versailles court. This theatricality underlined the sense of festivity. The idea of restoring the style of the period and celebrating theatricality was further explored in *Masquerade*, but, as in *The Stone Guest*, it adopted qualities that were unique to the author's art and the period in which he lived.

Inspired by the visual style of the 1830s, Golovin recreated a sense of splendour and luxury in the design, a striking image of the Empire. The furniture of the period consisted of the late Empire style (*vysoki klassitsizm – stil' ampir*): red wood, ornamented sides in gold, chandeliers, paintings, engravings, bronze, china and huge porcelain vases. Golovin studied the materials of the life style of the 1830s. For the production he made around 4000 sketches of costumes, furniture, make-up and props.<sup>16</sup> Everything on the stage, the furniture, glass, china, costumes and even cards,



were designed in his studio at the Mariinsky theatre. All the colours, patterns of costumes, set and properties merged together, creating stunning and harmonious effects, a distinct visual music of the Empire.

The contemporary artistic fantasy on the theme of the 1830s was very much alive at that moment in time. The past was re-created from a contemporary attitude. Golovin's stylisation demonstrated the influence of current artistic trends, particularly that of Michael Vrubel and Art Nouveau. Vrubel's series of illustrations based on Lermontov's poem *The Demon* in 1890 and his novel *A Hero of Our Times* (1890-1891) show a search for a lucid style identified with the Russian Art Nouveau style – a beautiful, melancholic, enigmatic, refined, synthesised style. Golovin drew on contemporary painting in his stage design, showing a unification of different forms of art, such as fine and decorative arts. This integration was often achieved through the created harmony of patterns and colours, as for instance, in the first scene where the colours of black, red and green were seen in the curtain, costumes, sets and furniture. The artist used this tool of 'total art' to change the look of things, thereby creating a type of synthesised environment, supposedly appealing to a wider audience by enhancing the dramatic effect of the production through bringing to the fore the full spiritual potential. The 'harmonic' approach to stage design, the creation of a perfect beauty and elegance, emphasised values of the classical epoch, such as power, beauty and faith, which appeared like ghosts from the past moulded in a contemporary artistic manner.

This contemporary treatment of the past shed new light on the values ingrained in tradition. Meyerhold used the design to provide a certain commentary in the

production. The visual aspect of the performance was imbued with the notion of national identity. The tremendous sense of pomp and splendour depicted an extravagant society both exhibiting and obsessed by wealth, a society preoccupied with the appearance of things. The fashion for lavishness, coming from Peter the Great, was an important element of the tragic show, whose 'perfect beauty' in the design was set against the superficiality, scepticism, irony of empty souls, that is, of impoverished souls.

The reviewers failed to see the significance of Meyerhold and Golovin's stylisation. Some contemporaries were entranced by the production's beauty; others were against it, notably Benois, because they believed this hindered the themes of Lermontov's drama. Benois wrote in his review that the staging of the scene of Nina's death was very poor since there was an emphasis on external beauty – 'it was almost as if this scene was from *Traviata* rather than Lermontov's drama.' In other words it was superficial and it did not convey the complexity of the drama.<sup>17</sup> Thus Benois perceived that Meyerhold simplified the play almost on the lines of a romantic Italian opera. Hence, it is of no surprise that when it came to the operatic repertoire, there was considerable interest in the high seriousness of German and Russian opera. Telyakovsky also disapproved of the production's stylisation:

There are no words, decorations, props...these are not decorations anymore, these are not costumes and props, but real things like in life, but put together so harmoniously as never happens in real life...and this excessive taste runs over everything – the play, the actors, and their performance.<sup>18</sup>

Telyakovsky perceived that the strong aestheticism in the design obscured both the themes of the play and acting performances. To him the production became almost an exhibition: 'They wanted to present life but presented a museum with the figures from

*Coppelia*.’<sup>19</sup> However, it was precisely this luxurious, sumptuous work exhibited for the whole audience to see that created a meaning in the production.

Golovin’s variety of strong colours and display of luxurious furniture and props succeeded in irritating the audience. The ‘harmonic’ visual style dominated the production and, as the action developed, became almost sinister in its perfection. The display of lavish design could have entranced its audience, but after a while probably became overwhelming. The props were also made larger than life, and this further accentuated a sense of a dream-like reality. The overwhelming effect of the ‘excessive taste’ in the design and its theatricality depicted the artificiality sought by Meyerhold. The director tested the boundaries of how far he could push visual aestheticism and its sumptuousness. There was something grotesque in this visual exaggeration, which mirrored Meyerhold’s theatre practice in the style of the grotesque, such as his excessive use of theatricality in *The Stone Guest*. The overstatement in design created a form of social critique, as its visual image caricatured the society it represented.

The exploration of theatricality and festivity depicted certain social aspirations of the time. As Kamensky suggests, studies by Soviet scholars, such as A.Piotrovsky, V. Propp, M.Bakhtin, indicated that the depiction of festivals in paintings and on stage during this period appear to represent life’s ideal model: ‘The sense of a happy and harmonious world, as presented on the stage of the theatre of the ideal’ brings into focus the most cherished hopes of the time, the concepts of justice, beauty, and liberty nurtured in the heart.’<sup>20</sup> The World of Art concern with the subject was evident in Boris Kustodiev painting of ‘The Fair’ 1908 or Nikolai Sapunov’s ‘The Merry-go-round’ 1908. In *Masquerade*, Meyerhold mounted a sense of a festive theatre, a

harmonious world full of an accentuated sense of festive play. The sense of spectacle was reinforced by the design, use of masks and the notion of 'play'. The folk element, presented in the images of *commedia* in the masquerade scene, represented a key element in the festive events. However, the tragic and sinister elements in the production, the exaggerated lavishness and sense of artificiality, suggested that this 'ideal world' of festivity and its 'cherished hopes' were far from being part of a contemporary reality. The image of the carnival did not convey a celebration of humanity. Rather, it depicted a world of pretence and deceit. It shed light on a reality, split between the grandeur of the Russian state and the undermined morale of the Russian soldier, between the wealth of the Empire and women waiting in line for food. This was a gloomy reality, where transportation, domestic trade and public order were breaking down, money was losing its value and wages were unable to keep up with the rising cost of living. In *Masquerade* St Petersburg's carnival of Venice could have frightened the members of its audience.

By exploring the notion of theatricality and stylisation, Meyerhold and Golovin reformed the audience-stage relationship through their use of the extended proscenium, that is, the added apron stage built over the orchestra pit. The experiments in the relationship between the spectator and the happenings on the stage were also pursued in the aim to depict the past in the present, to establish a connection between these cultural periods. Rudnitsky writes that Golovin created matt mirrors in rich frames at the side of this proscenium. This brought the audience's reflection on to the stage and suggested that spectators were part of the performance. The half-circle extended proscenium almost reached to the first row of seats – the prompter's box was absent and the footlights removed to create an acting area. At the both ends of the

proscenium, sofas were placed which stayed there throughout the production.<sup>21</sup> Two stairs on the side descended to the orchestra pit, where the orchestra was placed only in the centre. The auditorium was lit, as in *Don Juan*, which further lessened the divide between the performance and the audience. Moreover, as Rudnitsky notes, the construction of the stage resembled the architecture of the Imperial theatre, as in 'the two palatial doors on both sides of the stage and the colonnades resembling the colonnades of the theatre's side boxes. The theatre's auditorium has gold ornaments on white foundation – Golovin created white ornaments on a gold foundation.'<sup>22</sup> Thus the architecture of the auditorium was reflected and stylised on the stage. Between the two doors on the sides at the centre stage, a specially made curtain was hanging, which was not moved to the sides but was pulled up according to the old style. All these devices encouraged a form of theatricality and challenged the audience's expectations by moving away from naturalistic trends in the theatre.

The notion of theatricality was reinforced in the general use of stage curtains. Golovin created five curtains that were changed across the centre of the stage. Braun describes how 'critical scenes were played at the edge of the semicircular forestage and a series of borders and screens was devised to reduce the stage area and frame the characters for the more intimate episodes. The full stage area was used only for the two ball scenes.'<sup>23</sup> The designs for different scenes were revealed at the back of the stage, behind the curtain line, almost appearing to be flat pictures. In *Don Juan* Meyerhold also created two stage areas by his use of a Gobelin tapestry hanging at the centre stage. The front curtain was removed, actors solely using the proscenium area, apart from the last scene where they performed over the whole of the stage. In *Masquerade* curtains also created different spaces for the staging, which emphasised the variation

of dynamics between scenes. Thus the play of curtains showed how certain theatrical conventions became a live and integral part of the staging.

The use of curtains resembled the structural elements of a musical composition. Curtains sustained the atmosphere and mood of the play and, as Alla Mikhailova notes, 'were intended to play the part of an overture, of orchestral interludes and a tragic coda.'<sup>24</sup> Curtains were brought down at the beginning of certain scenes. As the audience entered the auditorium, the play's main curtain represented the overture of the production. It was painted as heavy drapes in red and black with a set of white cards as its central focus. The intensity of strong colours and the heavy voluptuousness of the curtain evoked the heated atmosphere of the gambling table. The curtain of the preceding masquerade scene was decorated with folk motifs, masks and vivid colours of the carnival, its various lines and patterns creating a sense of dynamic movement. All these elements brought together suggested a folk ritual of subversion. In contrast the curtain for the second ball scene was classic in design, its elegant pattern enhanced by the delicacy of pink and white colours. The final curtain was black, creating a sombre frame for the final scene. 'The tragic coda' introduced the mournful finale.

This innovative use of curtains played a crucial part in maintaining a continuous sense of musicality in the production. This was particularly evident in the transition from one episode to the other. Braun indicated that 'the forestage and a series of five exquisitely figured act-drops were used to ensure no pause in the action, the concluding lines of one scene being spoken before the curtain as the scene behind was swiftly prepared for the next.'<sup>25</sup> For example, the move from the gambling scene to

the second episode was musically and theatrically constricted. The rehearsal transcripts note that the first episode ended with the exit of Arbenin and Prince Zvezdich on to the proscenium and, at that moment, the curtain was brought down and the music started. The voices of the crowd were heard. Through gaps in the patterned curtain masked figures emerged on to the proscenium, around Arbenin and the Prince, who found themselves surrounded by the crowd in masks. The curtain rose and the proscenium and the stage were united.<sup>26</sup> The set exhibited many ornaments: luxurious lamps, girandoles, chandeliers, candlesticks and crystal. Figures in different national costumes, such as the Chinese Masker or the Turkish woman, conveyed the sense of the exotic, underlined by the eastern motifs in the music. The scene involved over 150 extras, all solely choreographed by Meyerhold. Thus Meyerhold maintained a sense of continuous narrative by his use of curtains, thereby achieving a constant flow of action, therefore musicality.

This underlined the rhythm of the overall performance and allowed the play to be performed with only two intervals. As Rudnitsky indicates, through his use of curtains Meyerhold for the first time broke the traditional dramatic construction of the play and created an episodic structure of the drama.<sup>27</sup> He divided the play into three parts, by bringing together the fourth and the fifth acts. The play was then separated into ten episodes. In the interview before the premiere he said:

The first part is about a growing jealousy...the two protagonists are Nina and Arbenin... In the second part Arbenin settles scores with the prince and baroness Shtral', and only in the third part he returns to the main plot of the drama, his battle with Nina...<sup>28</sup>

Within this structure, akin to a three-part symphonic composition, the action was orchestrated in relation to a different time frame. As Rudnitsky notes 'dynamic,

stormy episodes were alternated with quiet, elegiac ones.<sup>29</sup> Episodic structure determined the rhythm and the tone of the overall performance.

In contrast to the play's traditional staging, Meyerhold's episodic structure of the production created a faster flow of time, distinctive of the dynamics of modern times. The use of curtains and the organisation of the stage allowed the director to create rapid changes of action and space. Meyerhold pointed out in his lecture, 'About the interval and time on the stage' on 17 November 1921, that, when reading the play, the reader wants to read it quickly because of the unusual impetuosity of the action, indicating that the play should be performed with speed because it reads like that.<sup>30</sup> Thus the director perceived that the play required a new structure and rhythm in performance to sustain the energy of thought and action. In 1924 he proclaimed:

When I staged *Masquerade* I endeavoured to keep spectators on the edge of their seats. I could not for a long time understand why Lermontov divided the play into five acts (possibly, under the influence of the conventions of theatre in Tsar's Nicholas' time). But when I realised that the interval should be in a different place, everything sounded different – that, which appeared dark, became light. Condensing the inner colours, I lightened the outer expression.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the fast rhythm was supposed to keep the audience's attention. The director focused on compressing the actors' inner emotions with the help of a distinct flow of time, the light and grace of the swift rhythm. This possibly created more interesting and believable dramatic effects than if both form and emotion were of the same weight. The lightness in the movement of the drama underlined the tension between the inner and outer world.

During this period under the façade of elegance and grandeur seethed a general discontent and a feeling of emptiness. The collaborators stressed that the action is set in St Petersburg – the post-December Nicholas capital.<sup>32</sup> St Petersburg was strongly



marked by Tsar Nicholas I Romanov's despotic rule between 1825 and 1855. Anna Fedorovna Tiutcheva, Tsarina's Maria Aleksandrovna's companion at court, indicated this:

His autocracy was related to his vision of his role as the executioner of God's mercy, while around him in Europe influenced by new ideas a new world was being born – this world of the freedom of the individual appeared to him as criminal. He promoted his passé theories and saw his calling to be the suppression of these new ideals.<sup>33</sup>

Tsar Nicholas I was determined to restrain Russian society. A secret police, the so-called Third Section, ran a huge network of spies and informers. The government exercised censorship and other controls over education, publishing, and all manifestations of public life. Against this background individual initiative was inhibited. Meyerhold underlined this in conversation with his performers during the rehearsals in 1938:

Cards are played passionately, people come to a masquerade with their passion, all equal beneath their masks – they are all boiling. Dianas, Venuses, they all bring their own passion. Constrained by the chains of the Nicholas regime at any opportunity they would erupt.<sup>34</sup>

In relation to this, the popularity of masquerades and gaming tables during this period represented a form of personal outlet and protest.

For high society in the 1830s the masquerade balls held at the house of Vasilii Engel'gardt were important. These balls were open to the general public as long as they could afford the high price of tickets. In contrast, entrance to the court balls was limited to the members of court society, where a rigid hierarchy and etiquette was observed, as in the coded dress, which reflected the social ranks of the wearers. While these formal balls affirmed the existing social order, masquerades demonstrated a

blurring of social hierarchy and identity. Marchenko indicates that Tsar Nicholas preferred restrained clothing for women. However, in masquerades lavish gowns allowed them to free themselves. Thus she points out that 'It could be proposed that the fashion in masquerades, which took over St Petersburg's society in the 1830s was also a forerunner of female emancipation.'<sup>35</sup> Here ladies were obliged to wear masks and special costumes, which had to be ordered in advance, while men often wore half-masks or Venetian-like costumes. The wearing of masks involved some elements of risk, excitement and adventure. Behind masks women changed their voices, walks and concealed their true identity from the world. Since Peter the Great introduced court balls, women ventured out and entered society, whereas in masquerades, they toyed with their identity, thereby testing the boundaries of their place in society.

The attraction to gambling houses suggests that for the majority of the male population gambling was a way of life. It was through the game itself that a sense of honour, social allegiances and aspirations were explored. Describing the life of St Petersburg society a contemporary wrote:

It can positively be said that seven out of ten of the St Petersburg male public from ten in the evening play cards.... A need for the game is so widespread, that in some circles without further enquiries people's dignity is judged by the words: he plays, he does not play...people that usually would not be able to enter these social circles are accepted there because they play hard.<sup>36</sup>

This suggests that at gaming tables people from different ranks would mingle as money and the game broke the barriers of class. This particular social practice contrasted with the rigidity of Tsar Nicholas I hierarchical regime, where any sign of liberalism was brutally suppressed. In *The Queen of Spades*, Hermann's obsession with winning at cards is connected to his desire to achieve social status and power. In

one of his unfinished works Pushkin suggested how gambling challenged class barriers:

In there yesterday's servant is permitted  
To be with his master on equal terms.  
And he that was unlucky from the day of birth,  
Can often find within the game his recompense.<sup>37</sup>

Gambling personified attraction to wealth, opportunities, but also it gave a channel for passions and intrigue in a life full of worry and risk. Some achieved wealth, many lost enormous fortunes, but it was the excitement, risk and the illusion of wealth that kept people going. A play with destiny, a sense of fatal calling with which a man cannot find peace, desperate risk – all these elements define solitary characters whose lives are ruled by the game.

The image of the gambling table conveyed the main themes, the ills of the society of that time, such as desperation and self-destructiveness. Originally the play was rejected by the censor, mainly because of its satirical treatment of society and its tragic ending associated with the triumph of vice. Years later it was revised as melodrama, but Meyerhold, as Braun describes, removed any traces of melodrama from the production:

Meyerhold set out to restore the satirical emphasis of Lermontov's original version. He saw Arbenin's murder of Nina and his subsequent loss of reason not as the outcome of mistrust and jealousy but as the price exacted by a malign society from one who had sought to reject and discredit its corrupt way of life, having himself long pursued it.<sup>38</sup>

The director intended to demonstrate that Arbenin's tragedy is caused by social corruption. Arbenin, having acquired the secrets of success at cards and winning a large fortune does not gamble anymore, but at the beginning of the play he is seen to be drawn to his past – to the gaming table. Meyerhold, therefore, aimed to emphasise

the play's idea that the former gambler can never escape from his past and society. The opening of the production revealed a gaming table surrounded by men, where the intensity of the light hanging above them and the colours of red and black seen in the curtain enhanced the atmosphere on the stage. Meyerhold indicated during his 1938 rehearsals that 'the tragedy starts at the gambling house and finishes there.' After the seventh gambling episode 'a funeral begins'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, gambling, one of the strongest passions, which leads man to ruin, was one of the main themes in the production. In the image of the gaming table, Meyerhold aimed to convey the idea that certain social activities are hindrances to genuine human feeling and expression.

Although a large number of the male population could be found at gaming tables at night, gambling was not officially permitted by law. The character of Shprikh is based on an agent of the third police division, who knew the houses where cards were being played but, as Marchenko points out, 'was silent about it, because keeping these sorts of secrets was a way of having a constant income.'<sup>40</sup> In the play he is also a money lender. Meyerhold suggested that, in the second part of the production, the role of Shprikh is emphasised: 'Intrigue is happening on all sides...It is apparent that somebody's invisible hand (the Stranger) has started to conduct. Shprikh appears to be a hired spy and a hired intriguer.'<sup>41</sup> Thus through the character of Shprikh Meyerhold examined the workings of the corrupt society. The invisible hand belonged to the Stranger, 'the puppet master' of the production.

Even though the Stranger appeared in only two ball scenes, he became the main protagonist in the production. His figure symbolised the power of the social order over human life. Meyerhold pointed out:

Society has engaged the Stranger to take vengeance on Arbenin for his bitter disdain for everything in which once he took such pride.... The death of Pushkin and the death of Lermontov – one should remember the evil machinations of society in the 1830s – two deaths: the best sources for an explanation of the importance and the air of mystery surrounding the Stranger.<sup>42</sup>

Thus the Stranger played the part of society's executioner. He was seen at the masquerade (Act One, Scene Two), wearing a carnival Venetian costume of the eighteenth century – a black full length cloak, white ominous full mask and white gloves (in the text he is a mask). He approached Arbenin and announced 'this night a tragedy will happen to you' and then disappeared amongst the masks. There was a sense that he dictated the course of the play. Solovyov's review confirmed this: 'There is a feeling that somebody invisible is ruling everyone's actions and at times shows them different solutions.... The Stranger is always invisibly present on the stage'<sup>43</sup> The theme personified by his figure dominated the production and was reflected in two other characters. Meyerhold indicated that 'the Stranger gets his sacrifice after his servants (Shprikh and Kazarin) have laid down the ground for him'<sup>44</sup> Shprikh and Kazarin, a gambler with whom Arbenin used to play, plot the intrigue in the play. Thus the director aimed to sustain the dramatic line of the Stranger through these two characters. His figure reappeared in Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector* in 1926 in the image of Khlestakov and his double, and again in *The Queen of Spades* in the character once again called the Stranger.

The theme of the Stranger was also developed musically. Meyerhold perceived that time creates meaning on the stage; the distinct rhythm of the production related to characterisation and the unfolding drama. Since there was a sense of the constant presence of the Stranger it could be suggested that the overall rhythm and the

musicality of the production grew from the theme personified by his figure. In his lecture in 1921 Meyerhold indicated:

The role of Shprikh will only be understood under this condition, if the attention of the audience is not distracted from the fact that he plays such an important part. We will notice that Shprikh is continuing the line of the Stranger, only if we are drawn into the rhythm, which should be created by the production.<sup>45</sup>

This rhythm was supposed to reveal the importance of Shprikh and thus the presence of the Stranger. This also indicates that the production's musicality sustained the theme of the Stranger. Moreover, certain musical lines were underlined and they stood out within the rhythmical structure of the performance. The theme of the Stranger was emphasised in the special composed leitmotif in the score named – the Stranger's phrase. All this together conveyed the brooding presence of the Stranger. The constant flow of the production's musicality, thus, perhaps, underpinned the sense of uncontrollable and looming disaster.

The image of the Stranger brought fatalistic and supernatural elements to the production, suggesting that a human being is subject to fate. As was the case with the statue of the Commander in *The Stone Guest*, this time through the image of the Stranger, Meyerhold underlined the mysterious qualities in the production. The vivid presence of fate personified in this secretive figure possibly created a more frightening effect than the abstract depiction of it, since fate was shown to be material and close to life. In comparison to Meyerhold's earlier experiments in the symbolist drama, Rudnitsky points out that, this time, fate was presented in a different manner:

Fate was not looming over the production, or overflowing its atmosphere making everyone listen anxiously and be in a constant state of expectation – no, he was getting out amongst the crowd, walking through it, in flesh and blood and, at the same time, mysterious, wrapped in a secret, carried in himself death for the others.<sup>46</sup>

By bringing fate in tangible proximity to life, Meyerhold created a close connection between the notion of fate and social order. In this way the element of mysticism was used to reveal a truth about society.

The fatalistic element was also explored in devised pantomime scenes, which further conveyed the material and spiritual tension in the production. Meyerhold's sketches of the staging demonstrate that the key moments of the play were displayed in eight *commedia* pantomimes: the Theft, The Letter, Jealousy, Treachery, The Rivals' Quarrel, The Two Jesters and so on.<sup>47</sup> These scenes demonstrated a doubling of the play's themes, the development from the intrigues at the masquerade to the appearance of the Stranger, and were interlaced with other events on the stage, such as the masquerade dances. The masked *commedia* figures mimicked the present of the main characters, which they then abandoned in order to act out their future. As Oleg Fel'dman and Vadim Shcherbakov indicate, 'to start with they inhabited the same world, that of the flirtatious masquerade ball, then they transformed and became treacherously hostile.'<sup>48</sup> Masked figures first played out the deception in the play – the Blue Pierrot played with Nina's bracelet, the other masks followed him snatching away the bracelet. These secretive 'masks' deceived, cheated, their scenes became prophetic, terrifying, overtaking the course of the play and its fate. The pantomimes sustained the sense of the unknown, but yet again, they played the future openly and concretely; the fate was tangible, yet mysterious, as personified in the character of the Stranger.

The exaggerated reality in the doubling of key moments emphasised the notion of life's fragility. The repetition of key scenes, as well as Meyerhold's repetitive use of circling figures, possibly underlined a sense of human helplessness. As Rudnitsky writes, the sense of evil, revengeful, mocking-like qualities dictated Meyerhold's use of circles, such as the fatal circle of the players at the green table; the interweaving circle of the dance of the masks around Arbenin and the Stranger.<sup>49</sup> In the masquerade scene, actors created circles of movement set to music. This circling of action combined with the prophetic pantomimes probably created the effect of delirium and hallucination.

The sense of the grotesque, the overstatement present in Meyerhold's excessive theatricality, shed new light on the characters' reality. Rudnitsky indicates that the masquerade was seen as an image of the transparency of life, of the phantom nature of life.<sup>50</sup> The strong emphasis on the element of play strengthened this feeling. Pantomime scenes dismantled human actions. The pantomimes were performed by Meyerhold's own students - 'masters' of the grotesque. Alexei Gripich played the part of the Blue Pierrot. This allowed the director to conduct his own acting experiments within the production. In this world of masks and cards, games and illusions, and concealed feelings and faces, masquerade became a metaphor of the whole way of life of that particular epoch.

Pantomimes were set to music, which enhanced their dramatic and emotional impact. There was a synthesis of different musical styles as for instance, in the interlacing of the waltz with the mysterious pantomime music. Different musical styles broadly



reflected the different realities explored, those of the main characters and 'masks'. These musical lines were intertwined with leitmotifs of characters and themes in the performance. The play of leitmotifs, as in the theme of Arbenin and the Stranger, was part of the musicality of the production, enhancing characterisation and dramatic ideas.

There was a complex polyphony created between different events on the stage. This was evident in the second episode in the multi-layering of dialogues, the music, action of the main characters and the simultaneous pantomime. For instance, during rehearsals in 1938 Meyerhold indicated: 'The masks enact the taking of the bracelet, after which one of them follows Nina to the left door, gets the bracelet, kisses her hand, she leaves, Arbenin enters. Music ends. Text continues – after the words "the bird had flown" gallop starts.'<sup>51</sup> This shows that the movement on the stage was rhythmically and musically organised, almost cutting across the general music. Chepurov indicates that the action on the stage was not staged in a parallel rhythm with the music, but was set in counterpoint to and interlinked with the general musical line of the episode. However, sometimes the movement on the stage was directed in precise accordance to the rhythm in the score. For instance, the exit of the Turkish woman showed a synchrony of music and action which was then dissolved into different musical voices.<sup>52</sup> Thus different musical lines fed into the overall musicality of the performance, at some moments with opposing tension, at others in synchrony. The interlacing of multiple elements of the production showed a similar linking of different musical lines, whose overall synthesis created the musicality and the meaning of the production.

Operatic conventions usually include spectacular staging of large crowds, represented by the chorus or ballet dancers. The orchestrated staging of an enormous cast was also evident in the eighth episode, the Ball scene. Here the music and the staging was more formal than in the masquerade scene. The ball curtain depicted classic lines and soft colours, pink, white and blue. Nina's costume was also pink and white, comprising motifs of Russian 'Empire', but interspersed with black colour, which symbolised the approaching tragedy. The intensely brightly lit stage, crystal chandeliers, candles and silver reflected the dazzling magnificence of the scene. The scene opened with the polonaise, gentlemen asking ladies to dance, followed by a solo appearance of the famous pianist (at the premiere – pianist G.Romanovskii).<sup>53</sup> In the midst of the noisy crowd and dance music Nina's melancholic romance was staged. People surrounded the grand piano and attentively listened to her singing. The note in the programme announced that Nina's romance behind the stage is sung by opera soloist M.Kovalenko.<sup>54</sup> Thus the production engaged not only certain operatic conventions but also an operatic singer.

Nadezhda Tarshis compares the dramatic effect of Nina's romance to that of Pierrot's melancholic melody at the end of *The Fairground Booth*, which created a distinct lyrical quality in the production. This leitmotif of Pierrot was transformed in *Masquerade*, but also in other productions, such as *The Government Inspector*, where during the finale, Maria's lyrical song, like Nina's, also comes in the midst of the chaos. Tarshis points out that this stage device demonstrated 'the destiny of the lyrics and music in a world which is being moved off its centre.'<sup>55</sup> Meyerhold's use of lyrical melody cut through the bustle of the world, almost prolonging its doom, and

then disappeared. The tragic effect made more poignant by being set against the general music of the overall performance.

The lyrical element was also reinforced in Meyerhold's repetition of certain melodies. Braun indicates that Isaac Schneidermann's eye-witness account of the rehearsals for the 1938 revival described Meyerhold's use of a flashback as a form of lyrical commentary:

The strains of Glinka's *Valse-fantaisie* were heard. To its elusive rhythm, disturbing yet enticing, and announced by the soft tinkling of the bells that fringed the apertures in the curtain, the two Harlequins made their silent entrance. Strangely identical, they noiselessly circled Nina, paying court to her, gently taking her by the hand. But their sport concealed a threat. One of them sat on the banquette and drew Nina down beside him. Tearing herself free, Nina left the fatal bracelet in his hands, and by design he let it fall onto the middle of the forestage. Then much later, during the ball scene when Arbenin brought Nina the poison and stood motionless by the proscenium arch, his arms crossed, the scene of the lost bracelet reappeared before the audience, lit by the yellow spot from the wings – this time quite lightly and silently, as though in an apparition. And again, like an echo from the past, Glinka's *Valse-fantaisie* was heard.<sup>56</sup>

The commentary on the past was reinforced by the use of music, which enhanced its emotional and dramatic effect. The reappearance of the same musical theme stirred memories of the past events that were associated with that tune. The recalling of the past suggested that the funeral had begun.

A black curtain introduced the final episode – The Mourning room. Behind the door in the centre lay Nina's coffin. Around the door there were black drapes, on the walls blackened portraits. Characters wore black costumes and were holding candles. Arbenin's horror on discovering his mistake was set against the music of a tragic requiem. The service for the dead was composed on the theme of an old church motif. Rudnitsky writes that 'The Arkhangel'skii choir sang behind the stage for the

departure of Nina – but was it only for Nina?’ Rudnitsky sees this song to represent the ‘departure of the whole world of the state, which had had its day.’<sup>57</sup> Perhaps, the requiem did symbolically capture the social moment. The farewell to the old social order was also cathartic. Solovyov indicated that the director and the designer brought a feeling of happiness to the finale, moving away from cheap theatrical symbolism and pathos in the traditional representation of death on the stage.<sup>58</sup> In the finale, the tragic chords were resolved by a major key, which produced a sense of enlightenment; the musical line of adante-allegro-agitato ended the performance. The ‘troubled spirit’ was released and found its peace.

Glazunov’s music created the link sought by Meyerhold between certain Russian classics. Chepurov points out that there are similarities between ‘the musical-dramatic score for *Masquerade* and the musical-dramatic score for *The Queen of Spades*.’ The leitmotif of the three cards, related to the image of the Countess, conveys a sense of fate, represented in *Masquerade* in the leitmotif of the Stranger’s phrase. There are also similarities between the piano music of Nina’s romance and the scene of the musical evening in Lisa’s room in *The Queen of Spades*, while, the production’s finale, the depiction of enlightenment and its catharsis, resembles the opera’s finale. In *Masquerade* ‘the humming of the chorus accentuated the mysterious qualities in the music. This dramatic device was also borrowed from Tchaikovsky’s opera.’<sup>59</sup> Thus the score showed how Meyerhold reinforced parallel musical themes between different works, almost as if wanting to present a synthesised vision of Russian culture, which was to forge and highlight in one performance its distinct classical musical-dramatic voice and by doing this to reveal its substance.

Taking into account the construction of the production along operatic lines it could be suggested that Meyerhold's *Masquerade* was an opera without music, since it was not explicitly driven by music like opera. Characters spoke, they did not sing, but their voices and actions were orchestrated in relation to the sound score of the performance, which produced a heightened form of theatricality. Nataliia Savkina confirms that Meyerhold's *Masquerade* was often called 'opera without music' because of the perfection of its musical-dramatic score. She suggests that in the opera *The Gambler* there is a sense that people speak like real people, although singers sing and as such both productions have something in common. *The Gambler* can be viewed as opera-as-drama, while *Masquerade* is a drama-as-opera.<sup>60</sup> In opera Meyerhold sought to bring forward the dramatic elements inherent in the form, while in dramatic theatre he wanted to enlarge and stylise its characteristics. In the production the director's emphasis on a high emotionality suggests that he wanted to elevate the play's pathos to an operatic level. In turn, the high emotionality of the acting generated a state of alertness, as if something momentous would happen.

Although Meyerhold drew links between Russian classics he still preserved the dramatic elements distinctive to each work. For example, when directing the dramatic performance of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* in 1936 he suggested:

Boris's temperament should be completely different from the one we see in opera of *Boris Godunov*. Pushkin makes him like a Tatar, capable of outbursts.... From Pushkin's rhythm I see Boris as a hunter. In his adroitness there is craftiness... In the opera the qualities sustained in the bass role of Boris, create this character as noble, wise and grand. This is a certain operatic pathos, given in the tone of the opera.<sup>61</sup>

This shows that Meyerhold's interpretation of the opera and of the dramatic play was different, although the subject explored was the same. The tone and characterisation of the dramatic production was based on the elements of Pushkin's verse, its

language, rhythm and melody, while the distinctive musical qualities of the opera determined its own unique reading. The emphasis on Tatar qualities in Pushkin's character of Boris, the ruler of Russia, showed the director's exploration of the Asian influences in Russian history and culture. For indeed, Russian land spans Europe and Asia.

As an opera director in dramatic theatre, Meyerhold used operatic terms to direct the actors. For instance, when rehearsing the conversation between Nina and Prince in 1938 he suggested that 'this is a beginning of an erotic scene. The prince is halting...The scene interlinks with Pushkin, with some scenes from *Don Juan*, this is aria, arioso, this should be separated.'<sup>62</sup> Or when directing Arbenin's monologue about Nina's unfaithfulness the director indicated: This is arioso, don't break it, these are big words.'<sup>63</sup> Thus the stage direction, the focus on the vocal tone and rhythm of the scene, included operatic terminology. Different timbres and rhythms depicted new scene focuses, as well as demonstrated a precise development of characterisation.

The sound score of the performance supported the important experiments in verse theatre and characterisation. The vocal expressiveness of the verse was built on music, but unlike the opera *The Stone Guest*, for instance, where the music and words are set in the score, here the music had to be created in the actors' performances. A distinct musical tone was conveyed in the speaking of the text. As Rudnitsky notes, 'the actors' performance in *Masquerade* depended upon a precise execution of the given rhythm, tempo and intonations.'<sup>64</sup> The verse provided actors with melody in their performances, since its rhythmical and melodic elements are crucial ingredients of its form. Meyerhold directed his actors to convey the musicality of the verse as true to

their characters. For instance, in the fifth episode he indicated to the actor playing Shprikh that his monologue needs a very fast tempo, it needs to be full of voluptuousness, it needs to be pronounced with pleasure.<sup>65</sup> This suggests that the actor was directed to move the verse and enjoy its form, to make it alive and sustain a continuous flowing of time. The aim was to penetrate the core of Lermontov's verse whose form is not separated from the content, but is a single whole. Meyerhold's direction of speaking the verse was supposed to unite with other elements of acting. Solovyov indicated that Lavrent'ev, the actor playing Shprikh, achieved a unity of movement and the execution of the text, based on the traditions of the Russian romantic verse theatre. This in turn successfully created his character.<sup>66</sup> Thus the elements of the verse form determined characterisation.

Meyerhold's orchestration of male voices in the gambling houses, or the crowd noise in the ball scenes, resembled the direction of an operatic choir. Rudnitsky suggests that the 'ensemble was constructed in relation to a complex rhythmical and plastic score, based on the rhythm of Lermontov's verse, and the principles of staging the ensemble were, in essence, musical principles.'<sup>67</sup> The human voices created variations in timbre and rhythm, a play of crescendo and diminutive tones. The unity of the ensemble was emphasised by the precise orchestration of music and voices, and was rooted in a sense of artistic wholeness. In verse theatre this unity was possible through a strict adherence to the form, which created a strong base from which the distinct style and atmosphere of performance grew.

The verse form merged with the other elements of performance. During the rehearsal for the revival of the production Meyerhold indicated that, since *Masquerade* is a

romantic tragedy, there should be a heightened speaking of the verse.<sup>68</sup> This heightened verse in turn joined with the other elements of performance. As Yuriev wrote, 'The grace of the musical word in dialogues coincided with the grace of its external performance. Restraint, subtle emphasis and tone were strengthened by precise use of pause and gesture.'<sup>69</sup> The sense of elegance and mastery of verse fused with the lightness and grace in music. Beneath the beautiful form, underlined in the majestic design, there was a volcano of restrained passions.

By focusing on the elements of the verse, its melody and rhythm, Meyerhold reformed the art of the actor. Actors were supposed to give shape to a musical form, in a way that was similar to Chaliapin's art insofar as their art was related to interpreting and conveying the thought behind the form. Actors should be artists, working within set rules and with various techniques, while transforming and bringing the form to life.

Meyerhold fought for a theatre that would wholly embrace its stylistic elements and through that explore its full artistic potential. Theatre directing for him was like a composition, whose tightly integrated wholeness was based on a certain stylisation. However, Solovyov's review of the 1917 production, indicated that most of the actors showed their limitations, that they were not ready for the stylised theatre since they were bad with verse, and 'their artistic individuality is dependant on psychological motivation, rather than upon the sense of the whole production.'<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to recall Benois' criticism of Meyerhold's *The Stone Guest*, which disapproved of the fact that opera singers did not build their characters from inside, that is from a psychological motivation. Solovyev, on the other hand, regretted that, in *Masquerade*,



certain actors did not convey the formal elements of verse because they either did not follow its laws, or were influenced by naturalistic style of acting. This also points to the fact that at the Alexandrinsky theatre, as A.Varlamova suggests, the system of individual interpretations of roles prevailed over the notion of ensemble and the unity of style, which are characteristics of the theatre of the twentieth-century.<sup>71</sup> However, she notes that Roshchina-Insarova, who played Nina in the production, acted in a way that was part of the twentieth century tradition, as her parts were always an integral part of the artistic wholeness of the performance. She was almost able to look at herself acting as if being outside the part.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that the actress embraced the stylistic experiments sought by Meyerhold in creating an integrated performance. Moreover, in her notes written in 1920-1930, she recalled the general tonality of *Masquerade*.<sup>73</sup> This indicates that Meyerhold succeeded in creating a general musical grounding for the performance, as it was noted when discussing his orchestration of human voices. The verse provided actors with the uniting melodic and rhythmical base from which individual parts were supposed to grow. The audience were supposed to hear the verse form clearly.

Throughout his career Meyerhold sought to resurrect and enrich the Russian verse theatre, whether engaging with classical works by his beloved Pushkin, or staging plays by his favourite contemporary writer, Mayakovsky. His engagement with this form of theatre can be viewed in terms of its relationship to the concept of national culture, as it included an exploration of folk and epic themes, and the work of Russia's greatest writers. In 1935 Meyerhold put on a radio performance of Pushkin's *The Stone Guest*. He commissioned V.I. Piast, at the time a famous poet and a verse expert, to write a rhythmical score for the play, since the actors were bad with verse.

Piast composed pauses, intonations, accents.<sup>74</sup> He also created musical notes for actors reading Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, which he rehearsed in 1936. This suggests that Meyerhold sought to create a heightened form of verse theatre, where musical, theatrical, literal and conceptual elements combined. Russian language in this verse theatre was explored and enriched by the art forms of acting and music. For instance, actors, by applying their vocal mastery of the text, could further enhance the verse form. There was also a distinct musicality within the verse language, that Meyerhold sought to convey, demanding from the actor a certain rhythmical and musical awareness.

*Masquerade* was deeply ingrained in the concept of national art and shared elements of the operatic theatre in its construction, development of characterisation and the notion of an integrated spectacle. Its distinctive episodic structure showed, in turn, a dismantling of tradition through which a new form of musicality was created. Music was present not only in the form of the score, but, also, in the design and acting. A vivid example of this is when Golovin, during rehearsals, noticed how Roshchina-Insarova found a certain gesture, immediately decided to change her costume in order to emphasise the listless fall of her hand. As Varlamova notes 'Meyerhold and Golovin needed that note, in order to put it into the general movement of the performance, and they saw it and recognised it.'<sup>75</sup> This suggests that the actress' musical line in the movement was taken up by the director and the designer to become a part of the musicality of the productions. The movement conveyed the particular emotion experienced by the character, which was interlaced with other leitmotifs in the design and the direction, and became an important element of the atmosphere created on the stage. Patterns or gestures can thus be viewed as musical lines that

existed within the performance. This example also shows how different forms grew from each other and created this integrated performance.

By challenging the divide between different forms of art, as incorporating *commedia* in the Russian verse theatre, Meyerhold created a unique blend of different genres, such as elements of 'high' art, usually associated with the Imperial Theatres, and 'low' art, related to the staging of pantomime and harlequinade. This synthesis of commonly separated genres of performance anticipated the agitprop movement of the 1920s, which broke the division between traditional forms of art. Pozharskaia points out that the production left a lasting impression on the young Sergei Eisenstein, who was present at its premier. It is of no surprise that this became one of the strongest artistic experiences in the life of the film director.<sup>76</sup> To both artists, art was a dynamic and compressed form of composition, whose various elements were moulded together into a single whole and in a way that these elements would not usually have been seen.

The first run of Meyerhold's *Masquerade* was short lived due to the Revolution. Maia Sitkovetskaia writes that 'although the second performance was sold out, the auditorium was half full, and the third evening was cancelled. The production was repeated three times in March 1917 and eight in April. In the 1917/1918 season it was removed from the repertoire.'<sup>77</sup> She indicates that Petrograd's newspaper *Vechernii zvon* 15 December 1917 announced that there was a move to revive *Masquerade*, but it was acknowledged that 'the lavishness of the production was not in accordance with the times.' The loss of many extras and people working behind the scenes, due to the social turbulence, financial difficulties and the delayed opening of

the theatre season, made the production even more unachievable, since it depended on a huge technical support and cast.<sup>78</sup> However, as of 1919, *Masquerade* witnessed many revivals, culminating in Meyerhold's production in 1939 at the Pushkin theatre, the former Alexandrinsky. During the last revival, reviewers were quiet about the production. Perhaps they were frightened to write about it. After Meyerhold's arrest the production was viewed as Yuriev's work.<sup>79</sup> It was performed for the last time on 1 January 1941. Shortly after, during World War II a bomb destroyed the set. The score is now the only tangible document left, which was a vital part of the performance. It is interesting to note that in 1947 there was a concert performance of the production in the Bol'shoi Hall at the Leningrad Philharmonic.<sup>80</sup>

Did Meyerhold's *Masquerade* present a farewell to the world that ceased to exist in those days, as Rudnitsky believes? Perhaps in the historical context of the 1917 it seemed that way, but the reappearance of certain themes, such as the idea of the Stranger in *The Government Inspector* and *The Queen of Spades*, suggests that Meyerhold found the legacy of Lermontov's Russia strongly imbued in modern times. It seemed that in these works Meyerhold wanted to convey the sense of Russian destiny and culture, by recruiting all the arts, not least music, to his cause. Did Meyerhold deliberately choose this date for the premiere because he felt the approach of such a large historical event? It is almost impossible to know whether the director consciously responded to or foresaw the social change. It seems that the only plausible answer to this problem would be Pushkin definition of such events as 'strange coincidences'.

The operatic elements in the production supported the aesthetic principles and ideas of Meyerhold's dramatic theatre. The production succeeded in merging elements of literature, music, design and drama in a way that represented a contemporary vision of Russia in the 1830s. Music was used to comment on and furnish the pathos. The symphonic composition and the multi-layering of dramatic and musical actions, in parallel or in counterpoint, the sense of the grotesque, the celebration of theatricality and stylisation – all these aesthetic principles created the commentary in the production. These elements conveyed philosophical ideas, a quest into the notion of Russia's Europeanised identity and the spiritual state of Russian society, as well as apocalyptic visions of the future. *Masquerade* showed how a small Europeanised elite, alienated from the mass of ordinary Russians, raised questions about the very essence of Russia's history, culture and identity.

The October Revolution in 1917 confirmed the end of St Petersburg Imperial Russia. The tension between metaphysical and material existence explored in the production continued to be present during the age of technical progress, which was also one of mysticism. The dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, the past and the future, and between different ideologies and social orders seemed to have been most pertinent during this period of social change. In his theatre, Meyerhold aimed to embrace the spirit of the time and, by doing this, to commemorate and enhance it further by recruiting all the arts, particularly the principles of opera – the sister art of the dramatic theatre, where its grand form and music elevated human life above everyday existence, thereby most suitably capturing the cataclysmic experiences of the time.

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3. *ibid.*, 298
4. Braun Edward, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 141
5. Quoted in Rudnitskii Konstantin, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), p. 204
6. Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.148
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14. Pozharskaia, *Aleksandr Golovin*, as above, p. 55

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30. Meierkhol'd, 'Ob antrakte i o vremeni na stsene' in *Tvorcheskoe nasledie V.E.Meierkhol'da*, (eds.) Vendrovskaiia L.D. and Fevral'skii, A.V., (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1978), p.48

31. *ibid.*, pp. 59-60
32. The Decembrists were a group of dissatisfied nobles who called for the abolition of serfdom and the end of autocracy. On 14 Dec. 1825, they marched into Senate Square with a number of soldiers, but the uprising was crushed within a few hours and some of the conspirators hanged.
33. Quoted in Marchenko Alla, 'Perechityvaia *Maskarad*', as above, p.304
34. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p.382
35. Marchenko, 'Perechityvaia *Maskarad*', p. 306
36. Ashukin N.S, 'Istoriko-bytovoii kommentarii k drame Lermontova *Maskarad*' in Mikhail Lermontov, *Geroi nashego vremeni i Maskarad*, p. 326
37. Pushkin, unfinished comedy, 1821, in the programme for the World premiere of the First edition of *The Gambler* by Prokofiev, (Moscow: Bol'shoi Teatr, 2001), p. 4.
38. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, pp. 141-142
39. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p.367
40. Marchenko, 'Perechityvaia *Maskarad*', p. 300
41. Quoted in Sitkovetskaia (ed.), *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 309
42. Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.142-143, also in Meierkhol'd Vsevold, *Stat'i, pisma, rechi, besedi*, (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1969), vol.1, p.299
43. Solov'ev Vladimir, '*Maskarad v Aleksandinskom teatre, Apollon*, 1917, No 2-3 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike*, p. 355
44. Meierkhol'd Vsevold, *Stat'i, pisma, rechi, besedi*, vol. 1 p. 303
45. Meierkhol'd, 'Ob antrakte i o vremeni na stsene' in *Tvorcheskoe nasledie V.E.Meirkhol'da*, p. 49
46. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 205



47. Fel'dman Oleg and Shcherbakov Vadim, 'V.E.Meirkhol'd: Chertezhi k pantomimam vtoroi kartiny *Maskarada*' in *Meierkhol'dovski sbornik: vypusk vtoroi*, as above, p.228
48. *ibid.*, p.228
49. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 211
50. *ibid.*, 213
51. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 370
52. Chepurov Aleksandr, 'Mizanstseny na muzyke' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, (eds.) Picon-Vallin Béatrice and Shcherbakov Vadim, p. 366
53. Sitkovetskaia (ed.), *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p.311
54. *ibid.*, p.311
55. Tarshis Nadezhda, 'O muzykal'nom realizme Meierkhol'da' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, p.353
56. Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.147
57. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 212
58. Solov'ev Vladimir, '*Maskarad v Aleksandrinskom teatre*', as above, pp. 356-357
59. Chepurov in 'Mizanstseny na muzyke' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, pp. 361-2
60. Savkina Nataliia in the programme of the World Premiere of the First edition of *The Gambler*, p.9
61. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 282
62. *ibid.*, p.329
63. *ibid.*, p.365
64. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 213

65. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 379
66. Solov'ev Vladimir, '*Maskarad v Aleksandrinskom teatre*', p. 357
67. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 210
68. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 372
69. Quoted in Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 210
70. Solov'ev, '*Maskarad v Aleksandrinskom teatre*', pp. 354- 356.
71. Varlamova A.P., '*V Aleksandrinskom teatre: Rezissura Vs. Meierkhol'da i tendentsii akterskogo iskusstva nachala XX veka*' in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, (eds.) Pesochinskii N.V. and Kukhta, E.A.(Petersburg: Kul'tInformPress, 1998), pp.129-135
72. *ibid.*, p.134
73. *ibid.*, p.134
74. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p.226
75. Varlamova in '*V Aleksandrinskom teatre: Rezissura Vs. Meierkhol'da i tendentsii akterskogo iskusstva nachala XX veka*', as above, p.133
76. Pozharskaia, *Aleksandr Golovin*, p. 57
77. Sitkovetskaia (ed.), *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 312
78. *ibid.*, 312
79. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.209
80. Sitkovetskaia (ed.), *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol. 2, pp. 316- 317

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Concept of Proletarian Culture and the Purposes of the New Soviet Opera**

Revolution created a dissonance between past and future and between Europe and Russia, and produced a new and challenging task for theatre and the arts: the incorporation of revolutionary ideals into the creation of a proletarian culture. In broad terms, this meant that artists were supposed to generate a culture which would both feed off and support the new social order.

Proletarian culture was essentially defined as the new art of the proletariat and it affected all the arts, not least opera, to which Meyerhold contributed his own experience in the theatre. In the years following the October Revolution, the incorporation of the concept of proletarian culture regarding theatre and music inspired the creation of a new Soviet opera. The new purposes of opera included the popularization, understanding and accessibility of this art form. Opera was expected to embrace the new social ideas. The question of how to make opera 'proletarian' resulted in reforms of the genre.

The new social order re-evaluated the role of opera and theatre. It brought a deeper interest in the function of the arts and artists. There was a shift in the role of the arts caused by the Communist Party's focus on art and theatre as a form of mass education. Martin McCauley indicates that 'Lenin came to see that a cultural revolution was absolutely essential', as it was supposed to 'narrow the gap between art and the masses.'<sup>1</sup> The new educative purpose of art coincided with its political

role; art became a dominant means by which to convey political ideas, a means of legitimising a particular social group and a way of defining and imposing its right to exist. The Revolution turned to art to commemorate its heroes and ideals, to represent its friends and enemies, to justify the new social order. New social tasks in art created new principles for forming genres. For instance, Meyerhold, by aiming to incorporate revolutionary ideas into his productions, such as the theme of the popular masses, reformed theatrical experience in his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. The political focus directed on the artist to take an active part in the construction of the socialist society stimulated a search for new subjects and techniques in art; for Meyerhold's theatre in particular.

The shift from the Imperial to the Soviet audience and from the old St Petersburg to the new Moscow represented the shift in the way Meyerhold's theatre was both created and perceived. The policy of the Imperial Theatres prohibited political activity amongst its employees. However, as Braun indicates, 'in common with many other intellectuals he shared a disdain for tsarist obscurantism, a disdain that in his case was greatly exacerbated by the languid indifference of the Alexandrinsky stalls patrons who resisted all his efforts to disturb them.'<sup>2</sup> The fall of the Romanov dynasty provided new artistic opportunities, where previously censorship had rejected these, offering the possibility of blending experiment with political commitment on a large scale. Through this discourse Dr. Dapertutto and the director of the Imperial Theatres came together, both dedicated to creating a new form of popular theatre, a Soviet theatre. In 1918, Meyerhold left the Imperial theatres, partly due to the prevailing conservatism amongst other artists and their contempt for the revolutionary events. His last piece of direction at the Mariinsky Opera Theatre, or the State Opera as it had

been renamed, was Auber's opera, *La Muette de Portici*, or *Fenella*. Braun indicates that Meyerhold, due to other commitments, delegated most of the work on *Fenella* to his assistant, Sofya Maslovskaya.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps also, because of his increasing interest in the new revolutionary contents and forms, Meyerhold broke his contract with the State Opera soon after the premiere of *Fenella*. It is hard to distinguish to what extent Meyerhold's perception of the revolution and the newly found creative freedom, corresponding to the ideals that the newly established ideology was thought to be promoting, was political rather than artistic. Amongst some artists, the crossing of boundaries between these two areas was a frequent occurrence during this period. However, the move to Moscow indicates the director's participation in and engagement with the social and cultural changes at the time, especially as, in the new Soviet context, St Petersburg came to represent the aesthetics of the past, while Moscow became the new cultural and political centre of the Soviet Union. His theatrical experiments gradually adopted, as well as generated, a whole new set of social meanings.

Although Meyerhold did not stage any operas between 1918 and 1935, his conception of the socialist revolution in the theatre and the developed artistic principles in his productions, as well as his working relationship with prominent composers such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich, clearly showed his involvement with the creation of Soviet opera. On the other hand, the director drew from the aesthetics of the new opera and was inspired by it. For, indeed, Meyerhold's involvement with the development of Soviet theatre was organically linked to the creation of new opera; the dramatic stage opened up new possibilities in reforming the opera, and vice versa. It is also important to note that the birth of Soviet opera did not occur in isolation from

previous developments in Russian opera but, on the contrary, expanded upon, and amalgamated in a similar fashion the reforms in musical language, form and subject presentation. Meyerhold's pre-revolutionary work on opera, in which he explored new methods of art synthesis and reforms in audience-stage relationship, was important for the development of Soviet popular theatre, which sought to break down the divide between 'high' and 'low' forms of art and achieve a new kind of audience participation. During the 1920s, the experiments in the art of opera certainly reformed and redefined its form, purpose and stature, since a whole new set of cultural relations and values were formed.

The delicate task of the creation of a proletarian culture involved a restructuring and founding of new artistic groups and institutions. These institutions strove to sustain the proletarian culture in a way that was close to, or coincided with, their artistic credo. For instance, *Proletarskaia Kul'tura* (Proletarian Culture known as Prolekult too), an organisation founded in the spring of 1917 under the leadership of Alexander Bogdanov, was strongly based on communist ideology. Prolekult aimed to involve the proletariat in the creation of a new culture by encouraging street theatre and amateur and spectator-participatory performances. The formations of new social groups such as the ASM, *Assotsiatsiia Sovremennoi Muzyki* (Association of Contemporary Music), or Mayakovsky's organisation, *Levit Front Iskusstva* (Left Front of the Arts), which had both been founded in 1923, created a sense of artistic unity, but also represented to some extent the dynamics and creativity of the period. The aesthetic affinity between these two groups regarding, notably, their advocacy of new techniques and forms in music and art, showed an amalgamation of ideas between different artistic disciplines. Meyerhold often collaborated with ASM composers.

Thus, Shostakovich, a member of Leningrad's ASM, was a musical director in Meyerhold's theatre in 1928. Dmitri Sollertinsky, a close friend and biographer of Shostakovich, indicates that 'Meyerhold liked to rehearse to music, so Shostakovich compiled various musical extracts for this purpose.'<sup>4</sup> These artistic groups distributed their ideas amongst themselves and fed off each other. This in turn influenced the creation of Soviet opera. Even though some artists rejected the new order, while others blended their artistic and political concerns, a spirit of hope and excitement was certainly present amongst a whole range of artistic groups, committed to the creation of a proletarian culture.

After the Revolution, theatres were placed under the aegis of Narkompros (*Narodnii Komissariat Prosvesheniia* – National Commissariat of Education and Enlightenment), headed by Anatoly Lunacharsky. Within the Commissariat, theatrical sections led by regional leaders were responsible for the theatres throughout the RSFSR. Emphasis was laid on the creation of a new theatre for a wide cross-section of society through the unification of all creative forces. The new theatre audience was more than welcome; free theatre tickets made culture increasingly accessible to the masses.

The vastly expanded market opened up new possibilities for the creation of theatrical performances, particularly street theatre. The Wagnerian vision of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this grand integrated theatrical experience, had never before achieved such a close realisation as in the post-revolutionary mass spectacles, which were produced with the intention of entertaining the masses while, at the same time, circulating contemporary political ideas. Lunacharsky insisted that Wagner's view of the integrated spectacle

was close to contemporary cultural needs because it promoted the idea of mass performance: 'We need to return to Wagnerian ideas – to the revolutionary Wagner.'<sup>5</sup> Wagner's theoretical works, *Art and Revolution* (1849), *The Art Work of The Future* (1850) and *Opera and Drama* (1852) endorse the idea that an integrated and national art can unite the whole of humanity, regardless of its troubles. The composer argued that the loss of a Greek ideal resulted in the separation of the arts from society and that only the opera could reinstate art to its appropriate status. The First World War ended in March 1918 and the ban on German composers was lifted. Rosamund Bartlett points out that one of the first titles issued by the literary department of Narkompros in 1918 was the translation of *Art and Revolution*, with a preface by Lunacharsky.<sup>6</sup> The commissar's identification with the Wagnerian view of the educative and social role of the theatre coincided with the artist's quests for a 'total' art work. Integrated art was supposed to profoundly influence its audience, and street spectacles suggested that art should be everywhere. Here, while for some politicians art played a purely instrumental role in furthering the cause of the Revolution, artists, on the other hand, celebrated the socialisation of the arts.

The shifting of the categories of art brought into question opera's position in a socialist society. The problem of how to make an opera proletarian, given that opera is traditionally an elitist form of art, was far from resolved in the early years after the Revolution. Geoffrey Norris indicates:

The very striving for new modes of expression raised problems, particularly in the opera theatre, that for years were to prove virtually insoluble. Suitable subjects for libretti, questions of musical style, the very conventions of opera – all aroused such doubt and discussion in Russian musical circles that few composers felt inclined (or able) to embark on such a large-scale, risky undertaking as a new opera that might be compatible with the prevailing revolutionary mood.<sup>7</sup>



The re-evaluation of the operatic form involved a restructuring of its content and style, but, most importantly, its stature. Moreover, it was also difficult to define the notion of a proletarian sound, since classical music had been the music of the intelligentsia.

Largely due to Lunacharsky's protection of the arts, opera was viewed as a distinctive form of national art. Lunacharsky believed that 'the proletariat needs its own form of opera that will correspond exactly to its content.'<sup>8</sup> According to him, as Neil Edmunds points out, the ideal libretto should involve 'popular heroes, revolutionary enthusiasm and excitement.'<sup>9</sup> In this context, the birth of proletarian opera, both in form and in content, came after the relevant revolutionary experiences on the dramatic stage. For instance, the first Soviet-content play, Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe* was written and performed in 1918, while the first opera on a Soviet theme was *For Red Petrograd* in 1925, by Arseniy Gladkovsky (1894-1945). Levon Hakobian points out that 'the first Soviet operas appeared in 1925, after the years of uncertainty concerning the very appropriateness of the genre of opera for the so-called worker and peasant audience.'<sup>10</sup> These operas, such as *Eagle's Revolt* by Andrey Pashchenko (1883-1972), *Stepan Razin* by Peter Trodin (1887-1950) and *The Decembrists* by Vasily Zolotarev (1873-1964) were all based upon revolutionary topics, but with the exception of *The Northern Wind* by Lev Knipper (1898-1974), and *Ice & Steel* by Vladimir Deshevov (1889-1955), did not produce any innovations in musical language or style.

The new operatic vocabulary, relating both to the Soviet context and the technical developments in the genre, was strongly represented in Shostakovich's first opera *The*

*Nose*, as well as in Aleksandr Mosolov's *The Hero*, both written in 1928. Shostakovich is one of the most celebrated Soviet composers and Mosolov had a reputation in the 1920s as a leading member of the Soviet musical avant-garde. *The Hero*, being a satirical one-act chamber opera, reformed the classical structure of opera, while the employment of new instruments, such as the use of the peasant instrument, the balalaika in *The Nose*, suggested the popularisation of opera.

In the early Soviet days, there was a clear divide between opera and the new Soviet theatre. For example, Braun notes that the following occurred during the rehearsals of *Mystery-Bouffe*:

The Conservatoire refused to sell copies of the play-text on its bookstall and, according to Mayakovsky, even nailed up the doors into the theatre to prevent rehearsals...There was no question of giving more than the scheduled three performances since the Conservatoire was due to follow them immediately with a programme of opera.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that a distinction between a proletarian theatre and traditional opera was drawn; the Petrograd Conservatoire had to retain its reputation with the immediate follow up of opera in its repertoire.

The experience of the theatre in the early years after the Revolution had a great impact on the development of a Soviet opera. For instance, the theatre explored new dramatic characters such as the proletariat in *Mystery Bouffe*, thus opening up a whole range of new aesthetic possibilities for opera. Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* (1934), drew its inspiration from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and a story written by Nikolay Leskov in 1865, in which its main protagonist, Katarina Izmaylova, a merchant's wife, has an affair with her servant. Shostakovich stated that he wanted to write about the oppression of women in the tsarist regime and to show a

new emancipated woman. The opera was a bold step forward in the development of Soviet opera, particularly in the use of musical dissonance that served the purpose of emphasising the dramatic conflicts. The composer explored the contrast between the lyrical and expansive style created for the heroine, Katarina Izmaylova, and the grotesque and discordant music written for the surrounding characters. It could be suggested that the sharp dramatic contrasts in Mayakovsky's play between the 'Clean' bourgeoisie and the 'Unclean' proletariat, further emphasised in Meyerhold's staging of contrasted episodes, correspond to the harsh dissonance in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*. The play of contrasts was certainly the prominent contemporary aesthetic amongst different artistic disciplines. This artistic device was close to the Leninist ideal of a dialectical procedure that was supposed to unfold new meanings. However, the almost two-decades difference between the premiere of these two performances indicates that the very conventions of the operatic genre, especially its traditional status, made it a harder task to incorporate proletarian culture, than for the theatre.

New political undertakings merged with or imposed new meaning on certain aesthetic principles. It could be argued that the play of contrasts in Shostakovich's opera represented a purely aesthetic device related to the latest artistic trends, rather than being consciously incorporated in terms of its association with proletarian culture. Meyerhold explored the effect of opposites in his concept of the grotesque during his pre-revolutionary career, but, in the new social context, this principle was endowed with greater significance and was further developed as such. Moreover, during the changing cultural climate of the 1920s, there were differing artistic and political views

on questions regarding the creation of the art of the proletariat, which makes the analysis of the link between aesthetic principles and politics even more problematic.

The pluralistic character of the arts created internal tensions in connection with the creation of proletarian culture. Neil Edmunds writes that in the immediate years after the Revolution, Prolekult and the Music Department of Narkompros were the main organisers of musical activities.<sup>12</sup> The first opera staged by the Moscow Prolekult Studio was Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*.<sup>13</sup> The opera's subject matter concerns the complicated political events during the time of the accession of Peter the Great in 1682. Mussorgsky's heroic operas, in their portrayal of the epic past of the Russian people, greatly appealed to Prolekult's members, but, after the end of the Civil War in 1921, Prolekult lost its autonomy and was no longer a leading cultural institution. This coincided with Lenin's introduction of a New Economic Policy (NEP), in order to rejuvenate the ruined economy. The strain of Revolution, Civil War and famine, in which five million perished, all served to demoralise the Russian people. The NEP stabilized the economy, mainly its light industry (consumer goods) because it stimulated a small form of free trade policy. The encouragement of certain aspects of capitalism, particularly in the countryside where rich 'kulaks' were able to 'exploit' the poorer peasants, created tensions within the Communist Party. The political conflicts coincided with the artistic ones. In the following years, the intense ideological struggle between musical organisations was most prominent amongst the members of ASM and RAMP (*Rossiiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Muzykantov* – the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians). ASM was a Soviet modernist movement in the 1920s and its members consisted of professional musicians rather than ideologically minded artists. RAMP, on the other hand, was a group with shared

political beliefs, whose members endorsed principles in the creation of the proletarian culture which generally conflicted with the aesthetics of Soviet modernism.

Different artistic groups had differing views on the subject of musical styles in relation to the concept of proletarian culture. Edmunds writes that RAMP supported traditional styles in music, and opposed light genres such as jazz, foxtrot or gypsy songs because of their apparently decadent and lethargic influence on audiences. Its members promoted folk music rather than urban romances and, consequently, launched an attack on Meyerhold's use of jazz in his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) and his employment of the famous gypsy song *Kirpichiki* in *The Forest* (1924).<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, ASM promoted new opera in style and form, and the work of western composers. For instance, as Geoffrey Norris indicates, ASM supported the operatic adaptation of Mayakovsky's poem on the Civil War, renamed *The 25<sup>th</sup>*, which was staged in 1927 at the Maly Opera Theatre in Leningrad. The production 'called the actors to recite the lines of Kerensky, Kuskova, Milyukov and other figures in the Provisional Government, and contained elements of pantomime with episodes for choral singing and speaking.'<sup>15</sup> In the merging of various forms artistic forms, the opera shared Meyerhold's theatrical aesthetics, in that it combined words, gestures and sounds. Productions such as *Mystery Bouffe* or *The Dawn* involved a juxtaposition of different generic forms of expression, as well as a declamatory style in the acting out of current political events. RAMP, in contrast, was in favour of a stylistically traditional form of opera and regularly criticised ASM's activities. It is clear that the development of the proletarian culture movement was complex and diverse, where the artists simultaneously aimed to sustain and generate its penchants and rudiments.

For Lunacharsky, the creation of a proletarian culture depended upon engendering a particular realist view of art through which one could create a perfect world. He believed that the true aim of art was to reach beyond the narrow frame of individualism in the search for the 'good' and the 'beautiful'. In 1904, he described his realist view of the world:

It is a question not simply of engendering life at one's own level, but of creating it higher than oneself. If the essence of all life is self-preservation, then beautiful, good, true life is self-perfection. Neither, of course, can be confined in the narrow frame of individual life, but must be set in its relation to life in general.<sup>16</sup>

According to the Commissioner, the striving for self-perfection corresponded to the creation of a socialist spirit and community, a truly romantic legacy. The ideological impetus and purpose of this view was sustained in relation to the creation of new culture. Sheila Fitzpatrick indicates that 'Lunacharsky described the development of proletarian culture as a means of heightening the class awareness of the proletariat and promoting a spirit of militant enthusiasm for the achievement of class aims.'<sup>17</sup> As such, the creation of proletarian culture was indispensable to the development of socialist society. Lunacharsky advocated the necessity for a realist theatre because of its clarity of content and its clear and simple forms. According to him, such theatre should be promoted with a new dramaturgy of communist content. He thus asserted, 'classical realism is the most suitable form for the new theatre, but this form should be filled with new content.'<sup>18</sup>

The lack of new writing reflecting the new society was followed by the striking success of formal experiments in theatre art. In response to this, Lunacharsky maintained that it was possible for a proletarian culture to be created without a precise

artistic and ideological programme for it. As such, proletarian culture was discussed largely in terms of its potential for the future. This allowed a relative openness within the arts, where various artistic trends, such as the radically different movements of futurism and realism, for instance, coexisted in their commitment to popularising the arts, even though their conceptions of proletarian culture varied. Lunacharsky encouraged this form of pluralism within the arts, seeing its potential for the growth of socialism. He also claimed that in relation to the need for proletarian culture to correspond to the needs of the new government, the artists could learn from tradition as well as other sources. Robert Hughes notes that 'Lunacharsky wanted to preserve the past, preferably disinfected from bourgeois degeneration and corruption as in cheap pornography, philistine vulgarity, intellectual boredom.'<sup>19</sup> For Lunacharsky, the preservation of an artistic past can be viewed as a selective continuation of history. Indeed, in 1917, when in the spirit of Revolution some of the major historical sites and buildings were destroyed, Lunacharsky wanted to resign.

The leading conception of proletarian culture after 1917 came from the Proletkult's major theoretician, Alexander Bogdanov, in various articles, and later a book, *About a Proletarian Culture*, in 1924. According to him, the route to socialism was a struggle for the creation of a proletarian culture, which would bring complete class liberation. In this context, art and culture was to become a means for the unification and development of class strength. Bogdanov believed that the culture of the past was ideologically alien to the proletariat. As Nick Worrall indicates, the problem of proletarian culture was approached in a manner that stripped away any associations with the past:

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 other social groups. This isolation was necessary to ensure the ideological purity of the new forms.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, Prolekult promoted the notion of a new workers' culture which was supposed to validate and be in close association with the new social order.

Meyerhold's views on the making of proletarian culture was between those of Lunacharsky and Bogdanov. He built on tradition, but also sought to break with past ideologies. In 1920 Meyerhold was appointed head of the TEO, the Theatre Section of Narkompros, where he launched the October Revolution movement in the theatre. Worrall indicates that in the 'October in theatre' movement Meyerhold '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 government dictat.'<sup>21</sup> The conception of a Theatrical October involved a revision of all scenic values through the revolutionary spirit and a strict politicisation of the theatre. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes:

Theatrical October meant a full nationalisation of theatres, liquidation of the state theatres, introduction of revolutionary plays according to the directives of a general repertoire plan, struggle against false ideology in the theatre, and the development of theatrical techniques of cubism, futurism and supermatism.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Meyerhold shared Bogdanov's view of a proletarian culture whereby the new proletarian theatre involved the abolition of traditional 'falsehoods'. Lunacharsky attacked the Theatrical October because of its futuristic inclinations and believed that this theatre wrongly mixed revolution with art. He preserved the autonomy of the Alexandrinsky, Mariinsky, Mikhailovsky, Bolshoi, Maly, and the Moscow Art Theatre with its first and second studios, the Kamerny and the new Children's Theatre, excluding them from the authority of TEO. As Worrall points out, again and again Lunacharsky emphasised the need for a national repertoire, corresponding to an



educationalist politics and high level of theatre art. Nevertheless, in 1920, Meyerhold founded his Theatre Company, R.S.F.S.R. Theatre No.1, the first theatre to specialise in Soviet plays. Young and inexperienced actors became the members of this theatre.<sup>23</sup>

Prolekult ideas illuminated Meyerhold's aims at this time, especially in relation to spectators. Meyerhold, together with the Prolekult, participated in the promotion of the theatre in provinces and factories. Rudnitsky indicates that, when founding R.S.F.S.R. Theatre No 1, Meyerhold advocated the staging of two theatrical genres – revolutionary tragedy and revolutionary buffoonery.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note how this coincided with his earlier theatrical practice when the director staged operatic tragedies at the Mariinsky and 'low' comedies at the theatre studios. Meyerhold believed, as Gladkov states, that 'our performances should be full of desire and need. The main role of the theatre, as in music, should be to stimulate an active life'<sup>25</sup> The ideal theatre involved the spectator and encouraged their participation. For Meyerhold, the unity between the performer and the spectator was the true calling for theatre's practitioners who should strive to restore the theatre's wholeness and thus create a collective national art. The idea of a uniting art was also close to Wagner's and Lunacharsky's view of the role of the theatre.

Music offered various possibilities in relation to the collective participatory theatrical experience. Some Prolekult members asserted the importance of creating a new musical sound, free from the artistic past. Neil Edmunds indicates:

The musical expression of this belief resulted in the invention of mechanical or electronic musical instruments upon which workers could perform, and attempts to make music out of items with which the proletariat was familiar, such as factory whistles, guns, or motor cars.<sup>26</sup>

The new mechanical sounds suggested a freedom from the past. By creating sounds from the tools of labour, artists were bringing music closer to the proletariat. In accordance with Taylorist ideas, which promulgated efficient economy of movement for the worker, Prolekult believed that music could help the proletariat to work to their full capacity. Here the new music strove to excite, stimulate productivity and unite with the process of work; thus a new form of collective art would be realised.

The tension and the ambiguities of the silver period of Russian culture, between professionalism and amateurism, and artistic technique and free creativity, were transformed in the new social context. After the Revolution these artistic discourses questioned whether to create proletarian art with the employment of artistic knowledge or independently of it. Different artistic movements and organisations had opposing views on the making of art. Lars Kleberg writes:

The core of Prolekult's programme for cultural revolution was to liberate the spontaneous ideology of the 'new class'. Exactly contrarily to this was the avant-garde's theory of culture, which maintained that the most important prerequisite for the creation of art was not feeling but skill.<sup>27</sup>

For instance, Meyerhold's training in biomechanics endorsed the belief that there were acting skills which should be learnt. The training also suggested that acting could be taught to everybody regardless of innate talent or feeling. In this way the notion of artistic skill incorporated socialist values, particularly in abolishing the idea of amateur talent. However, although, the reforms of the theatrical techniques were related to the spirit of the Revolution, they more likely represented formal experiments in the development of Meyerhold's theatrical aesthetics. Throughout his career, the director was concerned with establishing an actor's technique and formulating the principles of theatre art. Prolekult, on the other hand, supported the

mass performances involving amateur performers, such as Red Army soldiers and workers. Worrall suggests that 'in supporting the amateur manifestations of theatrical activity, Prolekult was also striking a blow against any form of professionalism in the arts.'<sup>28</sup> However, even though these mass performances involved amateur performers, they were designed and directed by professionals. This suggested that the very notion of amateur art depended on a certain professional skill and support.

The promotion of amateur artistic activities lessened the divide between 'high' and 'low' forms of art. RAMP also participated in the creation of amateur activities. As Edmunds notes, RAMP advocated the view that workman's clubs need their own opera in relation to their own singing abilities, choral, instrumental and drama groups: 'Such cooperation between different groups in a club would, Bogdanov-Berezovsky believed, ensure that an opera could completely lose its bourgeois stigma, since it was created, staged, and performed by workers.'<sup>29</sup> In aiming to free the opera from its tradition, RAMP popularised operatic art by bringing it closer to the working class, but, at the same time, its members used the genre to elevate the voice of the 'new class'. The creation of workmen's opera suggested that there was a new valid and real culture, since the very conception of opera implied a certain artistic status.

The concept of proletarian culture also encouraged a new form of professionalism in art. There were departments founded at both GITIS (Moscow Academy of Theatre Art) for the direction of mass performances and at Vkhutemas (The Higher State Art Training Centre) for the design of mass 'happenings'. These institutions legitimised the arts and the relevant techniques they were promoting. For instance, constructivism endorsed the idea of new spaces, which would completely transform everyday life,

free from the shackles of traditional art. However, this required an understanding of both technology and architecture. This suggests that, instead of just dismissing any form of professionalism, artists, particularly those related to the avant-garde movement, were in fact searching for a new and evolving form of professionalism.

Meyerhold's work in the theatre embraced the main tendencies and problems of the Russian avant-garde at the time, and the educational role of the arts in relation to the goal of social progress. The blurring of political and artistic boundaries in artistic experiments was apparent especially in the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde. Meyerhold's pre-revolutionary commitment to exploring forms of popular theatre and heightened theatricality combined with a sense of faith and excitement in popularising theatre for the Soviet audience. The idea of constructing a new society, which would abolish old falsehoods, coincided with the artistic quest into the rudiments of art, the stripping away of tradition. It particularly embraced the avant-garde aspiration of conquering new spaces and perspectives. So it is of no surprise that futurists were the first group of artists to associate themselves formally with the Government. Only a few days after the announcement of the new Soviet rule, Lunacharsky invited artists who were willing to discuss the possibilities of collaboration with the government. Gassner notes that only 'five artists came: A. Blok, R.Ivnev, N. Altman, V. Mayakovsky and V.Meyerhold.'<sup>30</sup> In this period, futurism was a term applied to the so-called 'left' avant-garde in general.

Russian futurism after 1917 thus embraced the idea that a revolutionary art could be created, and insisted on the production of new values in the spirit of the revolutionary period. Futurism, as well as being an aesthetic manifestation, was also seen to be a

spiritual and social one. It insisted on transforming the world through the radical revision of all values through art.

The first futurist opera *Victory of the Sun* by Mikhail Matyushkin, which was premiered in 1913, involved a large cast of non-professional singers and actors and a new cubist setting created by Kazimir Malevich. The geometric stage, which displayed spiral forms and was complemented by the actors' marionette-like appearance in cardboard costumes, broke away from traditional theatre and opera. A poet, Alexei Kruchenykh, wrote the non-realistic libretto. In the staging the opera's strong sense of rhythm merged with the robotic breaking up of words by the performers. RoseLee Goldberg emphasises that the opera showed 'a complete displacement of visual relationships, the introductions of new concepts of relief and weight, certain new ideas of form and colour, of harmony and melody and a breakaway from the traditional use of words.'<sup>31</sup> However, as Goldberg writes, even though *Victory of the Sun* suggested new directions and entertainment models, particularly in the collaboration between poets, painters and musicians, it possibly did not define a new operatic genre because its move away from the accepted operatic forms was too radical and non-operatic. The press did not even write about the production.<sup>32</sup>

In an infant socialist society, the futurist's aesthetics nurtured the seeds of the new society. Tony Bennet notes that the Russian futurists 'viewed the devices of defamiliarisation as a means for promoting political awareness by undermining ideologically habituated modes of perception.'<sup>33</sup> The abstract qualities of the artistic form suggested that life and art were going to be freed from convention. Separation

from tradition was seen as a separation from class, whereby a new class-free and classless person would be created. The futurists' focus was the sky, their art, Utopian. This is why the futurists believed, as Milivoje Jovanović suggests, that futurism 'has very strong claims to be a forerunner of a proletarian culture'<sup>34</sup> During the first years after the Revolution, the futurists played a major role in promoting socialist ideas.

During this period, the arts had the immediate task of communicating socialist ideals to the people. The difficulty of sustaining, understanding and communicating the ideals of socialism in order to establish a ground for future development was great. Not only was an exact theory of development absent, but also the majority of citizens were unaware of the specifics of socialist ideology. The first task, when the country was still engaged in the Civil War, was to acquaint people, both literate and non-literate, with the new government and its particular vision of socialist life. At the beginning of the century, with often limited means of communication, Russian artists explored and almost foresaw the ideological power of the media in the future, in which certain facts could be manufactured to fit particular political views and be communicated to a wide audience.

The government sponsored artists to create AGITPROP – agitation and propaganda. Artists were encouraged to leave their studios in order to work on the formation of mass 'happenings'. For example, the street spectacle, *The Storming of the Winter Palace* was staged in 1920 as a part of the celebration of the third anniversary of the October Revolution and presented the re-enactment of key revolutionary events. Lunacharsky believed that 'culture which is being created on the foundations of the October Revolution should encompass big celebratory spectacles, festive

holidays...the voice of music'<sup>35</sup> Meyerhold proclaimed in 1920 that 'sporting parades, mass happenings, national celebrations, artistic and working demonstrations should destroy the significant difference between the working and upper classes.'<sup>36</sup> Street theatre offered the possibility of familiarising and bringing art to the masses. This coincided with the futurist ideal of art not being seen in museums, but on streets, cars, houses, costumes or objects. ROSTA's windows (*Okna ROSTA*) established in 1919 were another propaganda project, which displayed slogans, news bulletins and political caricatures in available shop windows. Alexander Rodchenko worked for ROSTA and, as Robert Hughes writes, his 'punchy, brilliant style, which rarely used more than two colours in addition to black, resulted in direct and arresting images.'<sup>37</sup> The art of a poster, photography, slogan and poetry celebrated art's social function. This art was rich with ideas, visual and aural sensations, and as such, unconsciously worked on the senses. It promoted social views, but also imposed its meanings by manipulating its audience. The prominence of artistic propaganda marked an affirmation of avant-garde views, as the streets were transformed through the display of radically new images. The new art was supported and also professionalised by a number of exhibitions, societies, organisations, newspapers and learning institutions.

By bringing an aesthetic validity to politics, the artist affirmed the new social reality. New artistic forms created a link between the truth of the inner and the outer world. Mayakovsky wrote agitational poetry and slogans for ROSTA. In one of his poems, a man of the future communicates with the people of the future:

To you I leave the fruit garden  
Of my great soul  
I praise the fatherland that is,  
But three times more the one that is going to be.<sup>38</sup>

In seeking to bring the people and art closer together, Mayakovsky used this new 'conversational' form, a new type of musicality. The language is spare and dynamic. Dissatisfied with the old style of Pushkin's verse, he moved away from a formal syllabic-based composition to create new poetic metres and music. This was in order to diminish the traditional logical sense of particular words and expressions, thereby bringing new meaning to words. Although the notion of the soul, as seen in the poem, and the idea of scientific society could appear as contradictory, the relationship between the two was often productive, as their aesthetic merger attempted to harmonise the 'spiritual' and emotional with the rational and social world. Thus, Todor Pavlova, in her introduction of Mayakovsky's work to the socialist countries, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, during their infancy in the 1940s, called the poet proudly 'the engineer of the human soul.'<sup>39</sup> Hence, the new forms of expression in art, which sought to establish new dimensions of understanding and experience. Poetry was also brought into public meetings, where the artists gave voice to a new, poeticised politics.

The new art and poetry were also seen and heard on Meyerhold's stage. An obvious example would be his collaboration with both Mayakovsky and Rodchenko in the production of *The Bed Bug*. Victor Kiselyov's designs of the costumes for 'The Clean' in Meyerhold's 1921 production of *Mystery Bouffe*, which was revised in response to contemporary events, also shared the elements of ROSTA's posters. As Braun writes, the costumes had 'much of the pith and vigour that made the ROSTA satirical windows.' For instance, the new central character Menshevik – The Conciliator – wore a 'red wig, steel gig-lamps, and flapping coat tails', while the 'Unclean' wore blue overalls.<sup>40</sup> These stereotypical representations of characters



served the common purpose of creating certain images that would become a popular culture. The theatre realised the images created in the posters and vice versa.

The sense of a political meeting was also transferred to the dramatic stage. In Meyerhold's theatre, founded in 1920, there were public disputes about the productions and their place and purpose in the social revolution. In the corridors of the theatre building, the audiences could see posters and revolutionary slogans. Lunacharsky proclaimed in 1926 that 'Meyerhold succeeded in adapting futurism to a poster-meeting period of our revolution. Futurism could produce the poster and stage a powerful meeting.'<sup>41</sup> In Meyerhold's theatre, the plays themselves were transformed into agitational performances. The No. 1 Theatre's first production was Emile Verhaeren's *The Dawn*. This symbolist play set in the mythical town of Oppidomagnea shows an international proletarian uprising. Braun writes that, Meyerhold and his assistant Valery Bebutov adapted the play 'in an attempt to bring out its relevance to recent political events.'<sup>42</sup> A political meeting was depicted in the staged gathering of the actors seated amongst the audience commenting on the Revolution, while announcements from the stage gave the current news on the War. Braun further notes that 'derived from the meeting was the declamatory style of the actors, who mostly remained motionless and addressed their speeches at the audience.'<sup>43</sup> This device of enstrangement, or distancing, served the purpose of addressing the arguments and moral dilemmas openly to the audience, thus resembling ancient Greek drama. Here actors present, rather than inhabit the part; they show their emotions explicitly and by doing this simultaneously comment upon their character.

The aesthetic values embedded in the ancient Greek theatre corresponded with cultural quests of the period. The look back into the past was important for the creation of the future. Lunacharsky also promoted the use of elements from classical Greek theatre: 'the new theatre should aim towards the architectural simplicity and the philosophical thought of the ancient theatre.'<sup>44</sup> Similarly as in *The Dawn*, Greek tragedy addresses its audience; characters come on stage and clearly articulate their points of view as if saying 'this is my case before the law'. Such explicitness of character representation is necessary in a Greek tragedy because it should not be left as merely inferred or guessed at. It is presented in word and action, and the mask is in keeping with this explicitness.

Meyerhold abolished the separation between the auditorium and the stage in his use of the chorus. The dismantling of theatrical illusion and the scattering of the chorus in the orchestra pit was used with the aim of stimulating the audience and bringing it closer to the happenings on the stage. The setting also served the purpose of creating a new theatrical experience. The design, by Vladimir Dmitriev, depicted red, silver and gold cubes, cylinders, triangles and discs. Supporting his choice of the design Meyerhold said:

We are right to invite the cubists to work with us, because we need settings like those that we shall be performing against tomorrow. The modern theatre wants to move out into the open air. We want our setting to be an iron pipe or the open sea, or something constructed by the new man.<sup>45</sup>

There was a sense that the theatre wanted to expand; the box-like stage had been for some time too constricted, and with the legitimisation of collective experience and revolution, the director wholeheartedly aimed at the elimination of the division

between theatre and social life; to create a total theatrical happening, a contemporary equivalent of the ancient Greek drama experience.

The idea of transforming everyday life into a gigantic theatrical experience never seemed to have been achievable before. Lunacharsky wanted to see a new opera emerging as a grand spectacle 'in huge auditoriums which would seat two or three thousand spectators.'<sup>46</sup> Here, the mass audience would transform opera by making it a grander collective experience. Lunacharsky's vision of the new opera shared elements with the development of participatory and mass performances. Meyerhold reconstructed the stage in order to abolish the separation of stage and street. For instance, in *Mystery Bouffe*, the proscenium was demolished, several rows of seats were removed and a ramp extended into the auditorium. A belief in technology and urbanism encouraged new artistic devices. *The Earth Rampant* involved automobiles and motorbikes and thus expressed a passion for the city. Worrall points out that, 'Meyerhold adapted a production at his theatre in 1923 of *Earth Rampant* as a mass spectacle, which he staged on the Lenin Hills, involving military and naval detachments.'<sup>47</sup> The performance showed a direct link with politics, as it was dedicated to Leon Trotsky and the Red Army. Lunacharsky believed that 'in order to experience and acknowledge themselves, the masses have to express themselves and that is possible when they become their own audience...people demonstrating to themselves their own soul.'<sup>48</sup> These manifestations created a whole new mass culture, which was becoming part of Soviet men and women.

Mass productions typically brought operatic characteristics into the theatre. *The Dawn*, *The Earth Rampant* and *Mystery Bouffe* involved a large group of actors and

impressive designs. Grand spectacles with huge choruses and a strong sense of rhythm were the main characteristic of Meyerhold's revolutionary performances. Since music is a vital part of celebration, serving to bring people together and provide a sense of excitement, it also played a crucial role in the creation of mass performances. Neil Edmunds describes the musical direction of *The Storming of the Winter Palace*:

*The Storming of the Winter Palace* had 6000 participants and 40,000 spectators, and military bands from Petrograd district played the music. *The Robespierre Overture* by the French composer Henri Litolff signaled the start of proceedings, followed by a performance of the melody of *The Marseillaise* in the form of a polonaise. The latter was played as spotlight fell on large models of Kerensky and members of the Provisional Government. The ensuing conflict between the revolutionaries and the Provisional Government was symbolized musically by a battle between *The Internationale* and the grotesque form of *The Marseillaise*. *The Internationale* finally overpowered its rival as the Winter Palace was stormed.<sup>49</sup>

In the performance familiar melodies were set within a context conducive to revolutionary ideas. The use of military band alluded to the militant and collective zeal of the army. The 'musical battle' between *The Internationale* and *The Marseillaise* demonstrated how music was not a mere accompaniment to the events on the stage, but had a precise dramatic and social function; it played an active role in the treatment of the subject itself, while promoting certain political ideas. The staging of these political hymns was close to Meyerhold's conception of the grotesque, in that the contrasting melodies and musical distortions produced a strong sense of theatricality which commented on the events portrayed. As in opera, now in mass performances, the music guided the audience's attention and stimulated certain emotional responses.

Mass performances employed the reworking of Christian themes and forms which served the purpose of creating a new 'socialist religion'. Worrall indicates that mass performances were usually called 'action' or 'mysteries' and that 'they recalled the popular spectacles of the Middle Ages and were part of an attempt to return theatre to the public sphere.'<sup>50</sup> These spectacles involved large crowds, chariots and people personifying devils or angels but within a new socialist context. Worrall notes that 'they were often staged according to 'simultaneous staging', or on motorised 'pageant wagons' processing through the city' and that 'they attracted and involved vast crowds who enacted, or saw enacted, in generalised terms the main political themes of the day embodied in the allegorical figures of Labour, the Priesthood, Capital or Revolution'<sup>51</sup> In these revolutionary spectacles, the familiar sacred form was placed in a new context. Artists drew upon the familiar in order to explore the new. The audience knew the old, and not worrying about the performance conventions, they concentrated on its content. As such, the new became part of them.

The presentation of some classical operas also demonstrated alterations of their themes in order to incorporate socialist values. As Geoffrey Norris points out, 'nineteenth-century operas were furnished with new librettos and titles.' The new libretto for *Tosca* performed in 1924 was retitled *The Struggle for the Commune*:

All the names of the characters were changed, as were certain elements which did not conform with Soviet ideology. For example, the Madonna being painted by Angelotti (here called Arlain) became in this new version a fresco glorifying the Commune and the international Red Army.<sup>52</sup>

Meyerhold also took part in this fashion of producing a revolutionized version of classical opera by turning it into contemporary agitprop. In collaboration with his associate Valery Bebutov he directed Wagner's *Rienzi*, engaging a new Bolshevised text, made out of fragments of Bulwer-Lytton's novel. Bartlett notes that there were

two new characters in the story and that the revolutionary content was emphasised. Each role was supposed too be performed by both an actor and a singer, with no specifically designed costumes. Meyerhold also developed mime scenes for the production. There was a concert performance in July 1921 at the Conservatoire's Great Hall, which engaged an orchestra of the Bolshoi Theatre and a military band. Meyerhold's theatre was closed before the production was completed.<sup>53</sup> Thus political commitment blended with experiments that combined opera, mime, a military and a classical orchestra. The doubling of the parts, as in his production of *The Nightingale*, demonstrated a continuity in his artistic development; his experiments with the operatic form now merging with certain socialist values and contents.

The first Soviet play, which was *Mystery Bouffe*, a distorted biblical story of the Ark, similarly participated in the creation of a 'socialist religion' by encompassing metaphors that captured revolutionary ideas. The play anticipates the international proletarian revolution. In the range of happenings invoking and sharing the elements of a mystery play, such as a flood representing the revolution, the 'Unclean', who were the proletariat, eventually succeed in throwing the 'Clean' – the exploiters – overboard. Then 'Simple Man' leads them through hell and a paradise to the Promised Land. The 'mystery' qualities of the play enabled Meyerhold to encompass his ideals of the theatre as a spectacle as opposed to a naturalistic representation and allowed him to introduce a new genre of epic theatre, capable of presenting extreme emotions and events.

If previously Meyerhold's use of theatricality conveyed a certain distance from reality, or a Pierrot-like melancholic glance on life, it now cut incisively through

reality with the belief that it could transform it. The director's artistic credo was voiced in the text of the play. Mayakovsky wrote in the prologue to the play:

We will too show you real life,  
But life  
Transformed into a spectacle most extraordinary.<sup>54</sup>

The role of the theatre was to expose its box-like illusion, to open up and celebrate its theatricality so as to transform life and humanity. In the first version of the play, the prologue ended with actors ripping apart the curtain painted with relics of the old theatre. By consciously abolishing the aesthetics of the old theatre, a new form of theatricality was created, where truth about society was sought. This inviting theatricality, since it addressed its audience directly, created a sense of festivity. The 1921 production particularly conveyed elements of festival and carnival. Braun describes Igor Illinsky's portrayal of the role of the Menshevik:

His figure derived from the traditional red-haired circus clown. His performance set the key for the whole production: an hilarious, dynamic, caricaturist rough-and-tumble, a carnival celebration of victory in the Civil War in total contrast to the still, hieratic solemnity of *The Dawn*.<sup>55</sup>

The image of the Menshevik or petty bourgeois was pertinent since the development of NEP policies. The clown-like figure, brought a carnivalesque element to the production. This was also sustained in the appearance of the famous political clown, Vitaly Lazarenko, who performed dangerous tricks on the trapeze, in the role of one of the devils. If previously the depiction of festive and carnival elements was treated as a far-fetched ideal of life, or conveyed sinister and almost frightening qualities as in the *Masquerade*, now, in the new social context, these forms celebrated life and humanity, a Bolshevik victory in the Civil War. The crossing of styles, such as verse theatre, song, epic, satire, mystery, circus conveyed a sense of an all embracing theatricality – a collective art for everyone.

The privilege that the 'left' avant-garde enjoyed in the early Soviet days was lost when the Civil War ended and the country was bankrupt. The Soviet government was now well established and agitational art was no longer needed. The Moscow Soviet ordered a closure of the R.S.F.S.R. Theatre No.1 in June 1921, arguably because of overspending.<sup>56</sup> Several months later the theatre was forced to close its doors, Meyerhold turned to Studio work and founded a higher institute of theatrical art, which was later renamed GITIS. Mayakovsky in turn established LEF (Left Front of the Arts), which, as Worrall notes, 'reflected a broadly based fusion between the spirit of avant-garde and the revolutionary mood of the time.'<sup>57</sup> LEF generated an original body of theory insisting that artistic forms were vehicles of ideology. The main contribution of LEF was the theory of Social Formalism promoted in magazines. LEF theories emphasised that their work was parallel with and identical to the process of building socialism, whereby a new society required new forms. By looking at and trying to interpret these forms, the spectator was supposed to reach a new level of understanding.

Meyerhold shared LEF ideas about art. LEF theories maintained that an artist is a 'psycho-engineer' or a 'psycho-constructor', an aesthetic not too far removed from Meyerhold's statement in 1920 that 'art should be a production tool, a means of production and a product of production.'<sup>58</sup> Artistic production in that sense involved different stages in its realisation, including a knowledge of the medium of arts' application; the artists were encouraged to go to factories in order to participate in the creation of applied art via machine production. Hence it is clear that the newly developing relationship between art and society was complex, where artists learned



from everyday life at the same time as the public learned from art. This fusion between art and life had a significant effect on the idea of what an artist might mean.

For both Mayakovsky and Meyerhold, to be an artist meant to be a 'fighting citizen'. Both artists were leading agitators, propagandists, seeking to bring the people and art closer together and, by doing this, creating a new poeticised and theatricalised politics. However, merging politics with the expressions of the spirit of avant-garde did not satisfy Lunacharsky. He believed that formalistic experiments widened the gap between theatrical presentation and a mass audience's comprehension of it. These experiments were associated, he claimed, with a bourgeois extension of self-centred individualism and art for art's sake and as such, it undermined the importance of collective experience and understanding. Nevertheless, in 1923, the Meyerhold theatre was founded (TIM), the first theatre to specialise in Soviet plays. During the same year Lunacharsky affirmed the supreme importance of realism and tradition in his slogan 'Back to Ostrovsky'.

Meyerhold promoted the idea of applying the tradition of the national theatre in the broad sense, combined with a radical reform of the staging and actors' art, in the interests of educating as well as appealing to a mass audience. In relation to the question of artistic tradition in 1920 he proclaimed: 'Critical analysis of the past achievements will be at the same time a disclosure of the crumbling forms of the old art aesthetics. Tradition should be understood as a living revelation of the past that is valuable for today.'<sup>59</sup> So following Lunacharsky's criticism, he staged *The Forest* by Ostrovsky in a manner that stripped away any consideration of classical realism. *The Forest* was divided into thirty-three episodes. The creation of a series of vivid

theatrical pieces or 'suites' of contrasting episodes stimulated a dialectical procedure which was intended to unfold new meanings. *The Forest* had full houses; it opened on 19 January 1924 and on the 01 June 1936 it marked 1500 performances. The fragmented representation of tradition effectively redefined the subject it was presenting.

In staging classical works throughout his career, Meyerhold sought to bring out the author's *dusha*. He staged classics where he sought to achieve an aesthetically synthesised atmosphere of the production's historical period. Within that, the historical restriction of censorship would also be considered. In his post-revolutionary work, the concentration on the historical period of the given play and its sociological characteristics, carried new social meanings in relation to the period's radical revision of the past. This reconstruction of the author's work meant, in a sense, a reconstruction of her/his 'freed soul' thus able to communicate to its present audience. If the theatre was supposed to be a 'magnifying glass' held up to reality, for Meyerhold, the realistic representation of classics could not fully explore the subject's dramatic potential. The concept of 'reality', the 'magnifying glass' and the 'freed soul' do not need to be seen as necessarily contentious or in competition. The dramatic tension between the author's individuality and society transformed the tradition according to the needs of a contemporary spectator, whereby the combination of inner and social truth was sought in the form of exaggerated theatricality.

The reforms of artistic tradition were also implemented in new opera – Shostakovich's opera *The Nose*, adopted from Gogol's story of the same name.

Shostakovich wrote the libretto with the help of writers, Yonin, Preis and Zamyatin. The opera concerns Major Kovalyev who finds that his nose has disappeared from his face and has taken up the role of a higher-ranking official – a state councillor. After a series of events, involving the police, a newspaper agency, a doctor and a barber, the Nose finally reappears on Kovalyev's face. Shostakovich completed this satire on bureaucracy during his tenure at the Meyerhold theatre in 1928. It is hard to distinguish Meyerhold's precise influence on the young composer. However, it is important to note that Meyerhold was one of the most prominent figures at the time, and it is hard to imagine that Shostakovich would not have absorbed and understood the principles under which the director was creating. For, indeed, there are parallel questions, such as the inquiry into the language, tradition, purpose and possibilities of music or theatre, both in the composer's music and in Meyerhold's theatre practice.

New opera was inspired by and drew from the new theatre and the latest cultural developments. *The Nose* had its premiere on 17 January 1930 at the Maly Opera Theatre in Leningrad, under the musical direction of Samuel Samosud, but witnessed only sixteen performances. However, the three-act opera, which was scored for chamber orchestra broke with tradition both in musical style and operatic libretto. The score is performed by a much smaller orchestra than in traditional opera and there is a cast of approximately seventy people, with some of the performers only speaking one or two lines. This suggests that the opera participated in the general artistic movement of grand spectacles involving large casts. The musical language absorbs Western influences, such as Berg, as well as Prokofiev and Stravinsky. The pace is hectic; the music is daring, particularly in the moments of total hysteria, such as the scene when the barber's wife squeals histrionically in her uppermost register upon discovering the

Nose at the breakfast table. These novel musical registers reflected the avant-garde's aspiration to establish new forms of expression, which in turn intermingled with certain theories of proletarian culture.

The new opera shared the elements of Meyerhold's theatre practice. Shostakovich broke away from the traditional construction of libretti and operatic music. Sollertinsky suggests that 'so as to present Gogol's story as fully as possible, the authors constructed the libretto on much the same lines as a film script, with many scene changes and sequences.'<sup>60</sup> This reflected the construction of episodic structures in Meyerhold's production of *The Forest*, or in Mayakovsky's dialectical verse. Glikman stresses that Shostakovich was inspired by Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* where the employment of music resembled a theatre symphony. In adapting the text to music the composer was not creating an absolute or pure symphony, but a theatre symphony.<sup>61</sup> The alternating of different episodes, such as the busy crowd scenes as in the newspaper office, with the scenes consisting of few characters as in the Kazan Cathedral, demonstrated a composition constructed under the principles similar to those of Meyerhold's *Government Inspector*. Shostakovich indicated that the libretto was devised 'on the principles of a literary montage.'<sup>62</sup> The composer interspersed his libretto with lines from other classics (eg. *May Night*, *Taras Bul'ba*, *The Brothers Karamazov*) and also added some scenes in order to enhance the opera's theatrical and musical possibilities, as when the Nose is pursued on the outskirts of St Petersburg. The strong theatrical element in the music, as well as the mixture of reality and fantasy brings the opera close to Meyerhold's aesthetics.

The opera subverted the perception of a traditional dramatic structure. For instance, after the ninth scene, the epilogue showed a conversation between Kovalyev and his barber, the scene with which the opera began. Norman Kay stresses that 'as if to undermine the whole sense of sequential time, the epilogue is by no means the end of the work; Shostakovich continues into a tenth scene, again a conversation piece featuring Kovalyev.<sup>63</sup> Thus the opera finale established a whole new set of musical and theatrical possibilities, rejecting the traditional resolution in the finale.

*The Nose* represented a bold step forward in musical language which became appropriated into the conception of Soviet opera. In relation to this Sollertinsky proclaimed:

Shostakovich has offered the most interesting musical experiments, based on rhythm and timbre alone...his heroes don't speak in conventional arias and cantilenas but in living language, setting everyday speech to music.... The opera theatre is at the crossroads. The birth of Soviet opera is not far off.<sup>64</sup>

The symphonic development of the opera as a whole, without numbers or leitmotifs, created a wider sense of continuous fluid music, thereby underlining the piece's sense of organic wholeness. The strong sense of rhythm is conveyed in the composer's percussive writing, which has marked the music of most of his later symphonies. Shostakovich adapted the music to the text in a declamatory and recitative style thus avoiding old, accepted operatic forms. This involved reforms in the art of the opera singers bringing them closer to the art of the actors. Since no melody or recitative was represented, and instead a simple human voice was heard in the merging of the text and music, a more candid operatic acting style was required. This also reflected Meyerhold's reforms in the word and music relationship as well as his enthusiasm for operas, such as Prokofiev's *The Gambler*.

*The Nose* demonstrated a new approach to operatic characterisation. Shostakovich created sharp and grotesque musical studies of characters. For instance, the high shrill voice of the Police officer is particularly hideous. The vocal lines have difficult rhythms and discordant harmonies, perpetuating a variety of psychological angles on the characters' situations. Levon Hakobian indicates that Mosolov's opera, *The Hero*, is 'scored for a small orchestra of the same type as in *The Nose* and it also 'yields to its minor 'cousin' in the sharpness of its musical characterisation.<sup>65</sup> Both composers suggested that the music was not an end in itself, but rather a means of experiencing and presenting the true theatrical nature of the opera. In *The Nose*, the heightened presentation of characters drew directly from the sense of exaggerated theatricality, producing a new perspective on the roles portrayed. Exaggeration is an important characteristic of the grotesque. The giant sneeze that opens the opera, the action being underlined in the score, exaggerates the importance of nasal functions. Here, the theory of the grotesque, as in Meyerhold's theatre, is related to the critique of the character; for indeed, the grotesque is the aesthetics of the extreme, of overstatement and criticism.

During the late 1920s satire was a popular form amongst artists and Gogol's writings became prominent. By now the Soviet political order was well established and increasingly centralized. Various socially committed artists revised their original ideas for celebrating the new society with critical questions about it. In the story of *The Nose*, Gogol mocks the police, newspaper agencies, and various aspects of a society based on different ranks and status. The sharp, witty and iconoclastic musical manner in Shostakovich's *Nose* highlighted the social critique ingrained in the story and

challenged the conventions of opera. As Meyerhold in *The Government Inspector*, so the composer used the elements of a satire to produce a sombre drama. The music is also serious, reflecting the tragedy hidden in the story. Levon Hakobian indicates how this tragedy was related to Soviet reality: 'Shostakovich represented the elemental gnosticism of Soviet man in a disintegrated universe where 'inside' and 'outside' stood in discrepancy to one another.' This polar opposition was conveyed in the music through 'optimistic marches or songs juxtaposed with harsh rhythmic movement and a heavy sense of atonality.'<sup>66</sup> The unusual harmonies and violent dissonances created an ironic questioning of authority devoid of any certainty of definite meanings and interpretation. Shostakovich used all manner of orchestral and vocal devices, where unnerving interludes tend to cut sharply into the music. To quote Geoffrey Norris, 'the predilection for weird instrumental combinations' and unusual intervals between each part, 'the juxtaposition of isolated solo sounds at the extremes of instrumental registers and a complexity of orchestral timbre', create a score that constantly assaults the listeners' ear.<sup>67</sup> As in Meyerhold's theatre, the grotesque pushing of theatricality and musicality to the extreme subverts the usual modes of creation and perception. The exaggerated satirical effects and the created musical distortions in the opera produced a multiplicity of meanings. The political context of *The Nose* was related to the opera's aesthetics, where the musical structure demonstrated a play of contrasts, coded language and subtext.

Towards the end of the 1920s, the satire and aesthetics of the grotesque were not politically favourite modes of artistic representation. Laurel E. Fay indicates the generally unfavorable critical reaction to *The Nose*:

Its failure to communicate as a social satire with roots in Soviet reality, its musically esoteric and iconoclastic style, and its total repudiation of classical

operatic values stood out as damning features. A common denominator in many reviews was the unworthiness of *The Nose* to be considered a 'Soviet' opera at all.<sup>68</sup>

The opera's unusual subject matter, which on the surface did not have anything in common with the Soviet reality, was deeply imbued with social commitment as it showed a perceptive study of bureaucratic repression. Its musical irony further shed a light on the people's characters in relation to their particular social status. It could be argued that it was precisely the social dimension of the opera that communicated to the contemporary society, a society that was being built according to new social and bureaucratic principles. However, the opera was seen to be an example of formalistic tendencies and western decadent influences, which were particularly associated with the avant-garde movement in general. The social change was gradually diminishing the enthusiasm for new forms of expressions, being more in favour of straightforward style and content.

*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, was premiered on 22 January 1934 at the Maly Opera Theatre in Leningrad. In order to make the opera more appropriate to the social requirements of the day, Hakobian indicates that, 'Shostakovich had to garnish the libretto with the motif of struggle against the obsolete bourgeois world.'<sup>69</sup> In 1932, the composer even drew parallels between the opera's libretto and his interest in the destinies of Russian women at various periods of history.<sup>70</sup> The opera showed a sympathy towards the main character, Katarina Izmaylova, even though she is a murderess. The classical dramatic construction, being four acts and nine scenes, was underpinned by harsh musical contrasts and a violent use of rhythm. The production's two-year run was brutally terminated as the opposition to such musical styles intensified. On 28 January 1936 Pravda's article, 'Muddle Instead of Music', attacked



Shostakovich's opera, its 'incomprehensible and depressing' music. This was followed next day with the banning of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*. The article affirmed the supremacy of socialist realism in works of art. However, Hakobian stresses that the opera was for some time praised as a masterpiece of Soviet music and Socialist realism.<sup>71</sup> This suggests that the very notion of socialist realism was not clearly defined, as the opera's new musical language certainly did not relate to the artistic doctrine which was about to prevail.

During the 1930s The Union of Soviet Composers centralised the whole system of artistic activities and intended to abolish the diversity of artistic trends with the aim of achieving homogeneity within the musical art. *Quiet Flows the Don* by Leonid Dzerzhinsky (1909 –1978) had its premiere on the 22 October 1935 at the Maly Opera Theatre in Leningrad. Hakobian writes that *Quiet Flows the Don* came to exemplify the new Soviet criteria for defining opera. The opera is based on the theme of class struggle and contains folkloric music, songs and dances. Hakobian points out that, 'in the official Soviet historiography of music, *Quiet Flows the Don* is referred to as the earliest example of a new genre, the so-called 'song-opera.'<sup>72</sup> This simplistic opera is technically deficient, but it follows a clear melodic and structural line. After seeing the opera on 17 January 1936 Stalin proclaimed: 'The time has come for creating our Soviet classical opera. ...It will largely use the melodic qualities of folk song, will be very approachable and comprehensible in the form.' The next day the content of this speech was published all over the press.<sup>73</sup> It became clear that the new opera, according to the governing official, should be accessible in music and language, far from conveying any technical complexities. The speech affirmed that Soviet opera

should be primarily national in character, as its music was supposed to be drawn from traditional folk melodies.

During this period, Prokofiev's musical language had also become more 'comprehensible' in style. Daniel Jaffe indicates:

In composing *Semyon Kotko*, Prokofiev reverted to the Mussorgskyan style of prosody he had used in *The Gambler*, but now, unlike the earlier work's modernistic style, married his prosody to a more restrained, deliberately accessible musical language. This compromise may have been partly due to political pressure, but Prokofiev was also generally interested in creating a new style of folk opera.<sup>74</sup>

The opera's libretto divided into forty eight short scenes is based on a story written by Valentin Kotayev, *I am the son of the Working people*, and it also involves folk setting and peasant heroes. The story concerns the soldier Semyon Kotko, who returns to Ukraine after the First World War and seeks the hand of Sophia, a daughter of a *kulak*, a rich peasant. He is refused by her father, his cottage is destroyed by the Germans and he flees to form a resistance movement. Jaffe emphasises that Prokofiev wrote the opera for Meyerhold's company without a contract.<sup>75</sup> *Semyon Kotko* opened on 23 June 1940 at the Stanislavsky Opera theatre, but its performances did not achieve noticeable success. One of the reasons for this being that at that time in history, after Stalin-Hitler's agreement on matters of war, German-Russian relations were supposed to be celebrated.

The complex relationship between cultural change and artistic genres was evolving at a dramatically fast pace in relation to the changing political climate. In 1929, Meyerhold was invited to the Bolshoi theatre in the post of artistic consultant. He wanted to stage the Prokofiev ballet, *Le Pas d'acier*, but the members of RAMP were against it because of its apparent anti-Soviet inclinations.<sup>76</sup> By the early 1930s,

RAMP, as well as its literary counterpart RAPP (The association of Proletarian Writers), came to have a dominant position. The supportive approach of the Party in relation to pluralism in art gradually faded with the growth of Stalin's role in the government.

Was Stalin's opinion on the questions of operatic genre, stated in relation to the performance of *Quiet Flows the Don*, the final definition and affirmation of a new Soviet opera? Perhaps in official terms 'yes', but more likely, it stood for only one facet of the whole gamut of values and explorations that the term itself advocated.

Soviet opera and theatre were intended in this period to convey the concept of proletarian culture which inspired and sometimes interlocked with the development of art, as has been discussed at some length in this chapter. The complexities in the notion of proletarian culture resulted in tensions and opposing views between different artistic movements and institutions. It questioned the role of opera in post-revolutionary society. Was Soviet opera supposed merely to endorse political ideals or was it actively required, through critical artistic enquiry, to contribute to the development of the Soviet society? Perhaps, the relative openness in the arts during the early years after the Revolution suggested that opera could play an active part in the creation of a genuine society, where social critique would constructively contribute to the improvement of that society. However, as the censorship on opposing views committed to the creation of a socialist state intensified, so were the restrictions on social thinking and artistic experiment imposed.

The questions that the concept of proletarian culture raised are pertinent even outside the Soviet perspective, insofar as they concern a radical revision of the role, possibilities and significance of the arts and the artist in relation to society in general. The concept, in addition, inspired or provoked a whole range of new genres, which even if taken out of the early Soviet context, stand as valuable artistic creations in their own right, as is the case with Shostakovich's work. Nevertheless, the new culture also supported the works of art, which in broad terms subordinated artistic values in favour of political ideals; as today, supported by sponsorship, these same values yield to the demands of a dominant commercial market.

The experiments into the notion of an operatic language and technique in relation to social change and the concept of proletarian culture, were of greater artistic merit than the 'song-opera' genre of *Quiet Flows the Don*. For instance, the musical style and the subject of *The Nose* reformed the operatic genre in accordance with the latest developments in music as well as producing a certain social resonance. However, unlike *Semyon Kotko*, the opera was not concerned with Soviet characters and settings, good or bad people, neither with portraying revolutions or proletarian aspirations. On the other hand, it could be suggested that Shostakovich's social commitment was demonstrated in his aesthetic treatment of the subject matter, the grotesque element conveyed a certain social critique depicting the sense of 'timeless' and relevant themes in Gogol's classics. Nevertheless, it is difficult to place *The Nose* as an example of Soviet opera because the implication of the term changed as society progressed. Moreover, the difficulty in defining the very concept of Soviet opera also makes this opera a problematic issue in terms of its engagement with proletarian

culture. The ambiguities in the idea of proletarian culture were reflected in the concept of Soviet opera and were part of the general cultural environment.

In the post-revolutionary culture the World of Art's insistence on the synthesis of arts, the enlightening purpose of art and the supreme importance of the artists, were appropriated by the players of history and were transformed by another discourse – the usefulness of art. Meyerhold's early search for a unified theatrical experience found its grounding within the celebratory post-revolutionary mass performances. In this way the pre-Soviet ideas became Soviet and dogmatic in the Soviet institution of the theatre. Meyerhold's work in the theatre exemplified this institution at its best, since his theatre practice fused ideas of social progress with artistic innovation and enquiry. Mass performances celebrated the integration of the arts with the aim of communicating political ideas to its audience. These theatrical events evoked the effect of grand and unifying operatic spectacles. The new purposes of opera, such as the notion of embracing, creating and commemorating a new culture, inevitably stimulated the drive for making this art form more relevant and alive. This also inspired new colours, dynamics and a sense of theatricality in music. The new theatricalised opera, particularly that of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, transformed the art of opera, the reforms of rhythm, structure and language in a way that was similar to Meyerhold's theatrical development. Here the development of Soviet opera and theatre seemed to be drawing from each other, while aiming towards the creation of a single and integrated performance. In this context, Meyerhold's work on the dramatic stage had a significant effect on opera and the development of the period's musical culture.

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## Chapter 6

### Meyerhold's music-theatre and opera, 1922-1930

The reforms in the opera in response to social and cultural change were interwoven with Meyerhold's artistic development. The new music of the period, arising within these reforms in the dramatic theatre, was organically connected to its time. This involved, for example, the development of the actor's technique, biomechanics, and the employment of new stage design, constructivism, in terms of their relationship to music. Meyerhold's work in the dramatic theatre was important for opera, since he aimed to draw on the principles of music, theatricality and stylization in order to create a unified theatrical experience. Dramatic productions, where music and rhythm played a crucial role in the staging, particularly conveyed the director's response to and experience of cultural change. Amongst them were *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *Bubus the Teacher*, *The Government Inspector*, *The Bed Bug* and *Woe from Wit* (retitled in the performance *Woe to Wit*). These productions showed how he had worked with actors, and all the other components of performance to create a dramatic, visual and musical cohesion, which in turn expanded and tested the vocabulary of theatre and music. All this contributed to the musical spirit of the time and significantly influenced his last direction of opera, which was *The Queen of Spades* (1935).

Music was a guiding principle in the staging of most of Meyerhold's post-revolutionary productions. In common with major Soviet theatres, his company had

an in-house orchestra. He emphasised the vital role of music in the dramatic theatre in a speech to his orchestra in 1928:

In our theatre we are planning a whole new program of musical things.... A whole number of composers are writing music for us. When S. Prokofiev attended our performance, he promised to write a special piece for the dramatic theatre...our theatre has a musical accompaniment, and a 'rhythmicalisation' of the spectacle is the basis of our theatre. <sup>1</sup>

The director collaborated with some of the best composers of the day, such as Vissarion Shebalin, Dmitry Shostakovich, Boris Asafiev, Mikhail Gnesin and Sergey Prokofiev. He would often combine well-known scores with new ones commissioned from composers. Braun points out that in rehearsing the music for the production of *The Lady of the Camellias* Meyerhold worked with two resident pianists in order to find the appropriate music for the text: 'Waltzes, polkas, romances and other pieces were culled from the works of Offenbach, Lecocq, Weber, Debussy, Ravel and even such minor composers of the period as Godard, Benjamin and Chaminade.'<sup>2</sup> Having decided upon the music he would then give precise directions to his composer. Thus he wrote to Shebalin:

Act Four begins with music. A can-can (or gallop) begins before the lights come up....The character of this short introduction music should invoke a traditional operetta finale in a scheme such as this: 8 beats: forte: major key; 16 beats: piano: major key; 8 beats: forte: minor key; 8 beats...<sup>3</sup>

Meyerhold's instructions to his composers reflected his clear vision of the desired musical orchestration of a play, as the quotation indicates, down to the detail of exact beats and musical keys required, and of course, including certain operatic principles, as the way in which he referred to the use of the traditional operatic finale. The music in *The Lady of the Camellias* created a strong base for the staging, from which musical-scenic actions arose. Such a musicalisation of the dramatic performance was a constant feature of Meyerhold's theatre.

Meyerhold thus aimed both in his dramatic and operatic theatre to create performances set to music. This interplay between music and staging is vital to an understanding Meyerhold's theatre. It was observed earlier in this thesis that Meyerhold treated the opera as a musical score rather than as a libretto, thereby reversing the accepted manner of staging an opera under the guidance of its text. This innovative approach produced both discoveries and questions in relation to operatic form and the concept of a total work of art. In opera the pre-determined musical element provided the director with a clear vision of the production. However, in the dramatic theatre, the music had to be created, thereby producing fresh theatrical meanings and possibilities; the relationship between music, acting and staging was redefined and further explored.

In Meyerhold's post-revolutionary productions, *The Government Inspector* or *Bubus The Teacher*, music became an integral component of the performance in which it pursued an independent semantic line. It consisted of everything that creates a sound: actors' voices and movements, tapping of feet, squeaking of floor-boards, and so on. All of these sounds and noises were arranged according to a rhythmical, musical and dramatic pattern. For instance, in *Bubus The Teacher* the design contributed to the musical orchestration of the performance. The scenic platform was carpeted so that the actors' movement did not disturb the sound. The bamboos, arranged around the stage area, created their own particular sounds upon the character's entrance or exit. Meyerhold created a sound design, which was another way of producing sound on the stage. This treatment of music and the possibilities of sound transformed not only his theatre, but also influenced the development of classical music and opera. Today it is

quite common to attend a symphony by Schnittke where the pianist plays the piano strings, or the musicians enter the orchestra pit from various entrances in unconventional and designed costumes. This theatricalisation of a concert or opera evolved from the theatricalisation of music rather than from music written for a theatre. The use of unconventional sounds in a musical score, such as the tapping of forks, coincided with the quest of the new proletarian culture to achieve a proletarian sound, which sought to break away from musical composition of form and notes. However, more importantly, this unconventional use contributed to the breaking down of barriers between the arts. The theatricalisation of music, as well as the musicalisation of the theatre, sprang from the theatre of Meyerhold: it transformed the theatre and initiated new integrated genres, while enriching the culture of the period.

By using music in staging plays the director produced a concept of musical dramaturgy; a certain form of theatricality being achieved by establishing a musical structure as a base for the staging. This challenged the limitations of a literary text by creating a theatrical dramaturgy based upon the rules of a musical composition. Musical dramaturgy involved a precise use of musical order between the space and time in performance. The new genres derived from the changing relationship between time and space, thus to a musical dramaturgy created for each performance. For instance, through employing principles of musical dramaturgy in *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold broke up the classical five-act division of the play. Alexei Gvozdev, a leader of Leningrad's school of critics and a keen supporter of Meyerhold's work since 1914, wrote that 'the show was divided into fifteen episodes, each of which became part of a large symphonic suite – a stage symphony of Gogolian themes...The production was, in fact, based on the principles of musical

composition.’<sup>4</sup> The episodic structure, as in Shostakovich’s opera *The Nose*, perpetuated a new sense of theatricality and music. This construction of episodes along musical lines, reformed the notion of time and space, thereby changing the perception and creation of art. In *The Government Inspector*, the director became the author of the production as he searched, through his use of musical dramaturgy and reforms in staging, for new ways of making theatre.

Meyerhold’s work on the stage resembled the art of musical composition. In 1918 in Petrograd he began his ‘Courses of Instruction in the Art of Theatre Production’, where he developed his principles of theatre art. Perhaps, this is why during this period he staged the experimental production of *The Nightingale*, not as a response to social change, but as an important step in exploring the spatial and temporal elements in theatre. In lectures, he pointed out that the art of the director is closely related to the idea of space and time on the stage. In composing a performance the director needs to envisage it in space, as every writer inhabits a different space, different world. This world is transformed in a performance. Therefore, he proclaimed: ‘theatre is an art that is created in time and space; the latter highlights the importance of movement on the stage, next to the word and the sound which are based in time.’<sup>5</sup> In performance, since movement and grouping coexist with the sound, according to Meyerhold, ‘the theatre director should be a ballet master and a musician.’<sup>6</sup> Since movement on stage is set in time, there should be a clear musical order between the two. Thus, as Meyerhold pointed out, ‘the director gives the actors the melody of their words, suggests bars and pauses. In general, he sets the whole staging of the spectacle.’<sup>7</sup> Meyerhold’s productions demonstrated a clear sense of orchestrated composition with its rhythm, pauses, pace, inflections and mood changes. His music created the

performance and coexisted with other artistic disciplines, the acting, design and the staging, which drew from one another, thus creating a new concept of a music-theatre.

Meyerhold was concerned with establishing a distinctive score for a scenic action, a graphic record of a performance as precise as a musical score. Alexander Gladkov indicates that Meyerhold believed that musical terminology was of great benefit because it has a mathematical exactness which is absent in the theatre.<sup>8</sup> Theatre art, unlike a musical composition, does not exist outside its unique scenic reality; it is not noted down with some universally accepted symbols, such as notes in music, and therefore it cannot be reinterpreted by different performers. However, theatre director Valery Fokin, a pupil of Meyerhold's student, Leonid Varpakhovsky, indicates that 'according to Meyerhold, the laws of composing scenic action show a strong affinity with those of composing music.'<sup>9</sup> This claim is born out by Meyerhold's lecture in 1918 when he announced:

We are approaching a moment in theatre history, when theatrical technique is beginning to gel. With that in mind we are beginning to record and analyse in detail, all the movements of performance. Here the musical and lighting scripts will be of special importance. All that together will become an element of a director's guidebook. The creation of special musical signs, upon which Mikhail Gnesin is working, will set down the melody of the actor's word.<sup>10</sup>

In the light of this quotation, it could be suggested that a scenic text is a sum of all performance components, and can still be defined as a score.<sup>11</sup> Throughout his career, Meyerhold elaborated on a program for the study of theatre art. In Petrograd in 1918, he structured a program of 'co-education' for stage designers and directors. Future directors and artist-designers were instructed in stage directing, drawing, model-making, stage engineering, decorative painting, movement and so on. In 1933 he organised a workshop, which aimed to develop a system of recording a performance



in its totality.<sup>12</sup> This establishing of a theatrical technique drew directly from musical terminology and structures. The creation of 'scores for theatre' also aimed at elevating theatre art above the confines of amateurism to the realms of a professional artistic discipline, having a distinctive language code and practice.

A strong sense of rhythm was present in Meyerhold's productions. The basis of stage creations was rhythm and a final product of a performance was a rhythmically organised process. Meyerhold claimed that, since the director is not on the stage as a conductor during the performance, 'there should be in every possible place visible clocks', reminding the actor of the scene's timing.<sup>13</sup> He asserted that the director should build a rhythm of the performance and establish the precise length of its acts, episodes or scenes. The calculated metrical time served the purpose of creating a defined theatrical composition based on the principles of a musical score. Gladkov states that Meyerhold specified that rhythm is knowing how to jump off the metre and jump into the metre: 'The art of a conductor is a rhythmical freedom in the metrical part. The conductor should capture the empty spaces between the rhythms. The director should know this.'<sup>14</sup> Metrical order organises the time on the stage: it underpins the development of the drama and music, which is explored in the rhythm and pauses. According to Meyerhold, a certain rhythmical freedom is associated with an interpretation of an artwork within a set metrical order. Here rhythm can bring a complex system of nuances, riding over the metre.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, in Meyerhold's theatre, the role of the director shares certain principles with the art of the conductor, working within a set musical form, but giving it its own breath, rhythm, colour, tempo and shape – its unique artistic signature.

Thus Meyerhold collaborated with conductors in his dramatic theatre in order to achieve a musical and dramatic coherence of the staging and the score. In a discussion with his orchestra in 1928, in relation to the appointment of the new conductor

I.Nikol'sky, Meyerhold said:

We have to bring our orchestra up to the requisite high level. It is true perhaps that he (Ianitsky – the conductor who is leaving) is a good conductor but in different circumstances; the thing is not to follow strictly what is written in the score. We want the leader of our orchestra to wholly engage with the director's ideas, to be the co-friend of the director. There should be a deep collaboration between them and I did not share the same language with Ianitsky.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that Meyerhold sought in a conductor an active theatrical collaborator rather than a pure musician. As Maia Sitkovetskaia writes, the engagement of the professional conductor, Nikol'sky, followed after Asafiev arranged the score for *Woe from Wit*, which also resulted in the growth in the size of the orchestra. The score was played throughout the production. The pianist behind the stage performed musical pieces, which reflected the character of Chatsky, incorporating rhythmical pauses for his monologues and lines.<sup>17</sup> There was a complex rhythmical amalgamation between music and drama, a unity of the art of actor and musician. In this speech Meyerhold addressed his orchestra as a part of his theatre company – '*nash ansambl*' ('our ensemble'). This suggests that the orchestra was supposed to be an integral part of the theatrical performance; it collaborated with and contributed to its sense of wholeness.

This exercise into the notion of rhythm and music on stage related to the development of the actor's technique. Meyerhold believed that there is an innate rhythm in every human being which is forgotten, but still seen, for instance, in animal movements. In his lectures in Petrograd, he asserted that exploration of the rhythmical movements of the body revitalises its innate nature. In other words, out of this rhythmic exercise the

actors would get in touch with their inner selves. Thus he suggested that the aim of the new theatre was the interrelation of nature and the human body.<sup>18</sup> For example, certain Eastern forms of theatre, such as Balinese rituals and masked drama, are rhythmically and musically organised, exploring the relationship between human being and nature. Here each character is defined by a distinctive rhythm and movement, depended on the development of the drama. The performers are equipped with musical, dancing and dramatic skills. James Symons indicates that as far back as 1909 Meyerhold suggested that 'a new multifarious performer encompassing the characteristics of a dramatic actor, opera singer, gymnast and clown is necessary to come to the fore for a complete synthesis on the stage.'<sup>19</sup> This all encompassing synthesis of different acting genres, based on principles of rhythm, suggested the notion of human rejuvenation.

Meyerhold distinguished two types of musicality in a performance: the staging itself and the melody of the actors' performances. In 1937 he proclaimed: 'I understood what the art of the *mise-en-scène* was when I learned how to harmonise the *mise-en-scène* with the melodic line of the performance or the art of the actor. This is very important. A whole work can be written on that theme.'<sup>20</sup> The harmonising of the two depended upon the created complex unity of oral and spatial rhythms and upon the synchronisation of different musical voices in performances.

The director explored the notion of spatial and oral rhythms in his training of the actor, that is, in biomechanics. There was a direct link between biomechanics and opera since the director aimed at advancing the art of the performer through exploring the possibilities of harmony and musicality on the stage. The relationship between

biomechanics and the constructivist design was also connected to the notion of musical composition, since the visual was closely related to the spatial rhythm and music. These principles of space, composition and rhythm were applied in creating both dramatic and operatic performances, but each genre presented a new set of tasks. Their solution on the stage was different in each form because the elements of the composition were different. In staging *Tristan*, for instance, he explored a slow gesticulation of movement that corresponded to the elements in the score, while in the dramatic production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), which did not have an existing score, biomechanical acting and constructivism demonstrated the emphasis on space, speed and rhythm.

### **Constructivism and Biomechanics**

Constructivism and biomechanics represented movements that were close to the spirit of the left culture. The concept of proletarian culture combined with technological and utilitarian ideas transformed theatrical experiences. After the closure of R.S.F.S.R. Theatre No 1 in 1921, Meyerhold launched the Higher State Workshop for Training Stage Directors in Moscow. On the completion of the training, students were awarded with a Diploma 'Director-Constructor'. In workshops Meyerhold mounted innovative productions and developed biomechanics as a standardised programme for the training of the actor. Its goal was to instruct the new actor in all the essentials of scenic movement. The first year students included S.Eisenstein, I.Ilinisky, V.Zaichikov, M.Zharov, S.Yutkevich, V.Liutse, M.Babanova, D.Orlov, V.Fyodorov, E.Garin and Z.Raikh. These were the actors that realized the director's ideas on the stage, most of them staying with him for years. It was the production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* that presented the new actor and the new constructivist design.

Biomechanics took its base from the music. Meyerhold believed that stage movement, which is an exercise in space, is important as musical movement set in time. The movement to music is the coordination of the self in time and space. He created biomechanical exercises or *études* on music, using mainly pieces by Liszt, Chopin and Rachmaninov. The exercises represented set musical numbers or 'scores for movement' and were usually done in various tempos such as *staccato* and *legato*, and in different rhythms. Erast Garin called them scales for the dramatic actor.<sup>21</sup> These scales developed the actors' physicality and the sense of rhythm and music, which served the purpose of creating the necessary skills in establishing a character. For instance, the changing rhythms in a biomechanical exercise, *Shooting from the Bow*, reflect the changing emotions of the actor carrying out this action: a slow movement corresponds to the act of preparation, followed by an actor running in a circle, which reflects the act of anticipation and possibly a faster heart beat before the execution of the action. This exercise shows how a clear use of rhythm helped the actor in her/his portrayal of the character's state of mind.

In his courses Meyerhold indicated that biomechanics implies 'the nature of biological movements and actions which are determined by the biological construction of the organism'<sup>22</sup> He maintained that regardless of what the person was stimulated by or was thinking, an automatic reflex signifying emotion would be felt throughout the body. It was through this reflex that emotion developed. The thought process of 'intention', 'realisation' and 'reaction' was divided into an equivalent movement, each having its own distinctive rhythm. Here the physical pattern alternated between position – a *raccourci* (*rakurs*) and movement. *Raccourci* holds the

body in the most expressive position in a short period of transition. It is still a dynamic pose since it is a part of the general movement and it is executed with a maximum of restraint (*tormoz*). In other words, in order to draw the arrow one must first find the right position of the body – the *raccourci* for the act of preparation, which would then develop into another pose for the act of execution, and so on. As in certain forms of Eastern theatre tradition, such as Balinese masked drama, even though actors appear to be still, their muscles would still work to hold a certain pose. Thus Meyerhold proclaimed: 'All biomechanics is based on the fact that if the end of the nose works – the whole body works. In the work of the most unimportant organ a whole body works. It is necessary before anything to find the balance of the whole body.'<sup>23</sup> This suggests that biomechanical acting is a constant physical action, its pattern between *raccourci* and movement is constructed rhythmically. In terms of biology, the concept of inner rhythm, as Meyerhold believed, is innate to every human being. Here the notion of a constant action could reflect the sense of being alive. Hence, the importance of concepts of 'reflex excitability' and 'a feeling of happiness' in Meyerhold's acting methodology.<sup>24</sup> In opera, where singers usually learn their parts first as concert soloists, biomechanics would inevitably reassert the importance of scenic action and movement.

The breaking up of the process of thinking, of the physiological state of the character, into a movement equivalent suggested that the body could be objectified and studied. The role was approached from the outside, rather than from internal emotions. The training involved an explicit physical communication of the actors' feelings and thoughts. The elaboration of physical exercises emphasised the actors' outward visualisation of themselves. The exercises served the purpose of developing the

actors' sense of space, balance, gravity and relationship between one another, skills that are not too distant from the qualities of a dancer. It is through achieving the right physical state for each action that 'excitability' would be created, which is the moment when the spectator is drawn onto the stage, into the actor's play. The actors' skills would in turn improve through developing the expressiveness and command of their bodies.

Biomechanics represented a collective theatrical training, a fixed acting genre and partly a contemporary evolution of the *commedia dell'arte*. Its stage devices, such as a leap onto a partner's chest, or coordination between partners in a certain space, are only superficially related to the principles of the *commedia dell'arte*, although these provided a sense of excitement in performance. More importantly, it was the relevant social resonance that both genres produced. *Commedia* roles were strongly based upon the social structures and characters of its time, such as the archetypal parts of servants, masters or travellers. Robert Leach indicates that the Meyerhold Workshop in 1922 published seventeen set roles for the actor, such as The Hero, The Lover and The Mischief maker.<sup>25</sup> He further points out: 'This was certainly how the actors approached their roles in *Magnanimous Cuckold*, beginning from a 'set type': Bruno – simpleton, Stella – young girl in love, Estrugo – fool, Count – fop, and so on.'<sup>26</sup> The highly typified and theatricalised nature of these parts created a social commentary in the performance. As Bolislav Rostotsky indicates, 'instead of showing psychological characters, Meyerhold at this time sought to reveal typical psychological traits as a sharp and effective method of social exposure.'<sup>27</sup> His early romantic engagement with the aesthetics of *commedia* was now, in the new context, transformed closer to the

form's original spirit, insofar as actors were supposed to exhibit the social traits of their characters.

In this way, biomechanics blended Meyerhold's pre-revolutionary aesthetics with the new Soviet ideology. The name itself advocated a belief in technology and science, in parallel with LEF's artistic manifesto. By exploring the mechanics of the human body, its impulses and rhythms, bio-mechanics suggested that nature and the machine could be united. The blend between the pre-modern and contemporary forms of expression was evident in biomechanical exercises, such as *Shooting from the Bow* or *The Stab with the Dagger*, which treated pre-modern subjects in such a manner that conveyed a certain excitement regarding urban and industrial society. Here, Meyerhold wanted to find the human being's inner rhythm and relate it to modern experiences.

The sense of unity on the stage and the new ways of character representation captured certain social aspirations. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold* the group's unison of movement suggested that the body of the proletariat ceased to be individualized, but became a part of the collective machine, of a collective action. Gvozdev named his review of the production 'Il-Ba-Zai', as a response to the unity of scenic-musical composition, particularly in the coordination between leads – Ilinsky, Babanova and Zaichikov. So he wrote:

The impetuosity and flexibility of Ilinsky finds its continuation in the exceptional rhythmicity and musicality of Babanova, and Zaichikov gives them that accompaniment with a precisely fixed gesticulation. Like a chorus in Greek tragedy, he follows and explains in his pantomime everything that seizes his partners in their passionate exchange.<sup>28</sup>



The play between partners demonstrated an organic growth of characterisation in relation to one another. The musicality and the general rhythm of movement (mainly presto) was set in the counterpoint to actors' individual rhythms in accordance with the role they were playing. A precise rhythmical drawing of pantomimes and characterisation, the impetuosity of musical development in the staging, starting from Babanova's scherzo or a dance-like entrance, underlined the sense of excitement in this collective creation. Actors stripped of any make-up and individualised costumes for each character, exposed their need of an acting technique, since vocal and physical elements were their only tools in creating characters. Their overalls – *prozodezhda*, designed by Lyubov Popova replaced the old scenic costume and displayed the same gray workman's shirt on each actor, further emphasising the unity of the ensemble. *Prozodezhda* supplied a uniform for the professional actor. The focus on actors' training coincided with the Soviet belief in the role of education in abolishing social inequality, while the representation of equals in a crowd also suggested this break up of class divisions.

The politics of the body as seen on the stage related directly to Meyerhold's experiments into the mechanics of the body, which served the purpose of increasing its functionality, and its applicability to a given role. This approach to acting corresponded to a theory of an American engineer, Frederick Winslow Taylor, who insisted that the factory workers should obtain the most economic and mechanized movements in order to enhance their productivity. Taylor's theory also coincided with Meyerhold's aim to develop a conscious art of the actor. Biomechanics trained the physical and mental agility of the actor, since both the physical and thought process were related in it. In an interview in 1932 Meyerhold said:

**We train not only the physiology but also the brain, and this is not just a simple training, but a training in accordance with a particular conception, from the point of the view of dialectics...Actor for us is a an actor-thinker, an actor-tribune, knowing well the whole political situation.<sup>29</sup>**

**Actors were supposed to interpret their parts in accordance with particular intellectual tasks and aims, (for example, 'This is my attitude towards this part'). The period's concern with the increase of human potential was thus reflected in both the physical and intellectual aspect of Meyerhold's acting methodology. Hence, the vital role of the actor in a socialist society, a workman capable of transforming the human body and elevating its thoughts to new heights, contributing to the building of the socialist state in the interest of the collective.**

**The insistence on the actor's physical training coincided with the Soviet drive for physical culture. Physical education was an important part of Soviet life during the 1920s. Edmunds indicates that, 'the government advocated participation in mass exercise programs in order to help keep fitness levels high and instill a collective spirit.'<sup>30</sup> This focus on the body showed a great belief in the potential of the body. By encouraging the development of physical stamina and a militant, collective zeal, Soviet politics aimed to tune the body and therefore the mind to a communal way of thinking and acting, by embracing a particular attitude towards life and developing an active and shared way of behaving. Even though there were disputes regarding the style of movement in theatre, for instance, Lunacharsky was in favour of realism while Meyerhold and the Prolekult promoted the idea of a new physical language, these experiments in movement metaphorically encapsulated the quest for the creation of an ideal socialist human being.**

The link between biomechanics, speech and meaning was a complex one since, for Meyerhold, words on the stage were to integrate the musical elements with the sense. It was only after the movement or the reflex was experienced that the actor's words would follow. These words were then supposed to be integrated rhythmically into a performance. In biomechanics, Leach indicates, 'speech becomes less a tool for psychological characterisation and more an element in the rhythmic texture of the scene.'<sup>31</sup> In becoming a rhythmic part of the performance, speech did not necessarily lose its meaning. Rather, it created a new meaning through its rhythmical or musical relationship to other stage devices. For example, when directing Fadeev in the role of Osip in *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold suggested that the swear words should be pronounced with rapid diction and with a play on a clear articulation of consonants... 'shooting through the music...'<sup>32</sup> The fast flow of accentuated consonants related to the anger felt by the character and was orchestrated according to the general music of the play. In this way, the meaning was sustained in the relationship between the effect of speech, music and rhythm.

The new technique of character representation produced a new perspective on the human being itself. Meyerhold employed difficult rhythms and dissonant harmonies on his stage, as Shostakovich had done in *The Nose*. For example, an actor could create several rhythms in a performance which did not coordinate. Robert Leach describes how the actor Nikolai Okhlopkov in *Objective: Europe* (1924) 'acted in different rhythms with different parts of the body, showing jerky hand rhythms contradicted by languid leg movements or a foot tapping swiftly against a slowly drawled speech.'<sup>33</sup> This discordant music, based on complex metrics and independent rhythms, challenged the conventional unity between performance elements. The

method of distorting the relationship between different elements of performance, as well as Meyerhold's use of estrangement effect, would be later adopted by Brecht. Janne Risum points out that, 'Brecht is to adopt such key devices of Meyerhold's biomechanics as raccourci, self-mirroring, and separation of gesture and facial expression by using the face as neutral mask.'<sup>34</sup> Here the dialectical relationship between the physical and the literal and between different rhythms and melodies caused an estrangement from the traditional presentational manner of the performer. As in Picasso's cubist paintings, different aspects of the object were seen simultaneously, unlike in everyday life. The difference being, that in a live performance, this method was actualized by the live body of the performer, who stood in close immediacy to the spectator. The uncoordinated relationship between rhythms, sounds, gestures, movements and facial expression, between spatial and musical presentation in artistic expression, attacked preconceived and fixed conceptions about the human being, revealing a dynamic and inconstant phenomena. Actors demonstrated a dismantling of the human body and its consciousness, creating a multiplicity of meanings in performance.

This unparalleled interplay between various performative elements, which was particularly close to the aesthetics of the left avant-garde, blended with the contemporary conception of a proletarian culture; the dialectical treatment aimed to perpetuate an objective perspective on the subject presented. In the staging of most of his post-revolutionary productions, Meyerhold achieved a sense of intensified or clustered dialectics, a breaking up and decoding of the play, as in his production of *The Forest* in 1924. A play of these clusters actualized in a densely structured composition, was explored across a whole range of artistic forms, such as film, theatre

and music. For instance, Eisenstein showed the principles of organised art in his 'montage of attractions', which showed a rhythmical juxtaposition of different shots – images so as to unfold a variety of meanings. Leach suggests that Andrei Bely, after teaching poetry for a year in the Meyerhold Workshop, wrote in his 1929 essay 'Rhythm as Dialectic' in which the equivalent of Meyerhold's ideas of 'reject' and 'negate' are interpreted as a contradiction or antithesis in the flow of movement, and are thus inherently dialectical.<sup>35</sup> This dialectical approach to art was part of the general cultural environment, which sought to define a whole new range of artistic principles and devices. At its core was an emphasis on rhythm.

Meyerhold's rhythms jangled and disoriented its spectators. The constructivist set design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* showed a three-dimensional stage area and created a rich variety of spatial rhythms for the actors' to use: the stage design consisted of different constructed levels and angles and supported the unexpected changes of rhythm and tempo in performance. This new stage design offered possibilities for deconstructing the action on multiple sites, where mass scenes in particular showed a great exercise in dynamics.

The ideological implications of a constructivist stage design blended with the development of the actors' art. The actualisation of movement and expression coincided with the constructivist ideal of the actualisation of the material by which artistic construction was created through the most economical and explicit means. Popova's design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* represented a 'machine for acting', in relation to which Meyerhold announced:

In the past the actor always conformed to the society for which his art was intended. In future the actor must go even further in relating his technique to

the industrial situation. For he will be working in a society where labour is no longer regarded as a curse but as a joyful, vital necessity. In this condition of ideal labour art clearly requires a new foundation.<sup>36</sup>

For Meyerhold, theatre was supposed to be transformed by the same factors that were meant to guide the rest of Soviet life, as love of work and active life. The production showed a bare wooden set which stood alone on an otherwise bare stage. The set was stripped of all the usual stage equipment, where the removal of any decorative characteristics suggested the notion of liberated labour.<sup>37</sup> Mikhailova points out that, 'Meyerhold believed that productions can be reduced to the degree of minimalism that would enable actors to go out into the street and perform with no dependence on the scenery and accessories of a theatre stage'<sup>38</sup> The poetry of machinery met the ideal of street theatre, a supra-theatrical production removed from the proscenium arch to any place. It celebrated the technical revolution's shift away from mysticism in art, suggesting that the rational and objective approach to life and art would improve the world and humanity.

New art was professionalised by new schools. Vkhutemas (1920-1930), the Higher State Art Training Centre, came into existence after 1917. This was probably the most advanced art college in the world at that time and the ideological centre of Russian constructivism. Most of the prominent artists of the avant-garde movement taught or gave lectures at Vkhutemas. In his post revolutionary performances most of the designers Meyerhold worked with came out of Vkhutemas or taught at this institution. Thus his theatre was changed with the development of art movements. The director moved away from the aesthetics of the World of Art, that is the group's emphasis on particular type of aesthetic beauty, for indeed, Meyerhold after 1918 never collaborated with Golovin again.

The union between technology and art, or between technique and spontaneity, brought a whole new way of looking at artistic creations. Mishel Pavlovski indicates that the shift in the perception of art is seen in the poster for Meyerhold's productions of *The Death of Tarelkin* (1922) which proclaims: 'The theatre of GITIS is showing a new production work by V. Meyerhold.'<sup>39</sup> Theatre became viewed as a production art, an actor as a workman or professional, hence the new name for a performance that is, production.

The collision between art and technology created new possibilities in the making of sound, therefore music. Biomechanics and constructivism explored the potential of mechanical sound with emphasis on rhythm and the interplay of various rhythms. This music, in turn, influenced the course of Meyerhold's theatre practice. For example, his description of the final scene of *The Government Inspector* clearly illustrates this:

A projection on a stage screen will announce: *Arrived from St Petersburg, the inspector needs to see all of you right now. He is staying at the hotel.* The flow of the text will be like this; some letters will come out slowly, others fast. Here a strong rhythm is necessary. It will be like on the piano – a certain correspondence between the showing up of letters and the knocks on some wooden keyboards. And this will be the anticipation; the anticipation of the arrival – like the knocking on wooden hammers...this is how we are going to show the text, by knocking.<sup>40</sup>

Meyerhold built up the climax of the closing scene by highlighting its changing rhythm. The reference to the piano and its knocking possibilities is interesting since contemporary music, as exemplified by Stravinsky's scores, more and more explored the instrument's percussive, therefore rhythmical, elements. This emphasis on rhythm, interspersed with technical ideas, related to the artistic quest into the sense of art's origin, blending spiritual-ritualistic with industrial-urban feeling.

### **Music-theatre genres – Production opuses**

In the immediate years following the Revolution, there was a strong emphasis on words, or poeticized politics, as in *Mystery Bouffe*, which bred a new sense of rhythmic and conversational musicality. The focus on the poster, rather than on traditional forms of visual art, reflected a belief in mass production and technology, introducing new concepts of colour and space, a new type of visual music. Meyerhold's formulation of his conception of Theatrical October in *The Dawn* and *Mystery Bouffe*, was followed by his engagement with biomechanics and constructivism, which demonstrated a great exercise in rhythm and in a spare design. In turn, his production of *Bubus The Teacher* premiered on 29 January 1925 marked a turning point in his extensive use of music on stage and return to vivid make up and costumes on stage.

Meyerhold's positive enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause was not always in line with Soviet policy. Lunacharsky, for instance, dismissed the subject matter of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, which concerns the jealous husband challenging his wife Stella to sleep with every man in the village. He believed that the production was a cheap entertainment and irrelevant to the needs of Soviet society.<sup>41</sup> However, the cultural views of Bolshevik leaders were not always consistent. Leon Trotsky, contrary to Lunacharsky, Lenin and Stalin, supported elements of LEF's aesthetics, believing that futurism and new forms in art were an important part of the new culture. In defense of the left avant-garde, Trotsky wrote in 1923 that futurism played a crucial role in the creation of new culture, 'influencing directly or indirectly all of contemporary poetry', and as far as Meyerhold's acting school is concerned, he



indicated that the director tried to 'draw from the future that, which can be developed as its inseparable part.'<sup>42</sup> Trotsky encouraged the left avant-garde, which he saw as a constructive influence on Soviet culture and attitudes. As Lenin became ill in 1922, he retired from his position as the Head of the Soviet Government. Stalin became Secretary General on 22 April 1922. Lenin died on January 1924 and the tension between two Soviet leaders, Stalin and Trotsky, intensified, with Stalin eventually gaining full control over the Soviet Union.

In *Bubus The Teacher*, later retitled *Bubus*, Meyerhold introduced slower tempos in his theatre in comparison to the fast-paced productions of his early post-revolutionary period. Nikolai Pesochinsky rightly states that, as of 1925, Meyerhold returned the tragic pattern to his theatre: 'anxiety began to fill the stage, the theme of the fall of European culture returned.... Everyone spoke about the revival of *Masquerade* and *The Fairground Booth*.'<sup>43</sup> The emphasis on speed, rhythm, construction and excitement was being replaced by melody and the introduction of tragic elements, such as the theme of the destruction of idealism explored in *Woe to Wit* (1927), or the apocalyptic visions of *The Government Inspector* (1926). Judging from his staging of these classics, it seemed that the director was more concerned with a general notion of humanity rather than purely that of the class struggle. It is hard to prove, but we can assume by the way it all developed that there was probably a certain disappointment on the director's part.

From his staging of *Bubus*, Meyerhold started to define and differentiate the generic register of his productions by their analogy to music. For instance, the production of *The Second Army Commander* by Selvinsky in 1929, in Pavel Markov's words,

'represented an attempt to create a monumental musical tragedy.'<sup>44</sup> The production presented the genre of Soviet tragedy; the performance depicted the Civil War, a sense of a heroic setting designed by Sergei Vakhtangov, and a declamatory style underlined by Vissarion Shebalin's score. The stage design demonstrated a full use of the forestage and the acting style sustained the heroic elements of war. Braun notes that Shebalin's score 'kept a strict regard for the metre of Selvinsky's text and created what was virtually a dramatic oratorio.' The reviewers 'singled out the account of the Battle of Beloyarsk by a narrator with a refrain in mazurka time chanted by the entire company of fifty using megaphones, like the masks in Greek tragedy, to amplify their voices to awesome power.'<sup>45</sup> Songs, chants, musical accompaniment to the spoken text and action, all these forms of music, brought operatic elements into the theatre, particularly in sustaining a sense of a grand spectacle. Being true to his earlier interest in extreme genres, the director also created musical satires, *The Bed Bug* and *The Bath House*. So it is of no surprise that Meyerhold described his productions as opuses.<sup>46</sup> This meant that each production corresponded to a unique musical composition and was defined in musical terms.

The genre of *Bubus* was described by the author of the production as 'a comedy set to music.'<sup>47</sup> The play, written by Alexei Faiko, concerns the life of a teacher Bubus, who after being involved in the workers' demonstration becomes terribly frightened. He is invited to be in the government, but, being a coward, is totally unsuited and not useful to the ruling class. Once the Revolution arrives, the new social order also does not need him. The clear story line with its vaudeville elements enabled the director to experiment with the nature of theatrical representation and story telling. Rudnitsky suggests that the production represented a light genre: the roles did not require a

concrete individualization, but rather they easily adapted to various social archetypes – masks, such as ‘the capitalist’, ‘the baron’ or ‘the liberal’.<sup>48</sup> The music enhanced the presentation of social masks. As Meyerhold suggested, ‘the music is a type of a co-construction, making it possible to represent the social masks more clearly and sharply.’<sup>49</sup> The pianist, Lev Arnshtam, was raised up and placed at the centre upstage, performing numerous pieces by Chopin and Liszt. The periodic jazz numbers, played by Valentin Parnakh’s jazz band, would interrupt the piano music.<sup>50</sup> The extensive use of melodies distorted the notion of salon music, so as to achieve an ironic depiction of the bourgeois past. The constant presence of music served the purpose of developing and enhancing dramatic themes, of evoking an associative response in the audience. Hence, the generic definition of the play – a comedy set to music (*komedija na muzyke*).

The social qualities of the play were further explored in Meyerhold’s conception of pre-acting (*predygra*). He described the function of this form of acting:

Pre-acting is a weapon for the actor-tribune: it is a device of the agit-theatre! Through the help of pre-acting, the actor wants to convey to the spectator his own attitude and relationship towards the happenings on the stage, wants to make the spectator see the happening in a certain way.<sup>51</sup>

Pre-acting involved the actors’ stylised anticipation of an action. It required them to establish a physical representation and attitude towards speaking the line. This opening up of the actor’s thought process challenged the notion of theatrical illusion. Pre-acting produced a commentary in performance, which was supposed to shed a new light on the meaning of the line. The stripping away of the social masks, of the bourgeois ‘decadent’ class, enabled the director to experiment with the social causes

and effects of the characters' behaviour. Thus Lunacharsky, after seeing the production, suggested that Meyerhold developed a form of sociomechanics.<sup>52</sup>

The score created a frame for the staging of the performance. Alison Comins-Richmond analyses the influence of Kabuki aesthetics on the production, particularly since in this form the music is an integral part of the performance, supporting, strengthening, commenting on the situation, and providing rhythmic as well as melodic emphasis. She describes how Meyerhold incorporated the piano music into the staging to guide the audience's attention:

Meyerhold instructed Arnstam to hyperbolise the musical dynamics of the pieces played, i.e. making the piano extremely quiet and the forte extremely loud. The actors were instructed to take their cue, that is, to tailor their emotional intensity to the dynamics of the music. Thus, the piano would affect both the actors' performance and the audience's response...

This suggests that the music instigated the emotional intensity of a scene, where action was built as if coming out of the score. In Kabuki the leader of the orchestra helps the actors to build up their actions and the moments of climax. In *Bubus*, music similarly guided the execution of the action. Another parallel with the Kabuki style of performance could be drawn in the symbolic function of the properties on the set. As Comins-Richmond indicates: 'a luxurious green carpet with warm pomegranate-red edging spread across the entire stage was used to represent the decadent culture of Europe in decline.'<sup>54</sup> Meyerhold also deliberately used costumes, such as tuxedos, evening gowns or jewellery, to signify the social status of characters. The rattling of the bamboos produced a similar effect to the entrances of Kabuki characters, as Comins-Richmond describes, when the 'screeching of the rings on the rod tells the audience that someone of importance is about to emerge.'<sup>55</sup> These conventions of the

Kabuki theatre influenced Meyerhold's use of sound, which not only added to the impact of the drama, but was also an important form of stage action.

Pre-acting as well as continuous use of music throughout the production enabled Meyerhold to create forms of expression without dependence on the word, and so further explore the use of pause and mime. Pre-acting and music presented the actor's state of mind before the utterance of words. The words then had to be integrated into the style of performance. Boris Zakhava, an actor who took part in this production recalls: 'the word material of the play in a way became a sort of a recitative and the movement of the actors strongly depended upon the musical rhythm.'<sup>56</sup> Meyerhold created a distinct rhythmical and melodic relationship between speech and movement. The stylised interpretation of the actor's speech alienated the literal and realistic representation of the word-sense.

In Meyerhold's theatre, particularly since *Bubus*, the notion of finding a character was related to the musical characterisation of each role. In *Bubus*, each character was identified with a distinctive rhythm and tempo. The actors were supposed to feel their characters' 'rhythmical wave' in relation to the overall rhythm of the production. For example, Garin recalled the first appearance of Valentin, followed by the entrance of Baron Feverari, to the music of the fifth étude by Chopin, which allowed various possibilities in rhythmical characterisation.<sup>57</sup> Chopin's score provided the actors with a precise metrical and melodic base for voicing the dialogue on different rhythmical and tonal levels. Here the music provided the necessary thread for the action.

The interplay between the overall music and each character was crucial in determining the genre of a performance. The main theme of the production was realised in a leitmotif, and all the other themes were related to it. Such musically defined performance offered new possibilities for building the action in relation to leitmotifs, themes and their variations, rather than upon happenings and characters. Meyerhold employed principles in the staging which he earlier explored on his operatic stage. The director attained a musical form in the staging of leitmotifs and connecting passages, thus mounting a theatrical symphony in a true Wagnerian tradition.

The production did not achieve great success partly because its overt experimentations did not capture the audience's imagination. The notion of pre-acting prolonged the play's action. The use of jazz music was also unpopular with RAMP followers. Moreover, the production provoked the Soviet authorities, in that the director used a screen suspended over both sides of the stage, where Lenin's citation was occasionally flashed and ironically integrated into the action of the drama.

Comis-Richmond describes this:

In Act II the Minister of Fine Arts and the Minister Without Portfolio (*bez portfelia*) are discussing latter's lack of an official area of specialization. He briefly expounds his views on the interrelation of politics and art. As one would expect he shows himself to be an utter fool. The following citation flashed: 'Only a parliamentarian cretin could have said such nonsense' Using Lenin in this manner was clearly not acceptable. The theatre received secret notification from the Moscow Department of Public Education dated February 25, 1925 and soon after opening, Meyerhold was forced to remove his politically suspect commentary as well as the make-up for the Minister of Fine Arts.<sup>58</sup>

As this quote shows, Lenin's citation was used to provide a cynical and wry commentary in the performance. The satirical effect between the happenings on the

stage and Lenin's utterances was not a politically favourable mode of artistic representation. Nevertheless, this experimentation with the social possibilities of theatrical representation and acting was closely interwoven with, and to a certain extent dependant upon, the musical qualities of the production. *Bubus* marked an important move towards staging to music, towards developing musicality in every component of a performance and the unity of the overall composition. The production also showed how in response to cultural change, new artistic forms were created, where the earlier positive attempt to create a culture of the proletariat was replaced with a more complex representation. Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* would further explore this, blending his artistic principles with his own social commentary.

*The Government Inspector (Revizor)*, premiered on 09 December 1926, after over a year of preparation, is one of Meyerhold's most acclaimed works. The play, written by Gogol in 1836, concerns the arrival of the young civil servant, Khlestakov, in a Russian provincial town, in which the whole system is corrupt. Having mistaken him for the government inspector, the local officials proffer various bribes, the Town Mayor even offering his daughter's hand to the stranger. At the end of the play, Khlestakov's true identity is revealed and the real inspector arrives.

The subject of Gogol's farce on Russian bureaucracy appealed to Meyerhold, particularly since the unstable political climate raised questions about Russia's fate and its place in the world. The year 1925 was a turning point in Soviet history. At the fourteenth Party conference in April 1925, Stalin announced his famous slogan 'Socialism in One Country', while during the same year Trotsky was removed as war

commissar. Rudnitsky states that the theatrical year of 1926 was marked by productions concerning Russian history, destiny and Revolution.<sup>59</sup> In that year, the party struggles intensified and Stalin's vision of 'Socialism in One Country', aided by the failure of the German Revolution in 1923 and the breakdown of the English general strike in 1926, gained the upper hand over Trotsky's internationalism and his belief in the permanent revolution that would unite the whole of humanity. Old 'patriotism' was re-introduced. Against this political background the Russian question became an important subject for the arts again. Meyerhold claimed that the social purpose of his production was to improve the health of the Soviet corpus.<sup>60</sup> The 'cure' for this illness would be found in his commentary on Gogol's Russia. The answers were once again sought within the golden period of Russian culture.

Meyerhold interpreted the play through entering the writer's world. He studied different versions of the play and the writer's comments on acting styles and staging, and eventually produced his own version of it. In seeking to bring out his interpretation of Gogol's world, he added lines and characters from other stories, particularly from *Dead Souls*, thereby re-emphasising certain themes in the writer's work. The starting point for the staging was Pushkin's comment on reading *Dead Souls*: 'God, what a sad place is our Russia!'<sup>61</sup> This resulted in transforming the traditional vaudeville style of the play's performance into a tragi-comedy. His aim was to produce tears through laughter. Both Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector* as well as Shostakovich's *The Nose* highlighted the tragic qualities in Gogol's writing.

The musical direction of *The Government Inspector* was entrusted to Meyerhold's old-time collaborator Mikhail Gnesin. This was an opportunity for both artists to



further pursue their quest into the relationship of music and the word, and the dramatic possibilities of this interaction. It is also no surprise that Meyerhold had a clear idea of the music he wanted to use in the performance. Sitkovetskaia writes that Gnesin confirmed that the music in the first two acts of the production was chosen by Meyerhold, while his composition for the last act was based upon Meyerhold's wish for wedding music played by a small Jewish orchestra.<sup>62</sup> The director insisted upon a Jewish Orchestra because, according to him, in Penza there were always Jewish bands playing at weddings.<sup>63</sup> The production incorporated a compilation of classical numbers, particularly romances by Glinka and Dargomyzhsky, as well as Gnesin's music. The use of quadrilles of the 1830s and 1840s referred to the historical period of the production, the age of Nicholas I during which Gogol had worked.

The design of the play also helped to create the atmosphere of the period. Rudnitsky notes that, although Gogol's play is set in a provincial Russian town, Meyerhold's design displayed the 'shining capital of the Empire' with all its characteristic décor.<sup>64</sup> The Empire style was evoked in the oval mahogany screen around the stage area, furniture and characters' costumes. The screen had eleven doors, offering practical possibilities for innovative staging. For example, the episode 'The Bribes' brought together all the play's bribes in a single event. Here, as Braun writes, Khlestakov sat while 'eleven hands, seemingly conjured up by his drunken imagination, materialized simultaneously from eleven doors and apprehensively tendered eleven wads of banknotes which Khlestakov pocketed with the mechanical gestures of a clockwork doll.'<sup>65</sup> In a rhythmical and automatic manner Khlestakov passed each door, repeating the same words when collecting his bribes. This wide use of space was in contrast to Meyerhold's device of moveable trucks, which advanced towards the audience

carrying a frozen image of the following episode, the setting resembling a period painting. After a pause this tableau came to life. The reduced space on the truck compressing both action and time, the dense grouping of actors and furniture, all produced a sense of a stifling atmosphere of the period. By highlighting the aspects of the Empire style, Meyerhold intensified the tragic elements in the production; as in his earlier production of *Masquerade*, the glamour and beauty of Imperial Russia was accompanied by a sense of its hypocrisy and corruption.

Meyerhold aimed to penetrate the Gogolian world by exploring theatricality and musicality rather than meditating on literature alone. Emmanuel Kaplan's description of the opening of the first episode clearly illustrates this:

Somewhere, slow quiet music begins to play. In the centre of the stage massive doors swing silently open of their own accord and a platform moves slowly forward towards the spectator: out of the gloom, out of the distance, out of the past – one senses this immediately, because it is contained in the music. The music swells and comes nearer, then suddenly on an abrupt chord-sforzando – the platform is flooded with light in unison with the music. On the platform stand a table and a few chairs; candles burn; officials sit. The audience seems to crane forward towards the dark and gloomy age of Nicholas in order to see better what it was like in those days... There they sit, wreathed in a haze with only the shadows of their pipes flickering on their faces; and the music plays on, slower and quieter as though flickering too, bearing them away from us, further and further into the irretrievable 'then'. A pause – fermata. And then a voice: 'Gentlemen, I have invited you here to give you some most unpleasant news...' – like Rossini in the Act One *stretta* with Doctor Bartholo and Don Basilio, only there the tempo is *presto*, whilst here it is very slow. Then suddenly, as though on a word of command, at a stroke of the conductor's baton, everyone stirs in agitation, pipes jump from lips, fist clench, heads swivel. The last syllable of 'revizor' (inspector) seems to tweak everybody. Now the word is hissed in a whisper: the whole word by some, just the consonants by others, and somewhere even a softly rolled 'r'. The word 'revizor' is divided musically into every conceivable intonation. The ensemble of suddenly startled officials blows up and dies away like a squall. Everyone freezes and falls silent; the guilty conscience rises in alarm, then hides its poisonous head again, like a serpent lying motionless and saving its deadly venom.<sup>66</sup>

The passage shows that the setting, light, actors' voices, movement and action were not just in accord with the general atmospheric effect of the music, but depended upon it in order to sustain the dramatic thought in the performance. By employing the rules of musical composition, Meyerhold composed the score for lighting on the same principle as that of sound and demonstrated its own organic rhythm. The staging of the actors' reaction in response to the word 'Inspector' showed the precise timing of their words, actions and movement. By building the spectacle on the principles of musical composition, Meyerhold in *The Government Inspector* created a total work of art, a unity of all its artistic elements.

Meyerhold defined *The Government Inspector* as musical realism. As Rudnitsky points out, he stressed that the production was a contemporary play staged in terms of realism, or to be more precise, to use the director's words, the play was staged in relation to the principles of a 'musical realism'.<sup>67</sup> The addition of silent characters, such as the Officer in Transit, might have enhanced the realistic qualities of the production as they provided the speaking actors with a partner, particularly during long monologues. However, it was through constructing a musical dramaturgy along episodic lines that Meyerhold approached his own conception of realism, his reading of Gogol, that is his creation of musical realism on the stage. The musical dramaturgy was supposed to reveal a deeper sense of Gogol's world and the play's social reality.

Musical realism determined the flow and the genre of the performance, which once again was built according to leitmotifs, connecting passages and their variations. Meyerhold divided the fifteen episodes into accentuated (*udarnie*) and non-accentuated (*perekhodnie*) each having a distinct musicality and providing a strong

sense of a rhythm and tempo in the overall scenic construction of the production. The non-accentuated episodes bridged the accentuated scenes. For instance, the slow episode 'Dreams about St Petersburg' showed the Town Mayor and Anna Andreyevna indulging in the dream of their daughter marrying Khlestakov. This was followed by the accentuated episode 'A Fine Celebration!', where the crowded scene was full of orchestrated voices, coughs and music. Gvozdev pointed out that every episode is a part of a scenic-musical happenings, gradually developing from comedy towards tragedy, and conveying in its totality a tragic-comic theatrical symphony.<sup>68</sup> Thus the director's sense of Gogol's tone, that is his perception of the music conveyed in the subtext of the writer's work, provided the base for the staging from each other musical lines grew. Each scene, every character and happening, was directed in relation to the musicality of the whole piece.

Meyerhold aimed to convey the musical structure of the text, which was further supposed to reveal Gogol's tone to the audience. As Rudnitsky suggests 'the director was reading rhythmically and musically the destiny of every character in relation to his feeling for the Gogolian rhythm, or Gogolian 'nerve'.<sup>69</sup> In rehearsals he repeatedly claimed that the most important thing is to feel the tempo. He insisted that the actors read their parts metrically, in soft voices in order to feel the tempo.<sup>70</sup> This corresponds to the technique of a pianist, for instance, whereby the musician usually starts to play a certain passage slowly in order to sense the right sound of the piece. Afterwards the tempo can be increased, but first it was essential to capture the right feel of the piece. Meyerhold maintained that, 'the most difficult thing to achieve in the staging of *Revizor* is the right tempo; while the tone is not difficult since it is given by Gogol's strong text of the play.'<sup>71</sup> For instance, he said:

Gogol's text gains in setting the role of Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky to a slow tempo because all the nuances, which characterise Gogol text, once pronounced carefully sound right. When we listen to the rest – the first scenes before the arrival of Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky and after they leave – it is unclear. There is a sense of an excess bustle, which overloads the text.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, according to Meyerhold, the establishment of the right tempo was crucial in sustaining the sense of Gogol's tone in the production. The musical reading of the text showed once again Meyerhold's engagement with the execution of the language on the stage.

Kaplan argues that the production shared elements with the opera theatre:

In every episode a familiar musical form is present, bringing into the production an unbreakable order like in the opera theatre...All of these musical forms in their totality and in their connection with the scenic happening, in their unity with the content represent a single whole, resembling an operatic form.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, the operatic elements were present in the construction of each scene. For example, Kaplan suggests that in the last scene Maria's solo by Dargomyzhsky, *Mne minulo 16 let* ('I have just turned sixteen'), appearing in the midst of the chorus of voices and Jewish orchestra music 'served the purpose of an intermezzo repeating the dramatical device in an opera, holding and at the same time sharpening the development of the action.'<sup>74</sup> During the romance, all the characters on the stage became quiet and listened to her singing. This calm and attentive moment, echoing the staging of Nina's melancholic romance in *Masquerade*, was followed by another wave of noise and crescendo to the end. After the intermezzo, a sense of grand operatic finale was created. The construction of episodes and happenings along musical lines, rather than psychological ones, created a strong sense of theatricality, which produced the desired effects in the production.

Meyerhold's musical realism was strongly related to the cultural environment of the time. Nadezhda Tarshis argues that these musically constructed dramaturgies were created in the spirit of new drama and therefore, the episodic structure of *Revizor* was symphonic rather than operatic. She also points out that Meyerhold hears and directs the opera *The Queen of Spades* as a symphony by destroying its original libretto.<sup>75</sup> The new opera, *The Nose*, was also based upon episodic dramaturgy, and therefore, resembled the structure of new drama. *The Government Inspector* was part of this new aesthetic that reformed traditional dramaturgy and music. Nina Kirai indicates that the production of *The Lady of Camellias*, with its break of action into vignettes, also resembled a symphony. The first act was divided thus:

1. After 'Grand Opera' and a walk on 'Fete'. (Andante. Allegro grazioso. Grave)
2. One of the nights. (Capriccioso. Lento (trio). Scherzando. Largo e mesto.)
3. Encounter. (Adagio. Coda. Strepitoso.)<sup>76</sup>

The musical dramaturgies constructed along symphonic lines furnished a strong sense of theatricality, the emphasis on changing timbres, tempos and rhythms elevated dramatic ideas on a grand scale. Tarshis indicates that in constructing musical dramaturgies 'contemporaries saw Meyerhold's titanic attempts to nourish the period's culture, to give it its own sound.'<sup>77</sup>

Throughout his career Meyerhold strove to revitalize the art of theatre and opera, to fight against accepted conventions. Thus, in *Revizor*, he challenged the established manner of character representation. When discussing his production he proclaimed that many contemporary revolutionary plays present two conflicting powers, the reds and the whites, which results in the creation of schematic, lifeless people. This trend has to be challenged, life must return to the theatre. Similarly, he indicated Gogol's play was traditionally interpreted schematically, since the vaudeville acting style

obscured the real depths of the characters.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, the aim was to resurrect the true feel of Gogol's text, to abolish dead routines.

Meyerhold further developed his method of constructing social masks in the production. The characterisation conveyed the spirit of the golden romantic age, linking *Revizor* with his other masterpieces, *Masquerade* and *The Queen of Spades*. Khlestakov, a man fallen by chance into the play's intrigue, cherished his lies and was capable of easily transforming and re-inventing himself. According to Braun:

Khlestakov had a different mask for every situation: Nevsky flâneur, ingenious card-sharper, timorous clerk, imperious general, adroit adventurer.... Yet on the words, 'Well how are things, Pushkin, old friend?' he lapsed into the melancholic reverie of solitary poet and for a fleeting moment the audience was offered a glimpse of Gogol himself.<sup>79</sup>

The traits of distinctly different Russian types were brought together in the one character, in the ambiguous mask of this distant and sinister figure dressed in black. On the other hand, the part of the Mayor, the leader of the officials choir, as Kukhta writes, was approached with the movement of 'almost Napoleon-like poses', giving an impression of an ex-general; with an inner 'manic and tormented consciousness', like the one of Hermann and Arbenin, while 'the main motif in the actor's performance, became the character's fear.' She writes: 'he only sees the Inspector, not even hearing the scream of the young officer as he steps on the latter's leg.'<sup>80</sup> Here Kukhta points out, heroes of a high romantic genre, along the lines of the character of the Mayor, became laughing stocks. The associative elements between them became a theme in its own right:

From the paradoxical connection between the theme of Arbenin and the Mayor, a human tragicomedy occurred. The Mayor took on the pose of Hermann and finished in hospital.... Like the Stranger overtaking Arbenin, so did Khlestakov, the Mayor. He was for the Mayor "the queen of spades"...<sup>81</sup>

Thus Meyerhold created as well as emphasised associations between his productions of Russian classics, through links not only in design, incorporating visual elements of the golden period, and music, as discussed in his staging of *Masquerade*, but also as the quote indicates, in the development of characterisation and construction of events. The Mayor was obsessed with the idea of the Inspector, Hermann with the secret of the three winning cards. The card of the queen of spades shattered Hermann's dreams, determining his fate, as Khlestakov to the Mayor. This reinforcement of connections between the plays demonstrated the director's desire to define the social masks, distinctive to Russian culture. The *Revizor* roles, nevertheless, preserved individual characteristics, which corresponded to Gogol's tragic-comic style, his own particular rhythm and music. Khlestakov, unlike the Stranger in *Masquerade*, conveyed an exaggerated synthesis of certain Russian traits, reflecting the strong sense of Gogol being primarily a writer about Russian people.

As was the case with *Masquerade*, the characterisation shared elements of opera, where each role had a predetermined tempo and tone, a particular musical definition. The musical approach to characterisation and the staging, however, was enriched by Meyerhold's post-revolutionary experience in theatre; the flow of time and the use of space was even more condensed and fixed in the performance. As in an orchestra, each actor-instrument had its own particular tone and timbre, while, when needed to express the unity of the crowd, different sounds and gestures would merge together in a created musical unison. Biomechanics provided actors with technical means to perform within this tight form, both on a musical and spatial level.



Musical approach to characterisation helped to produce a particular movement sought in each character. The actors' quality of movement was often directed in relation to a musical analogy: 'the way you sit should produce the right sound'<sup>82</sup> Meyerhold proclaimed during rehearsals. In the production there was an exaggerated play of hands and gestures. As Braun notes, Meyerhold advised his actors 'to find a certain eccentricity within the limits of your own personalities – in your poses, in your gait, in the way you hold your pipe, in the way you gesture with your hands.'<sup>83</sup> Actors were directed in their use of movement to highlight the individual traits of their characters. After an intense biographical study of each character, actors were assigned particular movement and hand gestures, which resulted in original interpretations. For example, as quoted in Braun, Anna Andreevna, 'provincial coquette, not quite beyond middle age, educated half on novels and verse in visitors' books and half in fussing over the pantry and the maids' room' became in the performance of Zinaida Raikh a 'Catherine the Great', a 'Provincial Cleopatra', a 'Russian Venus'.<sup>84</sup> Her voluptuous movements, rich silken dress which revealed her shoulders, suggested a beautiful St Petersburg's courtesan. Vladimir Solovyov wrote that 'her part was built on her smile, welcoming-flirty, but a smile of greedy desire.'<sup>85</sup> Her body movement blended with the voluptuous curve of the divan. The emphasis on a particular movement, and its corresponding musicality revealed the character's inner life.

Meyerhold's conception of musical realism was affected by Chaplin's art. The director believed that Chaplin 'although a realist, he is always a stylist: stylized boots or stylized moustaches don't stop him from expressing those most precise observations which he takes from life. He condenses moments of reality. Every touch defines a whole range of events.'<sup>86</sup> The musical dramaturgy, independent from the

play itself, also aimed to condense life, therefore to more fully represent the director's interpretation. Here, according to Meyerhold, 'every part does not sound separately but must be integrated into the whole crowd of instrument-parts'. It is necessary 'to make everything on the stage sound, the actor, the light, the movement and even the prop'<sup>87</sup>

The characterisation depended upon the actors' relationships to one another and to the objects around them. The associative elements were sustained in the created doubles in performance. Anna Andreevna was accompanied in three scenes by a silent character – the Blue Hussar, who perhaps mirrored her strong sexuality. Khlestakov was accompanied by the Officer in Transit, another silent but also vividly physically alive character. As Braun indicates, the Officer in Transit was Khlestakov's 'taciturn accomplice in every enterprise', sometimes helping the main protagonist, as for instance, when 'on sensing the Mayor's servility towards him at the opening encounter, Khlestakov borrowed his companion's tunic, fur-collared cape, and tall shako.'<sup>88</sup> Here Khlestakov's double provided the main protagonist with the means to transform, through the help of his new costume to pursue his new role. Meyerhold believed that in creating a relationship between actors, props and furniture, 'every object comes to dynamic life, has nerves, spine and blood.'<sup>89</sup> This was evident when the emphasis upon female sexuality was sustained by Anna Andreevna's huge dressing closet and her changing of outfits while anticipating a meeting with Khlestakov. Her sexuality, or her fantasy, was reflected in the courting of the young officers who appeared on the stage, some of them entering from her wardrobe. Such play with objects and doubles, enhanced the presentation of the character's inner life, producing a strong sense of theatricality.

Various pantomimic interludes drew elements of *commedia* and were constructed musically. Rudnitsky writes that the officers' serenade at the end of act one was followed by the suicide of one of them at the feet of Anna Andreyevna, while, at the same time another young officer jumped out of a box with a bouquet of flowers.<sup>90</sup> The abrupt chord – the death – was immediately subverted by the romantic chord of the flowers, producing a satirical climax. The little rhythmical interlude of staged contrast achieved a sense of heightened and grotesque reality. The episode with Anna, Khlestakov, Maria and the captain at the piano, particularly resembled a ballet performance. Khlestakov observed the notes on the piano after Maria caught him flirting with Anna. Gvozdev called this gesture a final chord of the scene, where the pantomime was built like a musical phrase in musical composition: 'A theme is taken up, dissonances are developed, a tension is created and the final chord gives a resolution.'<sup>91</sup> The satirical element was also heightened in some scenes by setting a specific form of music to a contrasting tone – situation. For instance, the wedding music in the final act is set against Maria's realisation that she will not marry. Such organization of sounds and actions, this 'in your face' musical realism, created active scenic forms capable of conveying clear social and psychological themes.

The episodes, rather than following a smooth dramatic line, were juxtaposed, producing unusual linking patterns. As Boris Zingerman states, 'the monumental world of Meyerhold's *Revizor*, where the province grows into the Imperial capital, disintegrates into small parts, like life in the art of Picasso into different margins; they reflect each other and in this way they double.'<sup>92</sup> Meyerhold brought a whole range of metaphoric associations between different events, such as between Anna Andreevna's

'diva's' closet and her heroine-like faint in the final act. Pantomimes, which in association with one another particularly provided the commentary in the production.

Braun writes:

The merest commonplace action was transformed into a studied pantomime: the ruminative, unison puffing of long pipes by the town dignitaries in the opening scene, the elaborate toilette of the mayor before setting off for the inn, even the proffering of bribes to Khlestakov – all assumed the precision of a familiar ceremony, which exactly conveyed the ossified daily round of petty officialdom.<sup>93</sup>

By highlighting the ritual of every day life, its importance, Meyerhold produced a critical commentary, obscuring the triviality of these actions. The associative element between these pantomimes brought the sense of time and space close together. Meyerhold's search for social and inner truth transcended the limits of past, now and tomorrow, of particular place and of the whole of Russia. The relationship between the music and the staging, the changing contrast, rhythms and tempos, the unusual connections between characters and actions, perpetuated a distinct type of reflective theatricality.

The condensed space created limits for the actors' movement, so the acting had to be self-restrained. For example, in the first scene, when the Mayor announced the arrival of the letter, the small space on the truck between the divan and the mahogany table made it almost impossible for the actors to move.<sup>94</sup> Within this congested area the exaggerated play of hands created a sense of spiritual deformity. This was particularly achieved in the third episode, when Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky appeared with the words, 'Unusual happening! Unexpected news!' where, as Meyerhold said, 'from all sides, between and from furniture, people crawl out, like cockroaches coming out from cracks', after which, Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky 'do nothing else except move

their hands' on the polished table. 'They do not smile, they are very serious people, they are not comical at all. They inspect whether or not the newcomer eats salmon. This is a very serious business.'<sup>95</sup> Eating, drinking, smoking, talking, bribing, flirting, the mundane habits of everyday life, the symbolic function of hands wanting to grab their own piece of cake, depicted a restraint of freedom, life obscured by props and furniture, life obscured and defined by things. Episodes consisting of huge casts on small trucks heaped into piles of bodies, epitomised a mass of human desires and fears in a chorus of hands and sounds. Kukhta writes that *Revizor* demonstrated 'the theme of the destruction of contemporary man, with crippled consciousness – the problem of a dead soul.'<sup>96</sup> The sense of liberated labour disappeared, replaced by a poignant commentary on the state and the course of European civilization.

Meyerhold's musical composition communicated an apocalyptic vision. The sense of imminent chaos was present in the construction of the last events in the play and built into the following actions: Khlestakov's letter arrived, which disclosed the truth of the situation, a pause followed, then confusion and the Mayor's downfall, as he was put into a strait jacket, proceeded by Anna Andreevna's climax, as she 'heroically' fainted so the officers carried 'the heroine' off the stage. Above all this Maria's lyrical song was heard, followed by the increasing volume of wedding bells. At this point, as Braun notes:

A disembodied Jewish band sent the guests on a frenzied gallop through the auditorium. Simultaneously, a white screen rose in front of the stage, bearing the fatal announcement of the inspector's arrival and then slowly disappeared aloft to disclose life-size terror-stricken effigies of the townspeople – condemned to eternal petrification.<sup>97</sup>

The musical composition of contrasting leitmotifs and the building up of tension through suspending the linear development of action culminated in a sense of horror.

The fixed and terrified figures suggested that the 'final hour' had arrived. The manikins replaced the actors on the stage, followed by actors appearing for the curtain call, each one standing next to their own character's personification. As A.Laskin writes, for a while, 'the live figures of the actors almost covered the dead world behind their backs.'<sup>98</sup> The actors left, on the 'empty stage' the image stayed, like a warning chord. Unlike in *Masquerade*, where the sense of enlightenment in the musical ending of the play suggested the notion of a freed soul, the last episode – 'Dumb Scene' – represented dead souls damned to a fixed eternal motion. Andrei Bely perceived that the final image of Meyerhold 'scenic poem about Russia', sounded as a 'thunder of apocalyptic horn'.<sup>99</sup>

Gogol's *Revizor* provided the author of the production with the means to create a commentary on contemporary Russia. The director's interpretation of the play was perceived as a personal outcry, as a distinctive vision of humanity's spiritual state and its destiny. Pavel Markov wrote that Meyerhold on the stage exposed his personal theme as director.<sup>100</sup> During the next few years Meyerhold would still have a relative freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the production predicted the future – the theme of the tragic solitude of the artist cut off from the world in which he believed. The stifling representation of the piles of bodies became almost visionary, a metaphoric image of gulag systems – networks of forced labour, of concentration camps during the Second World War. Reviewer B.Riikh perceived that at TIM they were playing – a performance-novel.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, this was a 'scenic poem' or a 'scenic novel' with all its power of lyricism and story, based on a Gogolian source. It was a text where 'the inside' and 'the outside' of Soviet people were at odds, where the Soviet 'props' obscured the earlier revolutionary aspirations. It was precisely in showing the

contemporary relevance of Gogol's satire on Russian society, that the director thought it could be possible to warn or to 'cure the health of the Soviet corpus'.

Meyerhold's musical realism stirred heated debates in the press. Lunacharsky, Mayakovsky, Asafiev and Kugel were in support of the production. The director Nikolai Petrov, wrote that, '*Revizor* created a revolution in the core of theatre art, which helps the art not to stand in one place, but to move forward'. He perceived, as David Zolotnitsky points out, that the production is one of the big victories of the Theatrical October.<sup>102</sup> But certain former fellow comrades in Theatrical October, such as Vladimir Blium, together with RAPP members believed that the production was far removed from the concept of proletarian culture. The press accused the director of deserting the revolutionary theatre, and making the play dark and vague, mysterious and provincial. Markus Chamy wrote in RAPP's journal: 'The workers do not understand this mystical interpretation.'<sup>103</sup> Meyerhold defended his work, but this resulted in, as Miličević writes, the union of critics rising against the director's 'anti social outbursts against the press.'<sup>104</sup> During the discussion of the production organised at his theatre there was a dispute, in which Meyerhold refused to give explanations, only occasionally erupting against his critics.<sup>105</sup> Although *Revizor* stayed in the repertoire for years, provoking numerous critical discussions, it demonstrated the growing isolation of the director from Soviet reality. Even his keen supporter, Gvozdev, had to revise his view of the production in a newspaper article '*Revizor: About my mistakes*' in 1931 after being accused of formalist analysis.<sup>106</sup> These long lived attacks in the press showed that the RAPP noose around the director's neck was tightening. The 'truth' expressed had to be silenced, the culture of lies had to be validated.

During the late 1920s, where the call for simplicity in forms and the positive directness of words was promoted, Meyerhold increasingly turned to music not only to develop his principles of theatre art, but also to convey his own experience of the world around him. In a period where the official jargon became increasingly one dimensional, Meyerhold's use of music expressed that which language was unable to do.

A Romantic belief in music's power to express the emotions which words can not, was reflected in his next adaptation of a classical play, *Woe to Wit*. In the production the main character was interpreted as a musician, while the piano became his self-expression. Braun indicates this:

The music, selected and arranged by the composer Boris Asafiev, was designed to reflect the various aspects of Chatsky's character: Beethoven – his militant reforming zeal, Mozart – his Byronic Weltschmerz, Bach – his exalted humanity, John Field – his tender dreams of Sophie.<sup>107</sup>

The actor's varying emotions were supposed to be in harmony with the music, which helped both to establish the character and guide the development of the drama. Once again, music did not merely serve as an accompaniment to the scenic action, but was a source of theatrical action. Asafiev wrote to Meyerhold: 'It is important for us to create in Chatsky that state, personally very familiar to me, when in the mind instead of words only musical phrases spring out...'<sup>108</sup> Thus music was inherent in the character of Chatsky, being the 'expression of his will', his inner world, a place where words don't live.

From Bach, Mozart, Beethoven to Field, from baroque, through classicism to early romanticism, music spanning the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the



defining period in western music, reflected the development of western thought. Asafiev saw Chatsky as 'a sensitive Russian man, artistically gifted, who visited the west at the time when Beethoven presented to human nature, with its inclination for philistinism and stupid vegetation, priceless ethical demands through the sounds of his music'. Thus Asafiev perceived Chatsky 'draws his will power from music.... Chatsky lives, thinks and feels through music, like it was with Beethoven.<sup>109</sup> Beethoven's music, expressing enlightened ideas of human progress, freedom and humanity, a sense of striving heroism and inner conquest, underlined the director's conception of Chatsky – as a reformer of stature, a Decembrist of the Nicholas period. The classical composer commemorated his own era yet extended its limits, introducing new modes of expression and depths of human experience, anticipating the Romantic movement. John Field, an Irish composer, the Romantic pioneer and Glinka's piano teacher, is credited with the invention of the nocturne, a single movement piece written for piano, conveying a mood and atmosphere, rather than a development of thought, usually sharing a feeling of sadness. His lyrical style, his poetic expressiveness, reflected the purity of Chatsky's feelings. It was through this synthesis of musical styles, in the character, that Asafiev and Meyerhold conceived the spirit of the time, the immense scope of cultural change and aspirations.

The Enlightenment ideas of reason, humanism and progress stood in opposition to the pettiness, avarice and vulgarity represented in people surrounding the main protagonist. The solitariness of Chatsky, as Rudnitsky writes, was especially evident in the episode of 'The Dining Room', where a table was placed across the width of the stage. Facing the audience, all characters performed the gross ritual of eating, while devising the intrigue of Chatsky's madness, from piano to forte across the table.

At the height of their enjoyment, Chatsky entered: silence, a pause, people covered their faces with white napkins, Chatsky's words about his torments cut across the heavy silence. His slow and softly pronounced words, together with his pose standing in the centre, opposite Famusov, who was seated, showed his inconsolable grief and helpless situation. Then music accompanied his slow procession past the table. Rudnitsky points out that in this scene it was clear what concerned Meyerhold in this production, namely the destruction of idealism.<sup>110</sup> Meyerhold brought to life the scope of this idealism through recourse to music. The character's tragedy metaphorically captured the director's growing isolation, the dissolution of his exalted dream, the tragedy of the Romantic artist, the separation of the Romantic artist from society. As in *Revizor*, the vaudeville laughter was subdued, while the tragic notes once again dominated the director's interpretation of the classical comedy.

The difficulty experienced by Meyerhold in reconciling ideology with artistic integrity intensified during this period. After the defeat of the leftist opposition at the fifteenth Party Congress, in 1929 Trotsky was deported. In the same year, Bukharin left the Politburo and Lunacharsky resigned from his post. On the international scale, this was the year when the stock markets dropped rapidly, heralding the economic depression affecting many countries in the 1930s. In Soviet Union the NEP period was over and a Stalinist five year-plan of forced collectivization and industrialisation was in force. Even Lunacharsky, who over the years protected the artists and fought to preserve the standard of artistic excellence, lost power when the Commissariat for Enlightenment was abolished in 1930. As Jaffe argues, 'Lunacharsky was shunted off to Geneva to represent the Soviet Union at the League of Nations, well out of the way while the proletarian organisations continued to savage the intelligentsia.'<sup>111</sup> The early

Soviet tolerance of different artistic trends came to a halt with the consolidation of power under Joseph Stalin and his plan to establish a disciplined society.

During the late twenties the Government increasingly commissioned the artist to create new socialist art and not to ponder over the dubious past and its traditions. Meyerhold's theatre, now GOSTIM since 1926 (Government's Theatre of Meyerhold), was constantly being attacked for staging classical works, and therefore, for not responding to the needs of modern Soviet spectators. In a climate where propagandist plays along the Party line flourished, the director turned to Nikolai Erdman's *Suicide*. The play presents Semyon Podsekalnikov contemplating suicide after a year of unemployment. Zolotnitsky writes that Glavrepertkom (*Glavnyi repertuarnii komitet*) saw in this play 'a curse on contemporary reality'. Despite the problematic representation of socialist society, evident for instance, in the depiction of dissatisfied characters, Zolotnitsky points out that, in 1928 Meyerhold got the rights to stage the play from the president of the Soviet of People's Commissars, A. Rykov. After the main rehearsal, the production was aborted by Government officials, as it was forbidden by 'the special decision of the Central Committee after a personal intervention by Stalin.'<sup>112</sup> In a climate where censorship became extremely tight, Meyerhold urged his favourite writer to provide him with a new play, desperately needing to fit into the Government's policy on the question of art. Finally, it was with *The Bed Bug* and *The Bath House* that Meyerhold once again collaborated with Mayakovsky, his artistic 'soulmate'.

In both productions, Meyerhold worked closely with Mayakovsky, not amending the text in favour of an independent musical dramaturgy. This was due to his great

enthusiasm for the poet's art that fervently sought to blend with the spirit of the time. Vissarion Shebalin wrote the music for *The Bath House*, while Shostakovich, composed *The Bed Bug*. In both productions, Meyerhold and his collaborators created contemporary satires or, to be more precise, music-theatre satires.

*The Bed Bug* was Mayakovsky's first play since *Mystery Bouffe*. This satire on Soviet life, premiered on the 13 February 1929. The first part of the play is set in the present, while the second is set in the future, where one survivor from the past – the petty bourgeois – Menshevik, Prisyarkin, finds himself in a clinically healthy and scientific society. Prisyarkin has his own little comfortable life by achieving a certain status in the new society and does not struggle to make life better for everyone. After a fire at his wedding, in the second part of the play, the worker and a bed bug found together in a frozen block are revived.

*The Bath House*, a comedy about bureaucracy, had its premiere on 16 March 1930. The play shows Pobedonosikov, the head of a particular government institution. Throughout the play the discoverer of the time-machine cannot get a meeting with Pobedonosikov due to bureaucratic priorities. Eventually, the Phosphorescent Woman arrives from the future and takes only the 'true' socialists with her in the time-machine to a communist world in 2030, leaving Pobedonosikov behind.

The new characters on the stage offered possibilities of creating a new form of agit theatre in response to the cultural change. Both plays presented clear social types and ridiculed their habits, pretensions and ways of life. Rudnitsky suggests that the cultural change was reflected in the changed social masks in the plays. Mayakovsky

in *Mystery Bouffe* created monumental and allegorical social types, while in *The Bed Bug* and *The Bath House* such characters as Prisykin, Pobedonosikov, Bayan or Optimistenko are taken from everyday life.<sup>113</sup> In tandem with the affirmation of Soviet policies, a cultural complacency occurred, validating the distinctive social types of the current order. In this political climate, the collaborators' questioned the contemporary 'right' way forward to the desired utopian future. By satirising social change and contemporary stereotypes, the artists transformed the agit theatre of the early 1920s, creating new artistic forms capable of addressing current social issues.

In order to convey their message, to show and purge the evil from contemporary society, a strong sense of theatricality and musicality was devised in these production. Shostakovich wrote the music for *The Bed Bug*. He had several conversations with Mayakovsky in regard to finding the right music and the playwright wanted the effect of a firemen's band for the first part, and a simple, unemotional score for the second.<sup>114</sup> The score contained harsh dissonances based on the marches of fire brigades, the juxtaposition of unusual tonalities, shifts of contrasting rhythms and tempos. Leach indicates that 'Shostakovich's music turned out to be dynamic, sharp and at times cacophonous, and it played a crucial part in the creation of the dramatic rhythm the author and director were attempting to achieve.'<sup>115</sup> The pace was hectic, the acting alternated between dancing, circus, acrobatic and dramatic styles. The images of contemporary life, the musical atmosphere of the epoch, the tunes of songs and marches of the 1920s, the contemporary clothes and props on the stage, together with the presentational manner of acting and pantomime, caricatured the banality, the philistinism of contemporary life. Prisykin danced and sang accompanied by the guitar, in short, enjoyed life and the pleasures people take in 'beautiful art'. His

crowded wedding scene, conveying a polyphony of ugliness and arrogance, ended with a fire and a violent transition to the future set in 1979. Rudnitsky writes that, 'a stormy and grotesque interlude recalled the theme of the foxtrot, which was just before played at the wedding, but this theme was quickly swallowed up in the wild, unthinkable collisions within the ever growing volume of sounds.'<sup>116</sup> The fire cleansed 'the world'. The chaos was transformed into an exaggerated order. Prisyarkin's songs were not in harmony with the sounds of the future.

The collaborators' view of the future satirically warned against the contemporary's narrow minded vision of it. Prisyarkin found himself defrosted after fifty years in a completely new society. The image of this man – an example from the past put in an unusual cage, was studied and observed by doctors and scientists. Prisyarkin, the party member, who could not fit into this society, proclaimed: 'What kind of life is this, if you can't put your girl's card up on the wall...What did we try hard for, spilling blood, when I am not even allowed to dance?'<sup>117</sup> The design for the second part was entrusted to Alexander Rodchenko, who used simple, huge forms, utilitarian and unfamiliar objects. The future presented a scientific and hygienic life, but it also showed an ironic, emotionless view of its inhabitants – a 'soulless society'. The uniformed and mechanical representation of the roles, the clinical white costumes of all the characters except for Prisyarkin, produced a sense of an anti-individual society. The exaggerated play with the aesthetics of the early Theatrical October, with its naïve pathos of uniformed crowd representations, perpetuated, in this new context, a distinct form of social analysis and critique. The official positive vision of 'the beautiful tomorrow', with all its industrial and scientific advancements, both

illuminated and commented on the present. The present in turn determined this distinctive 'non-human' future.

A parody on contemporary culture was particularly created in his next collaboration with Mayakovsky, in *The Bath House*. The poet and the director ridiculed the current views and disputes in relation to art and theatre, notably those of their opponents. In the third act, Pobedonosikov addresses the theatre director, who suddenly steps out of the play: 'Action? What kind of action? You should not have any actions, your work is to show, don't worry, without you relevant Party and Soviet organs will act. And then, you need to show the bright sides of our reality.'<sup>118</sup> The collaborators mocked the censor, bureaucrats, RAPP members, theatres and opera houses that claimed to create 'beautiful' things, whose art, in their view, took on a passive role in constructing a new society.

The exaggerated representation of the early Theatrical October attacked elements of the collaborators' own earlier artistic explorations, as its 'left-overs', in this new context, had also created its own form of commonplace 'beauty'. The satirical inquiry into the role of art questioned the values of that society. Pobedonosikov proclaims: 'We don't need a dreamer! Socialism – that's calculation.'<sup>119</sup> Artistic inquiry stood in opposition to the scientific efficiency and organization that were integral characteristics of the early LEF's aesthetics. Rudnitsky notes that Mayakovsky's slogans on the theatre walls served as a reminder of the bygone days of the Theatrical October movement.'<sup>120</sup> This was underlined in the staging, where actors performed sport-like etudes, in the spirit of the early biomechanical productions, next to the time-machine – Sergei Vakhtangov's construction going up to the skies. This glance

into the past shed light on the present, devoid of the early revolutionary sense of excitement. The earlier utopian vision had disappeared, replaced by contemporary comedies of manners and their accompanying critique.

Meyerhold's early conception of Theatrical October gradually turned against him, insofar as the growing political centralisation of Soviet theatres, which he used to advocate, did not correspond to his own developing aesthetics and his social commitment. The critical reception of *The Bed Bug* was divided, while *The Bath House* was mercilessly attacked and removed from the repertoire. The members of RAPP announced it was anti-Soviet, claiming that the production lacked the necessary social purpose for the day. As Zolotnitsky writes, 'three sins became associated with the production: the over exaggerated danger of bureaucracy, the unsuited utopian motifs and archaic devices buffoonery.'<sup>121</sup> Meyerhold's Theatrical October – a constant renovation of theatre forms and social masks, exploring current issues in a manner that removed any consideration of a clear-cut linear development and character representation – became an unfavourable aesthetic in certain political and cultural circles as it did not present a simple and 'realistic' representation of Soviet ideals.

The hard political climate of the late 1920s advocated Stalin's campaign against artists branded as enemies, namely 'formalist', followers of 'cosmopolitanism and leftist avant-gardism' associated with 'decadent bourgeois inclinations'. Mayakovsky committed suicide on 14 April 1930. Meyerhold's theatre was closed for renovation in 1931, never to reopen again. The social change and the subsequent reversal of values generated a new cultural environment. Rodchenko's 'oblique' photographs



were forbidden. The focus turned away from the sky (upward and idealistic) to a 'look forward' and 'progressivism'. The artistic experiments, inquiries, hopes, challenges and questions were no longer encouraged, since a 'look forward' implied that the 'right way forward had been found.' A single movement praising the advances of the Soviet state became dominant and replaced the diverse art of the 1920s. Rodchenko became a marginal artist.

Meyerhold's musical compositions reflected his deep social commitment as well as the changing cultural environment of the 1920s. The emphasis on speed, rhythm and the conquering of new spaces was followed by an extensive use of music as a means to express, to comment on, to highlight, to indicate, to synthesise and to stimulate the audience's response, to communicate that which words alone could not. In *The Government Inspector* Meyerhold demonstrated the theatre's potential power of combining in a single performance the distinctive qualities of a scenic poem, scenic novel and a theatrical symphony and creating, through this merger, a new theatrical experience. *Revizor* as well as the musical satires, attacked the commonplaceness of the established order. Like Shostakovich's dissonant music these productions depicted the void in meaning at a time when a centralized system claimed to have found the right answers to social and personal matters.

On Meyerhold's stage, the established music-theatre genres shared certain principles of new opera and music, such as a strong sense of rhythm, dissonance and symphonic structure. The tightly constructed forms of performance, where music, pantomime and words were in proximity to and depended upon one another – the musical-scenic composition of each event connected in a single totality – demonstrated a unique art

of theatre making, a mastery of a theatrical score. Gvozdev perceived this art as exemplary for the future direction of opera. He pointed out that opera 'still has not become realistic and has not found its place as a contemporary and necessary art for us.... Meyerhold's *Revizor* is the foundation for musical realism in theatre and an amazing school for all genres of musical stage.'<sup>122</sup> Musical realism compressed and heightened the sense of Gogol's world in its search for artistic truth in each action. Meyerhold had become an 'author' in his dramatic theatre by creating an independent art of theatre directing, through adapting the classical text to his own cause and principles of theatricality and music. In opera it would be his production of *The Queen of Spades* that would advance the role of the operatic director on a level that was seen in *Revizor*, and where Meyerhold's experience in dramatic theatre would significantly influence his last operatic masterpiece.

1. Meierkhol'd, RGALI, Fond 998. file 1, storage unit 536, *Beseda s orkestrantam GosTim v sviazi c naznacheniem I. S. Nikol'skogo rukovoditelem orkestra*. 16.02.1928.
2. Braun Edward, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, (London: Methuen, 1995), p. 277
3. *ibid.*, p.277
4. Quoted in Symons James, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: The post revolutionary productions 1920-1932*, (Cambridge: Rivers Press, 1973), p.157
5. 'Lektsiia No 1.Vvedenie v stsenovedenie' in Meierkhol'd Vsevold, *Lektsii. 1918-1919*, (ed.) Fel'dman, Oleg, (Moscow: O.G.I., 2000), p.28
6. *ibid.*, p.28
7. 'Lektsiia No 4. Rabota rezhissera. Metodika rezhissury' in *Lektsii. 1918-1919*, p. 69
8. Gladkov Aleksandr, *Meierkhol'd*, (Moscow: Soiuz teatral'nykh deiatelei RSFSR, 1990), vol.2, p. 112
9. Fokin Valerii 'Zametki rezhissera' in *Partitury dvukh spektaklei: Nomer v gostinitse goroda NN, Prevrashchenie*, (ed.) Semenovskii Valerii, (Moscow: Tvorcheskii tsentr im. Vs. Meierkhol'da, 1999) p. 131.
10. 'Lektsiia No 4. Rabota rezhissera. Metodika rezhissury' in *Lektsii. 1918-1919*, p.73
11. Valerii Semenovskii and Valerii Fokin, refer to a 'scenic text' as a score in *Partitury dvukh spektaklei (Scores for Two Plays)*.
12. Semenovskii, (ed.) *Partitury dvukh spektaklei: Nomer v gostinitse goroda NN, Prevrashchenie*, p.8
13. 'Klass V.E.Meierkhol'da. Voprosy po kursu i otvety' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Lektsii 1918-1919*, p. 165

14. Gladkov, *Meierkhol'd*, vol.2, p. 310
15. 'Urok Vs.E.Meierkhol'da, GEKTETIM', 05 September 1932 in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda, Publikacii Stat'i*, (eds.) Pesochinskii K. and Kukhta E., (St Petersburg: Kul'tInformPress, 1998), p. 56
16. RGALI, Fund 998, file 1, storage unit 536, *Beseda s orkestrantam GosTim v sviazi c naznacheniem I. S. Nikol'skogo rukovoditelem orkestra*. 16 February 1928
17. Sitkovetskaia Maia (ed.), *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, (Artist.Rezhisser.Teatr., 1993), vol.1, pp.154-155.
18. 'Pokhodnyi teatr' in *Lektsii. 1918-1919*, pp.185/186
19. Symons James, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: The post revolutionary productions 1920-1932*, p.82
20. Quoted in Gladkov, *Meierkhol'd*, vol.2, p. 113
21. Erast Garin ' O Mandate i o drugom' in *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom*, (ed.) Vendrovskaiia L.D. (Moscow : Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1967), p. 324
22. 'Plan Kursa po Biomekhanike', 1922 in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, (eds.) Pesochinskii N.V. and Kukhta E.A., (Petersburg: Kul'tInformPress, 1998), p.26
23. *ibid.*, p. 38
24. 'Lektsii Vs.E.Meierkhol'da', 21 March 1922, in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, p.29- 32
25. Leach Robert, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.74.
26. *ibid.*, p.75

27. Quoted in Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: The post revolutionary productions 1920-1932*, p. 106
28. Gvozdev Aleksii., 'Il-ba-zai' *Zhizn' iskusstva*, No. 27, 1924 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1920-1938*, (ed.) Lannina, T.V. ( Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr., 2000), p. 56-57
29. 'Stenogramma interv'iu s Vs.Meierkhol'dom amerikanskogo korrespondenta Barena's 5 April 1932, in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, p.61
30. Edmunds Neil, *The Soviet Proletarian Music Movement* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2000) p. 38
31. Leach, *Vsevold Meyerhold*, p.78
32. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.1, p. 75
33. Leach, *Vsevold Meyerhold*, p. 59
34. Risum Jannne 'Mei Lanfang: A Model for the Theatre of the Future' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, (eds.) Picon-Vallin Béatrice and Shcherbakov Vadim, (Moscow: O.G.I., 2001), p.266
35. Leach, *Vsevold Meyerhold*, p.123
36. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.173
37. On a practical level, being without a theatre when the work on the production began, the director thought of a way of producing the play without relying on the traditional conditions of the theatre space.
38. Mikhailova Alla, *Meierkhol'd i Khudozhniki*, (trans.) Bessmertnaia Elena, (Moscow: Galart, 1995.), p. 56
39. Pavlovski Mishel, *Chista Igra*, (Skopje: Mi-An, 1998), pp. 108-109
40. *Meierkol'd repertiruet*, vol.1, p.95
41. Lunacharskii Anatolii, 'Zametka po povodu Rogonostsa', *Izvestiia*, 14.05.1922, in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1920-1938*, p.38-39

42. Quoted in Pesochinskii Nikolai, 'Rezhisser, istoriia, politika' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, pp.172-173
43. *ibid.*, p.175
44. Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 253
45. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.255
46. Volkov S., 'Meierkhol'd i Shaliapin', *Muzykal'naiia Zhizn'*, No 18, (Leningrad, 1974), p.14
47. Rudnitskii Konstantin, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), p.328  
Meyerhold's role was defined as an author of a production, rather than a director of the play.
48. *ibid.*, p.326- p.328
49. Quoted in Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.328
50. Comins-Richmond Alison, 'Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Bubus* and the Kabuki: More than a Comedy Set to Music, a Bamboo Curtain, and a Bechstein' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, p.246
51. Quoted in Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.329
52. Lunacharskii Anatoli, *O teatre i dramaturgii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1958), vol.1, pp.374-376, also in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.200
53. Comins-Richmond Alison, 'Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Bubus*' as above, p.246
54. *ibid.*, p.248-249
55. *ibid.*, 249-250
56. Zakhava Boris, 'Dva Sezona' in *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom*, p.277.
57. Erast Garin, 'O Mandate i o drugom' in *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom*, p.320
58. Comins-Richmond Alison, 'Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Bubus*', pp.247-248
59. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.351
60. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.1, p. 152

61. *V. E. Mejerholjd O Pozorištu*, (ed. and trans.) Miličević Ognjenka, (Belgrade: Nolit, 1976) p. 207
62. Sitkovetskaia (ed.), *Meierkhol'd repertiruct*, vol.1, p. 29
63. *ibid.*, p. 50
64. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 352
65. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p.231
66. Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 234
67. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.353
68. Gvozdev, 'Reviziiia Revizora' in *Meierkhol'd v russskoj teatral'noj kritike 1920-1938*, p.250
69. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.356
70. *Meierkhol'd repertiruct*, vol.1, p.47
71. *ibid.*, 47
72. *ibid.*, 78
73. Kaplan Emmanuil, 'Rezhisser i Muzyka' in *V'strechi s Meierkhol'dom*, p.339
74. *ibid.* p340
75. Tarshis Nadezhda 'O muzykal'nom realizme Meierkhol'da' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, p.354
76. Kirai Nina 'Put' ot melodii i ritma slova k opernomu spektakliu' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, p. 407
77. Tarshis Nadezhda 'O muzykal'nom realizme Meierkhol'da' in *Meierkhol'd, rezhissura v perspective veka*, p. 355
78. *V. E. Mejerholjd O Pozorištu*, p.203-204
79. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 229

80. Kukhta E., 'Revizor u Vs.Meierkhol'da i novaia drama', in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, p. 157-8
81. *ibid.*, p. 158-9
82. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.1, p.61
83. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 225
84. *ibid.*, pp.226-7
85. Quoted in Kukhta, 'Revizor u Vs.Meierkhol'da i novaia drama', in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, pp.161-162, TM.
86. Meierkhol'd, 'Iz vystuplenii raznykh let' in *Meierkhol'd: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, p. 65
87. *V. E. Mejerholjd O Pozorištu*, p. 208
88. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 229
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90. Rudnitskii, *Meierkhol'd Rezhisser*, p. 365
91. Gvozdev, 'Reviziia Revizora' 24 January 1927 in *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike 1920-1938*, p. 247
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108. Asaf'ev Boris to Meierkhol'd, in Meierkhol'd Vsevold, *Perepiska*, p.273, also in Glikman Isaak, *Meierkhol'd i muzykal'nyi teatr*, (Leningrad: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1989), p.339
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110. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p. 386-387
111. Jaffe Daniel, *Sergey Prokofiev*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p.122

112. Zolotnitskii, *Meierkhol'd: Roman s Sovetskoj Vlast'iu*, p. 208
113. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, p.414
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117. Maiakovskii Vladimir, *Pocmy, P'esy, Proza*, (ed.) Mikhailova A., (Moscow: Pravda, 1988), vol.2, p. 576
118. *ibid.*, p. 602
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## Chapter 7

### Meyerhold returns to Opera: *The Queen of Spades*, 1935

Meyerhold's musicalisation of the dramatic theatre revealed new possibilities in the rejuvenation of operatic art and captured the cultural spirit of the day. Boris Asafiev pointed out in 1927 that, as the reforms in the dramatic theatre incorporated music in the staging, this integration of the two disciplines should also encourage musicians to embrace theatrical richness in musical intonations and interpretations.<sup>1</sup> The musicalisation of the dramatic theatre extended the vocabulary of theatre and sought to revitalise the arts through their fusion. Asafiev perceived that an operatic performance should become an extension of theatre's possibilities and become a musical-theatrical art. He proclaimed: 'the theatre is moving towards music, it is ready for opera, musicians should also be artists of the theatre in order to achieve the necessary synthesis.'<sup>2</sup> Samuel Samosud was Artistic Director of the Maly Theatre and its principal conductor. His first encounter with Meyerhold's theatre took place in Tiflis in 1906 when the theatre was on tour; where he saw *The Death of Tintagiles* by Maeterlinck, *Love's Comedy* and *Ghosts* by Ibsen and *The Assumption of Hannele* by Hauptmann. Olga Dansker indicates that Samosud found Meyerhold's theatre overwhelming: 'it is possible that it was then the conductor fell in love with the theatre and realised that the role of the conductor is larger than that of wielding a baton.'<sup>3</sup> Samosud was interested in the amalgamation of music and drama, and he strongly promoted the idea of a fundamental theatricality in music. If music in dramatic theatre provided the means to produce a heightened art of performance, dramatisation of the operatic theatre in turn sought to affirm the dramatic thought – the 'real life' in opera. The merger between these arts invested each one with a greater

significance; the aim being to realise a particular utopia in the arts, to reveal a reality behind reality, to realise the full potential of artistic expression, thereby producing an all-encompassing experience and a commentary on life and society.

Meyerhold's work during the 1920s, which was strongly identified with the city of Moscow, was marked in the 1930s by his return to the aesthetics of St Petersburg, albeit enriched by the Soviet period. In 1932 he revived his 1910 production of *Don Juan* and, in the following year, *Masquerade* at the former Alexandrinsky Theatre. In 1934 he staged *The Lady of the Camellias* with Zinaida Raikh in the title role of Marguerite Gautier at the poorly equipped Passage Theatre in Moscow. He indicated that the purpose of this production was to 'raise the question of the treatment of women both in our country and under capitalism.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, this was true to a certain extent, but most likely the director was interested in realising the full potential of a total artwork, aestheticism and characterisation. The production demonstrated the splendour of Paris in the design, which was inspired by Renoir's paintings, a triumph of Raikh's talent and a unity of all stage components underlined by Vissarion Shebalin's score. It included forty-seven musical numbers out of which only four were repeated at key psychological and emotive moments. Here Meyerhold explored the counterpoint between stage action and music, using rhythmical contrasts between the main theme and different and opposing leitmotifs, thus creating new ways of merging temporal and spatial elements. The emphasis on the majestic beauty of design, contrasted with the sombre climate of the day, which rejected such extravagance as it alluded to past values superfluous to the needs of the proletariat. In such a way, Meyerhold directly challenged the cultural conventions of the time. Here it seems, his response to Stalin's forced collectivization, which resulted in

innumerable deaths and appalling famine throughout the country, was to call on the type of beauty and aesthetic harmony of Diaghilev.

During the 1930s Meyerhold's theatre found it hard to adapt to the cultural climate of the day. In 1932 the Central Committee resolution 'on the reformation of literary-artistic organizations' resulted in the liquidation of all independent artistic unions, organisations and groupings, including RAPP whose influence, nevertheless, was significant upon the dominant movement finally institutionalised. A single centralised Union of Soviet Writers, like its counterpart, the Union of Soviet Artists, enforced their own artistic rules on all movements within the arts. Between the years of 1932 and 1933, Stalin's five-year plan witnessed the Great Famine and unrest, notably in the Ukraine. Stalin's building of an advanced socialist state, like the construction of Peter the Great's visionary city and society, was paid for with many lives, while at the same time, artists were encouraged to celebrate the achievements of the Soviet state. This was also a decade of immense social turbulences in the west. The economic depression affecting many countries was particularly strong in Germany. Hitler rose to power in 1933, a single forceful philosophy and culture took the upper hand. In Russia, the second five-year plan was announced in 1934, while in the same year, the First Congress of the Writer's Union proclaimed socialist realism, defined by Andrei Zhdanov, was the only acceptable art form. In practice this meant expressing social values in art from the Communist Party's viewpoint. Theatres were encouraged to present peasants and workers overcoming obstacles so as to achieve socialist goals and to stage contemporary Soviet plays depicting the positive, socially useful and – as it was labelled – realistic nature of Soviet society, which meant the promotion of an enlightened proletarian reality that was proclaimed to exist and so validated to exist.

In a world strongly divided by the narrow conception of good and evil, and of 'us' and the 'enemy', relations between people were easily broken and critical inquiry and artistic innovation became dangerous territory for the director. On 1 December 1934, Kirov, the head of the Leningrad Communist Party, was mysteriously murdered, marking the beginning of the Great Terror, with its show trials and purges of so-called 'enemies of the people'. Meyerhold's 'unhealthy' distortions of reality and his past connections with Trotsky were not favoured by the ruling Party. It became apparent that his past 'sins' urgently needed to be amended.

It was against this political background that Pyotr Tchaikovsky's classic *The Queen of Spades* directed by Meyerhold and conducted by Samuel Samosud opened on 25 January 1935 at the Maly Opera Theatre in Leningrad. The production, which took over four months to rehearse, marked the director's return to opera after seventeen years. In a socialist realistic culture, the stylised form of opera offered further opportunity for Meyerhold's development of musical realism in theatre.

The artistic policy of the Maly Opera Theatre was based upon creating new works of the theatre, particularly stimulating the creation of Soviet opera. The Maly reopened after the Revolution in 1921. In these early Soviet years the theatre was encouraged to bring mass audiences to opera by the use of more easily acceptable genres; initial productions were *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini and *The Song Birds* by Offenbach.<sup>5</sup> However, the Maly aspired to reaching beyond the genre of chamber opera and producing a new form of contemporary opera. Asafiev, a keen promoter of new work, vigorously advocated Arseny Gladkovsky's opera *For Red Petrograd*. With the

advice of Samosud the new opera opened in 1925, while the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution was marked by the productions of Mayakovsky's poems *Twenty five* and *Good*. Nevertheless, as Dansker points out, these productions were still far from the conductor's conception of contemporary opera.<sup>6</sup> Samosud then turned to the staging of two works by the left-wing German composer Ernst Krenek, *Der Sprung über den Schatten* and *Jonny spielt auf*. Both productions conveyed a satirical view of the West, and a pointed use of rhythm, jazz and unusual melodic lines. In the following years the theatre presented Shostakovich's operas *The Nose* (1930) and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* (1934). These innovative theatre experiments, were closely aligned to the artistic credo of the Association of Contemporary Music (ASM), that is with Meyerhold's fellow comrades in the arts.

The Maly's innovative approach to classics in particular brought new ways of looking at operatic art. The reforms in staging classical works of drama or opera, as exemplified by Meyerhold, strove to eliminate all the out-dated and lifeless modes of performance so as to reveal the subtext or the 'real' artistic value of the work to the contemporary spectator. In discussing the staging of Bizet's *Carmen* in 1933, Samosud proclaimed: 'To free *Carmen* from the platitudinous – that is our task.'<sup>7</sup> The conductor aimed to reach the heart of Bizet's art, the drama's reality, by eliminating all melodramatic effects and their vulgarisation of the opera's heroes. In approaching the staging of *The Queen of Spades* the intention of both director and conductor was to create a real musical tragedy, avoiding the usual operatic conventions and bringing real characters onto the stage, where both the meaning of their words and the music would be heard. The synthesis between realism and stylisation, 'real people' and singing, the lessening of the divide between theatre and opera, and the move away

from the artificiality associated with operatic characterisation once again strikingly recall the power of Chaliapin's art.

*The Queen of Spades*, with its premiere in 1890 in St Petersburg, pointed in new directions. Tchaikovsky, being one of the first graduates of Rubenstein's Conservatoire, which opened in 1862 and was based on the western and classical traditions, opposed the Russian nationalist composers in his music, namely the group of Five. The composer initiated a new form of Russian music that merged with western styles, although his work strongly reflected the Russian temperament. *The Queen of Spades*, like his opera *Eugene Onegin*, brought to life distinctive St. Petersburg characters. So it is of no surprise that the World of Art members worshipped the composer, his unique Russian cosmopolitanism in art. The hallucinatory subject of the opera and the intense emotionalism of the score, that also included extensive pastiche of eighteenth-century musical models, signalled the approach of Russian modernism, which began in the middle of the 1890s.

The opera's text was by the composer's brother, Modest Tchaikovsky, after a short story written by Pushkin in 1834. The libretto departs from the original story significantly. In Pushkin's version Hermann stops at nothing to learn the secret of the Countess's three winning cards at the gaming table, even seducing her poor orphaned relative, Lisa, in the attempt. Tchaikovsky's opera creates a more romantic interpretation of the story, where Hermann's affection for Lisa, who this time is the Countess granddaughter, is more genuine. Here, in an 'operatically speaking' common twist, Lisa is engaged to an aristocrat whom she does not love. In both versions Hermann is an outsider, a commoner amongst aristocrats, but in the opera,



Lisa's noble status reinforces the idea of Hermann's need to attain wealth in order to marry her. As in Pushkin, Tchaikovsky's Hermann, haunted by his obsession with the three cards, forces the Countess to reveal her secret, but the latter, terrified, dies before Hermann's dreams are made real. Subsequently, the Countess's ghost appears before the main character, naming the three cards – three, seven, ace. In the final act Tchaikovsky introduces a scene between Lisa and Hermann by the Winter Canal, thereby further emphasising the romantic theme. In Pushkin's story, by contrast, the focus is on the male gamblers. In the true tradition of operatic spectacle, Lisa drowns herself, and Hermann, having lost at cards in the opera's final scene, commits suicide. Pushkin, on the other hand, leads his hero from the gambling house to the asylum, leaving Lisa to marry a civil servant.

In approaching the opera, Meyerhold's intention was to elevate the work of Pushkin and to find the writer's thoughts in Tchaikovsky's score. In order to reveal the true sense of the opera, Meyerhold believed that it was necessary to alter its libretto. In his article 'Pushkin and Tchaikovsky' Meyerhold reasoned that, in composing the music, Tchaikovsky drew on the writer's tale: 'when we closely examine the opera we see that Tchaikovsky presented us with Pushkin's conception by the means he had at his disposal.'<sup>8</sup> Meyerhold thus perceived that, even though the original libretto was distorted in relation to the original text, the subtext of Pushkin's story was sustained in Tchaikovsky's score. He claimed that Modest's text strongly reflected the decayed cultural climate of Alexander III's late Imperial Russia.<sup>9</sup> The main alteration of the original tale in the libretto was the result of Vsevolozhsky's instructions, who, as Director of Imperial Theatres, had set the opera in the reign of Catherine the Great. Tchaikovsky in turn had to obey the dictates of the Imperial Theatres, who had

commissioned the opera. Therefore, Meyerhold and Valentin Stenich wrote a new libretto, where the intention was, as Meyerhold announced, not to follow 'Pushkin pedantically, but to lift the seeds hidden at the base of his novel.'<sup>10</sup> Their enquiry into the amalgamation of Pushkin's and Tchaikovsky's language laid the ground for reassessing the opera's genre, its themes and form.

The notion of opposing operatic convention and ridding it of routine coincided with the distinctive socialist view of politics in opera. The idea of constructing new librettos was popular in the two decades after the revolution. For example, Asafiev believed that in staging operas there should be a re-examination of librettos and music and, if required, a necessary alteration of their elements.<sup>11</sup> It has been discussed that the lack of original Revolutionary operas prompted the writing of new librettos for old works, as was the case, when the opera *Les Huguenots* became *The Decembrists*. Meyerhold stripped Modest's libretto of its social context to reveal the true artistic value of Pushkin's tale to the contemporary spectator. He studied the entire range of Pushkin's work and subsequently changed the historical period of the opera from the late eighteenth century to Pushkin's era of the 1830s, where the original text had been set. By doing this, he was not only participating in the cultural movement of the time but was, once again, paying homage to the spirit of the World of Art movement.

The new libretto intensified the focus on the social context of the characters and opened up possibilities for re-examining the canon. In the ball scene of Act II, the appearance of Catherine the Great was replaced with that of Tsar Nicholas II, thus emphasising the contrast between the Countess' eighteenth-century court and the nineteenth century of Hermann's world. In the music the clash between these two

worlds is conveyed by the juxtaposition of Mozartian grace, recreating the rococo past of St Petersburg, with an almost Wagnerian chromatic intensity in the scenes of horror. Adrian Piotrovsky wrote in the production's programme:

The musical language of Hermann and Lisa on the one side, and on the other the musical language of the Countess, upon whose characterisation Tchaikovsky was working, as he wrote, 'trying to forget that there was music after Mozart', is a language of different centuries, of antagonistic generations.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the change of period emphasised themes inherent in the score obscured in the original libretto. Asafiev wrote in the production's programme:

Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* is a deep artistic synthesis of layers and a complex process of the fall not only of feudalist society, but also attitudes, which came with the beginning of capitalism.... The psychology of a game, the philosophy of success, chance, winning, risks, or unsteady, treacherous, deceptive happiness, were taking the place of the old, established order of life.<sup>13</sup>

The focus upon social transition and conflict was pertinent at the time, given the accelerated social changes of the period and Meyerhold's gradual alienation from the centralised cultural environment during the 1930s.

In seeking to define the opera's true meaning, realise its full potential and extend its generic boundaries, Meyerhold aimed to delve beneath the tradition of grand opera. He believed that, 'we have to help the diseased organism – operatic theatre, which, from our point of view, is in a horrible state: those theatres, with their superior status raise barriers, they do not let anything fresh out.'<sup>14</sup> Although the revolution instigated a re-assessment of past values, the main opera houses in Leningrad and Moscow preserved the tradition of the Imperial theatres insofar as their high cultural status implied the production of exemplary art, with all its opulent sets and star singers. The preservation of this tradition was perhaps due to the fact that the term 'high culture',

in the socialist context, as in bygone age, implied a certain economic and symbolic status of the country. Meyerhold had parodied the Bolshoi's 'beautiful' methods of staging opera and ballet in his production of Vsevolod Vishnevsky's *The First Cavalry Army* in 1931. He objected to the complacency that tended to reproduce methods of staging which obscured the social relevance of art and its genuine development.

Hence, the production was supposed to be an exemplary work, which would reveal the true value of the art of opera. Samosud recalled that *The Queen of Spades* at the Mariinsky theatre, with Nikolai Pechkovsky in the title role, had prompted Meyerhold to re-stage the same opera.<sup>15</sup> Meyerhold dismissed Pechkovsky's interpretation of Hermann and with it the tradition of grand operatic singing. To him, the demonstration of solely vocal ability, led to a theatre without thought (*mysl'*) – the theatre against which he was fighting.<sup>16</sup> In the role of Hermann he cast Nikolai Koval'sky, a singer not of great acclaim, but who, according to Meyerhold, had a great intellectual sensibility. During rehearsals the director sought to fill the production with thoughts, since he believed that 'there should be a thought in everything: Can we, grown up people, do this work if there are no thoughts in it?'<sup>17</sup> The thought or problem he set himself before directing provided him with the guiding principle in the staging.

In re-interpreting the opera, Meyerhold aimed to eliminate the notion of cheap romanticism, which had been encouraged in the original libretto. The character of Yeltsky, Lisa's suitor, who represents family happiness and the opera's positive resolve, was cut. Hermann's status of a poor engineer's officer was restored. The grand operatic portrayal of romantic experience was replaced with the new

interpretation of Lisa, performed by Agrippina Sokolova, based on Pushkin's tale. Sokolova indicated that Lisa 'became a poor relative in the Countess's home, an unhappy, lonely girl, truthfully and passionately loving Hermann. The heroic pathos disappeared, that psychological despair which had previously characterised the performance of the part.'<sup>18</sup> Thus Lisa was seen to be living in a society to which she did not really belong, like a Pierrot from *The Fairground Booth*. Neither Lisa nor Hermann died in Meyerhold's version, the outcome being potentially more unsettling. During rehearsals he proclaimed: 'Lisa is a victim of chance, thrown on to the tracks of life. You are a flower being stamped upon for no reason.'<sup>19</sup> Lisa became an innocent victim to no avail, while the romantic pathos was subdued in Hermann, in favour of his destructive attraction to gambling. The new reading of the roles and plot thus rejected the notion of a tragic, romantic spectacle and, as such, discarded the conventional operatic pathos.

As Meyerhold aimed to get away from the accepted manner of operatic portrayal, he also strove to free Tchaikovsky's opera from the superficial grandeur of the Imperial stages. Alexander Fevralsky emphasised that, 'Meyerhold cleansed the classical piece of cheap and false tradition'<sup>20</sup> Meyerhold stressed that Vsevolozhsky commissioned the ball scene. The director believed that it was necessary to reduce its cast and sumptuousness as these obscured the drama: 'We are not interested in a costume display. We have a small number of actors in the ball, they hardly move, they are boring and they are directed in that state.'<sup>21</sup> The usual sense of grandiose splendour, of a stunningly costumed crowd, was removed. The chorus was placed in the orchestra and in areas on the stage, thereby producing new ways of hearing the music. The spare use of movement and the director's insistence on monotony in

characterisation, produced a sense of dreariness, suggesting that this was a dead social routine repeated over and over again. Instead of following the operatic convention of displaying the mastery of chorus or ballet, Meyerhold redefined its function and produced a commentary in the production. Piotrovsky pointed out that the ball, which had previously stood out from the realistic line of the opera, became an integral part of it, down to the smallest detail.<sup>22</sup> The chorus had a clear dramatic purpose, to create a defined social context for the main character. Meyerhold indicated that 'the ball should be a background, where the main theme of Hermann is preserved.'<sup>23</sup> In this way Meyerhold dramatised the opera, by subordinating operatic convention to the service of the dramatic thought and conceptual unity of the production.

Hermann was present throughout the production. Meyerhold proclaimed: 'I am deliberately putting Hermann in all the scenes.'<sup>24</sup> He cut the characters unnecessary to the development of the drama. For example, in the episode of Lisa's room, her friends were removed from the stage, so as to intensify the portrayal of Lisa and the scene between the two main protagonists. The direction was focused on the central character even when he was not on the stage. While rehearsing the scene in the Countess's bedroom, Meyerhold noted that 'usually until Hermann appears in this scene we don't feel him. He should be felt from the beginning, in the music.'<sup>25</sup> The orchestra, as all other elements of performance, was supposed to follow the main thought of the production, which was the thorough study of Hermann.

The stage space intensified the sense of the repressed post-Decembrist society. The designer of *The Queen Spades* was Leonid Chupyatov, a member and promoter of the World of Art (1916-1918). His design was the production's weakest point according

to most reviews of the time, particularly in the colours used. However, archive materials show that Meyerhold played a vital part in the construction of the scenic space and its details.<sup>26</sup> Rather than using the depth of the stage, Meyerhold changed the stage perspective by moving his actors close to the front edge of the stage. He drew a triangle from the proscenium edge to the back. The diagonal lines shortened the stage space and produced a new sense of dynamics. The closed space, with no depth of perspective, produced a sense of a stifling atmosphere.

This sense of compressed space reinforced Meyerhold's emphasis on the theme of the gambler, a man with boiling yet restrained passions, an image so strongly ingrained in the social period and which repeatedly reappeared in the director's work. Whether winning or losing at cards, the gambler epitomised man's play with destiny, with life and death, as in *The Lady of Camellias* when Armand won at cards but lost his love and the meaning of his life. It is interesting to note that during this period Meyerhold once again planned to stage Prokofiev's opera *The Gambler*.

In aiming to integrate the work of Pushkin and Tchaikovsky in the production and to sow the seeds of this obsession with gambling, Meyerhold altered the balance between the text and the music. Contrary to his previous opera direction, he made score changes with Samosud to the extent of cutting 445 bars. In the first scene the action of the original libretto was moved from the Summer Garden to Narumov's gaming house, in reference to the opera's literary roots, where new words were set to the music. The children's marching song was given to a girl in Hussar's attire who entertained the gamblers. In support of his changes of scene, Meyerhold pointed out that Tchaikovsky himself was unsure about the first scene set in the Summer Garden, especially with the wet-nurses coming on and off the stage depending on whether the

soloists are singing, as it can appear as operatic buffoonery.<sup>27</sup> He also suggested that the music does not specifically convey a children's march. Therefore, he claimed the scene change was both true to its literal as well as musical origins. Once again, as in *Masquerade*, the first scene introduced the central theme of the gambler.

This altered balance between music and text provoked heated debates amongst musical and theatrical circles, where the first scene was particularly disappointing to some critics. Isaac Glikman writes that the musical motif of the children's march is not applicable to the atmosphere of a gaming house and that, as Tchaikovsky had collaborated with his brother in the construction of the libretto, it should not have been changed, particularly since the composer himself had praised it.<sup>28</sup> However, it could be argued that Tchaikovsky was influenced by the conditions of the operatic genre or the prevailing tastes of the day, while a closer investigation into his music reveals the true inspiration of Pushkin. To some reviewers the problem of changing the score in relation to the new libretto, which was still not Pushkin's text and not completely removed from Modest's version, obscured the music in certain places. The musical critic, Samuil Gres attacked the changed emphasis in the opera: 'it is not about love and death anymore.'<sup>29</sup> According to Gres, the original tale and the opera were thematically different works of art. However, Meyerhold believed, it was precisely the removal of the original operatic pathos that would reveal the strength of this classical work. Even though his changes were perhaps uneven in places, Meyerhold's treatment of the text and music should be viewed in relation to his overall staging of the performance, which was based on his own musical dramaturgy.

These operatic reforms were pursued with the aim of stimulating new associations and responses within the audience, which would in turn breed a new and critical view of



the world. In the production's programme the director wrote: 'Tchaikovsky gave us his own view on the path taken by Pushkin's creation and he was moved precisely by Pushkin's imagination and thoughts.'<sup>30</sup> Meyerhold in turn produced his own view of the opera so as to communicate with the contemporary audience. He believed that a man of the new contemporary socialist culture wanted to see the world transformed in art, and so 'our aim should not be to present Hermann like Tchaikovsky saw him, or to see Hermann, like Pushkin saw him.'<sup>31</sup> Meyerhold argued that the artist should present his own modern critical vision of Hermann. In thus defining the role of the contemporary artist, he was fighting for the right to interpret and create his own works of art, for a space to preserve his individual freedom.

The counterpoint between the scenic action and the music sustained the complexity of meanings in the production, away from schematic representation, for example, from the use of large gestures to express the raising of feeling as the orchestra plays a crescendo. During his tenure at the Imperial theatres, Meyerhold explored the parallel relationship between movement and music, while, in *The Queen of Spades* he created a contrapuntal fusion between them. The action, words and music would sometimes contradict each other, creating a grotesque effect. For instance, when directing Koval'sky to leave the ball, Meyerhold required the singer to exit at a slow tempo in contrast to the musical crescendo: 'Don't accentuate the intensification in the music. You brought the intensification.'<sup>32</sup> However, there were points of unison between music and action, as when Hermann entered Lisa's room. Here, according to Meyerhold, the unison could be created because it was to the point.<sup>33</sup> This suggests, as Nadezhda Vel'ter, who performed the Countess, indicates, 'Meyerhold aimed towards an original counterpoint, when movement anticipated the music for a second, or

appeared as its echo. But, when it was necessary, he asked for a unity of gesture and harmony.<sup>34</sup> Actors were supposed to add to or communicate with the music, which in turned enhanced the dynamics of the score. The play between the counterpoint and the unity of staging and music, and sudden breaks and contrasting rhythms, challenged the audience's expectations as the stage action proceeded in a dynamic and unexpected way.

A musical order framed the production. This was reflected in Meyerhold's documentation of the performance titled 'The director's score of *The Queen of Spades*'. The interplay of different disciplines in the opera sought to underline the subtext of the drama and the music. The stage action sustained musical themes, which provoked a new perception of the music. For instance, during rehearsals of the ball scene Meyerhold pointed out:

It is possible to build the plan of the scene, to create the relationship between the guests and the spectacle, to create the state of Lisa and Hermann at the ball, by which, regardless of the ongoing spectacle, we can follow them, listening to the music, where as if cut off from the main musical concept they appear as an independent musical piece.<sup>35</sup>

The focus on the series of intimate scenes between Lisa and Hermann, removed them from the events around them, as if they were classless people. Such construction of scenic-musical events was a constant feature of the performance.

By bringing the two genres of literature and opera closer together, Meyerhold created his own author's theatre, his own interpretation of the score. The performance was once again constructed along episodic lines, which in conjunction with one another produced associations and meanings. In response to critical attacks, particularly on the question of love, Meyerhold underlined:

Love is not removed from the opera. Even though in the first scene characters don't talk about love, music covers the gap between what is said and what is expressed in the score, which leads the spectator to fully understand Hermann's behaviour in Lisa's room.<sup>36</sup>

Meyerhold's musical dramaturgy conveyed Hermann's state of mind. The discrepancy between what was said – the music and the action, permeated the production and ultimately created its meaning. As Kopytova notes the introduced dissonance between the score and words was brought together in the fourth episode – 'Lisa's Room'.<sup>37</sup> The stage was revealed in almost full light, evoking St Petersburg's white nights. Meyerhold's score of *The Queen of Spades* describes the precise directions for Hermann's entrance:

In the first seven bars Hermann appears through a window, Lisa runs up the stairs towards her room. On the seventh bar Hermann opens the door and on the eight bar he enters her room.... After the movement a 'word battle' follows...than again a dumb scene – Hermann puts his gun into his jacket, goes upstage and stops. The passionate music accompanies his confessions of love, his plea to be heard.... The arioso, 'Forgive, celestial creation' (*sosdanie nebesnoe*) is filled with tender feelings.... The voice of the Countess is heard, a new and tragic element in the music is introduced. Sharp and nervous rhythms express Hermann's obsession with the three cards.... Lisa urges him to leave.... The love duet confirms the pure image of love.... The last nine bars are a dumb scene.... On the last three bars the main curtain slowly lowers, Lisa falls on the divan.<sup>38</sup>

The above description shows how Meyerhold directed in close correspondence with the score. Thus as Kopytova points out 'in creating a director's, author's spectacle, correcting and changing the libretto, Meyerhold was more than ever directly drawing from the music.'<sup>39</sup> The counterpoint between the music and the staging emphasised the turmoil in Hermann's mind, strongly expressed in Tchaikovsky's score. This emphasis on opposing feelings, developed in the relationship between scenic actions and the music, in turn, showed the director's unique reading of the score.

This build up of associations between different episodes reinforced certain themes in the production, condensing once again, as in *Revizor*, the sense of time and place. The second act was transformed into four episodes. Meyerhold's score of the performance describes its staging. In the fifth episode of the production – 'Before the Ball' – the main curtain opened up the front of the stage, while the back of the triangular area was disguised by two small curtains. The use of curtains allowed the director to create almost filmic shots of the events, that is, close ups as well as wide shots. The arrival of the guests, accompanied by the choral song evoking the excitement of the ball, was halted for four bars on Hermann's entrance, who fleetingly crossed the stage and disappeared. The repeated entrances of this dark figure justified the gossip about his strange behaviour. The effect of the love theme introduced on his receipt of Lisa's letter was quickly subverted by his friends teasing him about the three cards. The episode finished on Hermann's words 'I am a madman!' and his rapid exit. Then the two small curtains were raised and the whole triangular stage was revealed, introducing the sixth episode – 'The Ball'. The Countess and guests sat to watch the performed pantomime. Hermann entered, passed the note to Lisa, sat next to her for a while then left the stage.<sup>40</sup> In this episode the intimate scenes between Lisa and Hermann reminded the audience of their 'love' leitmotif, which would be further developed in the following episode – 'Meeting with Lisa'. In the previous episode the theme of the solitary brooding figure of the main hero was explored, anticipating his madness resolved in the finale. The theme of the gun introduced in Lisa's room, suggesting the gambler's playing with life, was later developed in the episode of the Countess' bedroom. This gradual building up of associations emphasised the development of the main musical lines of the production.

Each episode carried a new thought and was subordinated to the main theme of the production – the image of Hermann. Meyerhold's score further describes how 'The Ball' finished with a choral song celebrating love. On words 'the end of troubles had come' the large curtain was slowly lowered down, behind it the seventh episode – 'Meeting with Lisa' was prepared. Here the stage was again divided by two small curtains, highlighting the intimate scenes. Hermann by chance bumped into the Countess, played by Vel'ter.<sup>41</sup> The singer describes this moment:

For a moment they almost touched and here also they moved away from each other, dying away in some strange raccourci. The semi-dark projector lit only these two distorted faces...their meeting was a tragic contrast to the fun of others, not in unison with the rhythm of other moving persons.<sup>42</sup>

The emphasis on the Countess-Hermann meeting prepared the ground for the scene in the Countess's bedroom. The sense of disorder and tragic doom was quickly changed by a theme of love, when Lisa gave the key to the Countess's house to Hermann. The dissonances between these two themes were resolved in Hermann's affirmation of his determination to find out the secret. By concluding with and highlighting the Countess-Hermann theme in this episode, Meyerhold provided an ironic commentary on Hermann's feelings of love.

The counterpoint between the music and the staging, the contrasting rhythms and tones, evoked a distorted notion of romantic love. At the ball, in place of the traditional pastoral, which is an innocent dance of shepherds and shepherdesses, Meyerhold devised a concert trio and a *commedia* interlude reminiscent of his St Petersburg period. Here, once again, Meyerhold collaborated with his *commedia* expert, Vladimir Solovyov, who helped him devise the interlude. As in *Masquerade* the doubling of the action was sustained by the masked characters. In the pantomime Tartaglia received a love letter, while at the same time, Hermann gave his note to

Lisa. But the letter proved to be just a mocking ruse. When Tartaglia went to find his lover, the servants put a blanket over him and took him away from the stage.<sup>43</sup> The *commedia* characters echoed Lisa's tragedy, showing a dream-like representation of Hermann's reality. The pantomime was intercut with a famous romance given to singers holding notes and singing in Meyerhold's words, 'not in a Russian but in the Italian style.'<sup>44</sup> This focus on the Italian style of operatic singing was interspersed with a mocking pantomime-like tonality, which subverted its melodramatic and romantic associations, suggesting an absence of real feeling. As in *The Government Inspector*, the theme was taken up and then developed by a different tonality in the staging. The contrasts created the grotesque effect. The play between reality and fantasy, the overstated romantic connotations in singing with the satiric pantomime, all set against the main action of hero, demonstrated a certain social critique.

Meyerhold's use of the fantastical in staging served the purpose of revealing certain social and inner 'truths', and intensifying his commentary in the production. The disparity between reality and fantasy is at the core of both Pushkin's tale and the opera's score. Tchaikovsky's music of the opera is permeated by the sense of fate. In the programme notes Matvei Kalaushin points out that the epigraph of the novel '*The Queen of Spades* means a secret malevolence' and is taken by Pushkin from a fortune-telling book and indicates the main theme of the tale – Hermann's malevolent destiny.<sup>45</sup> The metaphysical element, the sense of fate and doom, must have appealed to Meyerhold given his treatment of the subject in both *The Government Inspector* and *Masquerade*. So it is of no surprise that in directing *The Queen of Spades*, Meyerhold took Pushkin's line in the fifth act as a starting point: 'This night the deceased Countess appeared before me...she was all in white and she said to me:

Hello, Mr. Councillor.' In this epigraph Meyerhold found a unity between the elements of fantasy, mystery and reality, which became the key idea in his staging of the opera.<sup>46</sup> The play between such opposing concepts, the sense of horror evoked in the epigraph, was supposed to shed a new light on reality.

In this play of contrasts Meyerhold once again turned to his use of the grotesque. The ninth episode, 'The Countess's Bedroom', began with an orchestral introduction, where the music of Hermann's love confession was heard in a deformed tonality, suggesting the disintegration of any hope of future happiness. The director's score describes how Hermann moved quickly up the stairs, halting at the Countess' portrait. The chorus behind the stage sang the servants' song of greeting to the Countess.<sup>47</sup> Here Meyerhold directed the servant to run to the fire place and in a deformed pose – stretched arms, head askew on her shoulder – to warm the Countess' shoes, whose legs are raised.<sup>48</sup> The staging was supposed to produce the effect of a dream-like, not ugly, reality. Thus Meyerhold pointed out:

*The Queen of Spades* is a continuous fantasy. It is a complete disorder and that's why every detail in the production should create the same impression of a fantasy. That is why you cannot just simply run into the room and warm your legs, but everything should be a bit deformed.<sup>49</sup>

The grotesque effect in the staging reflected not only Hermann's discordant mind, but also the deformity of an unreal society. The scene ended with the same introductory music, but transformed into a more tragic tonality. This dream-like misshapen world was a comment on the director's own reality, as it echoed his personal tragedy, that was his great difficulty in adapting to the surrounding social environment.

Meyerhold throughout his career strove to achieve a heightened form of reality on the stage, an alternative way of seeing things. In the production he aimed to realise the

full potential of art, its subtle play between reality and fantasy. The sense of magic was sustained in his use of space. The art historian, Nikolai Tarabukin, wrote an analysis of how Meyerhold created the effect of space and time moves in the *Queen of Spades*. He indicates that the director incorporated a tradition seen in ancient art, as in Egyptian reliefs, where the human figure is shown to be in different physical positions in one moment, or in Russian iconography, where the person occupies different spaces, as if standing both inside and outside a church at the same time. Meyerhold used this method in decorative art, where different spaces seem to merge into and out of each other, revealing a shift of place and time without a change of scenery. Tarabukin gives the example of Hermann when he came to the window of Lisa's room from the street, entered through it and got into the house. The spectator without a change of scenery was made to see two spatial plans.<sup>50</sup> This revolutionary theatrical visual realisation of time and space allowed the audience to experience an alternative reality – art's potential miracle.

The sense of mystery and doom was highlighted in the return of the mysterious character, the Stranger. In the twelfth episode, 'The Gaming House', to the surprise of everyone, Hermann started to play cards, winning the first two rounds. His aria, while drunk with victory and assured of success, was followed by the appearance of the Stranger. Braun describes this:

Hermann's fatal challenge was taken up neither by Yeletsky (as in Tchaikovsky) nor by Pushkin's Muscovite gambler Chekalinsky, but by a figure called 'The Stranger' invented by Meyerhold - a characteristic flourish which stirred memories of the infernal emissaries of his Petersburg days, yet was in no way inconsistent with the mood of Pushkin's tale.<sup>51</sup>

The play between reality and fantasy was once again explored in this character; the mysterious became tangible personified in this human figure. Upon the Stranger's



words which challenged Hermann, the Countess arrived unnoticed and sat at the gaming table. Hermann's assurance of victory, 'My ace!', followed with the voice of the Countess, 'No! Your queen loses!'<sup>52</sup> As in *Masquerade* and *The Government Inspector*, the metaphysical coincided with the real as the Stranger stamped his tragic mark on the main protagonist. However, the difference was, as Meyerhold stated, 'if society had hired the Stranger to take vengeance against Arbenin for his disdain for society, the Stranger in *The Queen of Spades* takes vengeance against Hermann for his attempt to enter society, for the attempt of the outsider to rise above the established order.'<sup>53</sup> The modern aspiration of individualism, of the human desire to reach new heights, to challenge the set order, to determine one's own destiny, were all doomed in this repressed society. Piotrovsky saw in the production the condemned bourgeois idea of the solitary conqueror of life.<sup>54</sup> But was this only a bourgeois idea of a bygone age? This leitmotif signalled the approach of the director's own tragedy, whose card – the symbol of fate – was soon to put an end to the gambler's game with his own life and with his provocative artistic play with society around him. The tension between individualism and society was most pertinent during this time, when the development of humanist thought was experiencing a trial, both in the Soviet Union and in the western world.

As was the case with *Masquerade*, the production showed that the tragedy began and ended at the gaming table. The twelfth episode began with a chorus of 37 male voices and 28 mixed ones. Alexander Fevralsky describes it:

On a relatively small space lots of people are staged...a play of hands is worked out excellently, the colour of costumes and accessories colourfully accompany the singing of the choir. In this scene there is a development of the device used in the construction of the episode, 'A Fine Celebration' in *Revizor*.<sup>55</sup>

Meyerhold incorporated elements he had explored on the dramatic stage, such as the accentuation of hand movements. The triangular stage perspective together with a huge colourful rug, which hanging behind the human bodies dominated over them, produced the sense of confinement. In this environment Hermann's isolation, his mental and emotional state almost became justified, his boiling passions needed to burst out. The careless fun was interrupted with his entrance, when the music assumed an almost tragic quality, culminating in his loss at cards and his loss of hope.

Thus the gambler had gone mad, emotionally broken like Arbenin and put in a strait jacket like the Town Mayor. Meyerhold added the last scene in the mental hospital in line with Pushkin's story, where the same music of the barracks episode was repeated. But this time, Hermann was all alone without a ghost to point the way forward. Here Meyerhold indicated: 'There is a bed. Hermann is all in white. Vrubel, 'Insomnia'. Broken lines of the duvet, of covers... horribly broken, deformed... Take everything from there.'<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Vrubel's themes of anguish and premonition of total disaster were echoed in Meyerhold's production. Vrubel's fragmentary compositions, posing questions of good and evil, strength and sadness, notably in his paintings of *The Demon*, expressed his search for a greater spirituality, monumentality, for a heroic personality. Hermann's image behind the hospital bars echoed the painter's personal tragedy.

The finale brought together Meyerhold's versatile play between both Tchaikovsky's score and Pushkin's tale, demonstrating his desire to create a complex philosophical operatic theatre. The cards were spread all over the floor, the main curtain was lowered slowly, Hermann fell on the bed. The music of the barracks episode was then

transformed into the last nine bars of the gaming scene expressing the theme of love, which is Tchaikovsky's finale.<sup>57</sup> Pushkin's story, on the other hand, finishes on an ironic note towards Hermann. Gvozdev supported the director's decision in the finale:

Tchaikovsky does not view the image of Hermann ironically, and in my opinion Meyerhold here rightly moved away from Pushkin's story and left Tchaikovsky as the author of the opera, whose main character was still firmly based on Pushkin's original.<sup>58</sup>

In returning Hermann's thoughts to Lisa and to a tender image of love, Meyerhold intensified the play between madness, fantasy and reality, and the conflict between genuine feeling and social aspirations, which were at the core of his interpretation of the opera. Gérard Abensour indicates that there is a hypothesis that Samosud urged Meyerhold not to finish the opera on a depressing note, but to follow the laws of the opera's poetics, which should gain the upper hand over Pushkin's prose.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, in this sense of enlightenment evoked in the score, Meyerhold was supposed to suggest that 'death-love-resurrection' would be there for the central character. On the other hand, having stripped the opera of melodramatic inclinations, rather than complying with this particular operatic convention, Meyerhold highlighted the inherent conflicts in Hermann. By giving no resolutions in the finale, since the romantic connotations contradicted the treatment of the main character, the director's score remained open, posing questions.

The image of Hermann linked certain players of modern history and culture into one character. Hermann gave a sense of a nineteenth century archetype, insofar as the role epitomized characteristics which were emblematic of a nineteenth-century man with his social aspirations and sense of displacement. Panteleimon Grachev perceived that Hermann 'feels in himself supreme power, but cannot find its realisation.' According to him, Hermann evoked various associations, such as the Decembrists, the destinies

of Pushkin and Lermontov, Napoleon's legend in Russia and contains traits of Tchaikovsky himself.<sup>60</sup> Koval'sky affirmed this:

Meyerhold's Hermann is a social type of the Nicholas period, having the unifying characteristics of that time. In him there are traits of Balzac's heroes, Stendhal, and Lermontov. Apart from that, Hermann is a solitary figure, reserved, alienated from everyone.<sup>61</sup>

By evoking the destinies of writers of the Nicholas period, Meyerhold underlined the problematic relationship between the artist-intellectual and the despotic government.

A sense of a doomed faith, social desires, dissatisfaction, greed for life, desolation, loneliness and Hamlet's introspection, created an in-depth study of the character.<sup>62</sup>

The dominance of his image in Meyerhold's direction highlighted the tragic destiny of this nineteenth-century archetype, of a man who was born with the coming of modernity. This image rose up before contemporary spectators, who themselves were torn between the complexities of modern history and change.

By applying Pushkin's thoughts to Tchaikovsky's music, Meyerhold emphasised the sense of Hermann's manic and tormented consciousness. In the first scene Hermann's aria, traditionally about love, was now about gambling. 'How terrifying it is' the musicologist Andrei Budiakovsky wrote, 'to sing about cards with such passion...this is not in Tchaikovsky or Pushkin.'<sup>63</sup> Although Pushkin's Hermann is a man who strives to gain power and is torn between feverish imagination and strong desires, the writer created a more distanced portrayal of the character through his sense of irony in the writing. His gambler theme, on the other hand, applied to Tchaikovsky's intense emotional power in the music, further emphasised the distorted state of Hermann's mind. It was precisely through this over-exaggerated romantic passion when applied to cards that Meyerhold intensified his portrayal of the main character.

This sense of a split, fervent and tormented consciousness inspired multiple associations in the audience. Budiakovsky saw in the character 'the pricking consciousness of the psychological realism of Dostoyevsky.'<sup>64</sup> Kopytova writes that 'part of the audience perceived Hermann as manic.'<sup>65</sup> Konstantin Derzhavin believed that 'the theme of the production became fatalistic romantic passions'<sup>66</sup> The strong sense of passion in this driven character resulted in Pavel Gromov seeing Meyerhold himself in Hermann.<sup>67</sup> As it was for Hermann, Meyerhold's own card of the queen of spades was just around the corner, waiting to avenge his strong imagination, passions and ambition.

The sense of split personality explored in the image of the gambler alludes to Boris Grigor'ev's portrait of Meyerhold painted in 1916, which shows the two radically different sides of the director: in black clothes and white gloves Meyerhold strikes a theatrical, magician-like pose of a dandy, while behind him, Meyerhold in red uniform, points to the sky with an arrow. David Zolotnitsky writes that the two vividly contrasting images, reflect the tensions from which Meyerhold's creativity arose, neither of which could alone be enough.<sup>68</sup> Dr Dapertutto and the director of Imperial Theatres, although united for a short period of time in the early 1920s, were now in deep dispute. The various discourses that led to the centralisation of artistic policies, contained elements of Meyerhold's Soviet theatre, but by adopting only some of its facets superficially had become commonplace, thus directly opposing and repressing the director's creativity. But Meyerhold, like Hermann, could not free himself from himself. Like the Russified German Hermann, being displaced in the Russian Europeanised capital, Meyerhold during the 1930s increasingly experienced a

struggle with his own consciousness, as he was trying to make sense of his theatre and himself in this repressive climate.

The wide scope of ideas conveyed in the production could not have been possible without Meyerhold's attentive and detailed work with opera singers. His understanding of the art of the actor was crucial in making the opera alive. In relation to this Sokolova wrote:

First of all Meyerhold is a brilliant actor. Every demonstrated movement is taken in with an amazing ease. Every remark – a stimulus for the further development of the actor's art. And – what is most important – Meyerhold is able with great ease and speed to make the actor feel and understand the part.<sup>69</sup>

His intensive work over the years with actors and their training certainly played an important part in his direction of opera singers. His unique approach to operatic characterisation was evident, for instance, in his direction to Koval'sky, after Hermann realised that the Countess was dead:

If this scene is done as a central scene, it will be Pushkin's scene. If you are going to get frightened, if you are playing melodrama – nobody will believe you. There should be a complex construction. Here there are emotions all the time, which appear in waves. You are waiting for tears to come – yet you do not burst into tears, they become dry, or, in contrast, they appear when you least expect them.<sup>70</sup>

The director guided the opera singers to find a psychological truth in each moment in relation to the music, supported by the wealth of biographical detail from Pushkin's story. Meyerhold above all dramatised the opera by bringing dramatic thought in each action when working with singers.

Opera singers were supposed to sense the right tone in the music in order to follow the musical thoughts conveyed in the score. (*mysl partitury*). When asking Vel'ter, who played the Countess, to sing more softly, Meyerhold proclaimed: 'It is difficult for me

to find the Countess if there is too much music'<sup>71</sup> The strong volume of the voice would obscure the nuances, the subtle variations of the music, the musical thoughts. In Meyerhold's theatre there was no real difference between musical and dramatic thought – both these concepts sustained each other. So it is of no surprise that the director during rehearsals recalled Chaliapin's performances: 'Chaliapin always looked for an internal, psychological and thoughtful line in his material.'<sup>72</sup> By capturing the musical thoughts in the score, singers would portray their characters.

The play between stylisation and reality was evident in Meyerhold's acting methodology, as when the elaborate physical language aimed to express the character's experiences. Meyerhold believed that in opera there should be singing because there is no other way of expressing emotion. Asafiev considered that opera's musical language is organically linked with our emotions; it comes out from the emotionally filled word and it moves by the breath. Therefore, in singing we only recreate with a bigger intonation and expression the elements of the music-intonation of the living word.<sup>73</sup> As such, the musical dramaturgy is firmly based on principles of the living word and expression, yet it is heightened. It was in this way that the stylised form of opera fitted Meyerhold's conception of musical realism, that is, a new form of heightened realism which aimed to penetrate into the core of a given artwork so as to condense life and illuminate its truths.

In the production, Meyerhold once again engaged with enriching the blend between musical, poetic and dramatic elements of the text so as to penetrate deeper into its sense. The rewriting of the libretto was measured in relation to the realistic as well as poetic elements in the drama. The new libretto even incorporated some of Pushkin's

verse and was supposed not only to regain the opera's meaning, but also to improve characterisation and the flow and effect of the lines. For instance, Meyerhold changed Hermann's lines when looking at the Countess' portrait from 'I look at you' to 'I look at her' and 'from dreadful and strange face' to 'from a strange and dreadful face.'<sup>74</sup> The first line was altered because Hermann cannot in reality speak with the portrait. The director sought truthful qualities in the opera, while, the reversal of 'strange' and 'dreadful' was done in order to build up the intensity and effect of the line, the poetic elements of the drama.

Meyerhold strove to eliminate the operatic problem of movement in its unity with the sung word, that is, to abolish banal operatic gestures and poses. Characterisation in the opera drew elements from the actors' training. Vel'ter indicated that 'during rehearsals Meyerhold conducted biomechanical exercises.'<sup>75</sup> When rehearsing the opera, singers would sing particular scenes and Meyerhold would simultaneously execute the movement of their character. For instance, when directing Lisa's aria 'Why quiet tears', Meyerhold showed the principle of rejection and execution of action by suggesting that she move her head back before she puts it into her hands. The first movement can be in synchrony with the music while the final action could follow after the final chord in the music, thus finishing the thought in the music.<sup>76</sup> Meyerhold believed that this would enhance her performance:

There is more artistry than when together with the chord, because the movement can truthfully be delayed a little, like a pedal.... And tears will be sung with ease. This is crescendo, which has a lift, and when the breathing itself transforms into a sigh, the singing becomes the result of this breathing of the whole body...<sup>77</sup>

Meyerhold aimed to reach the emotional state of the character through his use of movement, which was as if coming out of the music connected to the breathing



pattern. The focus on the breathing, which is crucial for opera singers, is also important for dramatic actors, since the breath is closely related to the performer's thinking process and feelings. By finding the right physical form, the right placing and the movement of the body, Meyerhold sought to reveal the truth in each moment, through the unity of the physical, vocal and inner life of the performer.

Meyerhold's use of biomechanics was not an end itself but a means of achieving a correct tuning of the performer's body, which would put the opera singer on the right path in his characterisation of the role. Once the right physical and emotional base was created, the right impulse of the body, Meyerhold would let the performer develop his own image of the part. In relation to this Koval'sky wrote:

In first rehearsals my actor's will was a bit strangled by Meyerhold. It was important for him to rightly outline the image. When I felt for the first time the main characteristics of the part, his loneliness, introversion and diseased obsession with cards, Meyerhod gave me a complete freedom.<sup>78</sup>

Allowing the performer to develop his part further was indispensable to sustaining the sense of life in his performance. Improvisation and self-control were, for Meyerhold, crucial elements of acting. The director's tightly constructed composition was supposed to provide opera singers with a form within which they could realise their creativity so as to enrich both their performances and his own conception.

The basic biomechanical principle, reject-execute was also maintained in the interpretation of character generally, as previously strikingly demonstrated in his staging of *The Lady of Camellias*. Leonid Varpakhovsky, who worked with Meyerhold on the production, recalls Raikh's performance:

Instead of the feverish flush, the weak chest and the coughing, all suggesting sickness and a sense of doom, there was recklessness, gaiety, eagerness,

energy, no hint of illness. Once more one found oneself recalling Meyerhold's words: 'In order to shoot the arrow, one must first draw the bowstring.'<sup>79</sup>

The same biomechanical principle was employed in the portrayal of the Countess. The director insisted that the actress should not play the old age of the character: 'For all her 89 years, she'll do herself up following the fashion of the 1830s.'<sup>80</sup> The actress was required to find measure in age, while the contrasts created more depth to the character portrayed. Thus, the final outcome, the execution of the action or its resolution, became more effective since the Countess' death is more shocking when it is less expected.

The contrasting relationship between the elements of the production created new possibilities in musical characterisation. Meyerhold tried to free the opera singer from the over-dependence on music, further exploring the relationship between rhythm and metre. He argued that in a parallel unison between music and gesture certain elements in the score are accentuated while others are lost. This then becomes anti-music because music is based on the rhythm – the task of which is to overcome the metric part.<sup>81</sup> As such, when directing Vel'ter in the scene of the Countess's bedroom, Meyerhold suggested:

Your walk is not rhythmical but metrical – it should be rhythmical. Your steps fall into big accents in music, and you should walk slowly so that there should be no such parallels.... break the metre and play only the rhythm. ...In order to have non-metrical movements there should be stops. So you walk, then you lean on the stick...here you are already out of the metre...<sup>82</sup>

Meyerhold prevented the tendency towards a metrical interpretation through his use of the pause, aiming for an overflowing rhythm, which was still dependant upon the musical structure but was not visible on the stage. Here, like the director's staging of each action, characterisation grew organically from Tchaikovsky's score. Opera

singers were guided to reveal rhythmical interpretations of their characters within a set musical structure.

Rhythmical movement on the stage became an indispensable tool of expression, revealing a multiplicity of thoughts in the production. As Gvozdev pointed out, episodes, as when Lisa comes down the stairs accompanied by Polina's song, or Hermann crawls on to the stairs in the Countess' bedroom, showed that with every step there are new psychological moments in the character's image, which are revealed in the movement.<sup>83</sup> In this scene the large staircase, which dominated the stage, allowed the director to build different rhythms to Hermann's walk, cutting through the music and conveying the complexity of emotions the character was experiencing. According to Piotrovsky, 'the contrasts of tempi created on the magnificent space of the staircase, is characteristic of the production's style.'<sup>84</sup> The rhythmical characterisation determined a variety of tempi in the performance, where, when music expressed certain thoughts, the performers who were in counterpoint to it, commented on it.

The complex overall musicality of the performance depended upon a strong sense of style and unity of all its components. In order to achieve this, the performers were to have a sense of the whole of the piece and their part within it. Vladimir Grokhol'sky who performed Tomsy, indicated: 'In the work with Meyerhold it is amazing that you not only know your role, but you feel part of the general conception; you feel your place in the fabric of the whole performance.'<sup>85</sup> The director guided his performers to relate their role to other characters around them. For example, when rehearsing the scene in Lisa's room, he said to the singer portraying Polina: 'Your romance here serves as the background. The dramatic focus is upon Lisa. You should

sing objectively, just conveying the form; here there are more elements of sadness than of drama, but you are making it very dramatic, it becomes Italian.'<sup>86</sup> Meyerhold thus instructed singers in vocal characterisation not only to convey their characters and avoid the commonplace in the style of singing, but also to sustain the right form and dynamics in each scene.

This sense of unity in the production, the complex rhythmical amalgamation between musical scenic actions and the score, depended upon the achievement of artistic harmony between the art of the director and the conductor. Meyerhold was intensely interested in the conductor's art and as Boris Ravenskikh, a student of training at that time at the Maly, recalls Meyerhold's saying 'Learn directing from conductors.' Ravenskikh evokes how Samosud and Meyerhold drew from each other, listened and supported each other.<sup>87</sup> For example, in rehearsals Meyerhold was often inspired by Samosud's musical direction: 'Don't be afraid to follow Samosud here, when he wants to pull out from a piece everything possible.'<sup>88</sup> However, the director would also give his own instructions to the musicians: 'After the words 'horrible face' the music should sound grander, Samosud can change it afterwards, but now it is necessary to feel the breath of the new scene.'<sup>89</sup> Here the development in the music is encouraged in order to achieve the right tone, therefore the right thought, in the following scene. Whilst directing in relation to the elements of the score and drawing from the art of the conductor, Meyerhold was at the same time, supporting the orchestra to follow the dramatic qualities in the music.

In seeking to establish a musical unity, Samosud reformed the way the opera was traditionally heard in the performance through his interpretation of the score. He

indicated that 'the main thought in the music diluted the effect of other separate parts, which had once been popular, the chosen favourite numbers of the opera.'<sup>90</sup> In aiming to re-discover the 'hidden passages' in the music, Samosud elevated the bridge passages. This was possible through abolishing the sense of pre-eminence of the highlighted musical numbers and the habit of creating particular 'breaths' before them, which traditionally broke up the flow of the score. Samosud's single flowing musicality closely related to Meyerhold's interpretation of the score. It was precisely in these connecting passages that Meyerhold filled the opera with Pushkin's thoughts, sustaining the unbreakable pattern in characterisation. Between arias, duets or ensembles, the movement of the performers helped to reveal the director's 'through-line' in the production.

By changing the original libretto, synthesising the score and the staging, and reforming the tradition of opera's performance, the collaborators treated *The Queen of Spades* as a symphony. The production demonstrated a unique flowing musicality in the connecting passages as well as in the high points of development, uniting into a single whole different spatial as well as aural leitmotifs. Budiakovsky pointed out: 'Everything is played, there are no empty, coincidental, connecting places in the opera.... There is a new uniting tempo in the opera, breaking from the tradition of its productions.'<sup>91</sup> These reforms in operatic form provoked Nikolai Kondrat'ev to write: 'The spectacle was small, no arias, or duets were followed by clapping.'<sup>92</sup> Such 'disappointed' comment confirmed that there was no sense of a grand operatic style, but rather of a united and flowing performance, a symphonic musicality.

Meyerhold's musicality and Samosud's understanding of theatre art brought together the two disciplines, which in turn extended their own generic boundaries. Gvozdev praised the relationship between the music, the staging and the *psychological line of the opera*:

Thanks to what was happening on the stage I listened to the orchestra all the time. And this impression is unforgettable...the image of Hermann, constructed upon music, becomes for me even more broad, more relevant, so that I am even more affected and desperate to discover who this man is.<sup>93</sup>

The staging invested the music with greater significance, stimulating the audience's response. Scenes grew from the score while the staging helped to unveil the music.

Gvozdev affirmed this:

Every new *mise en scène* – it's a new thought: every new *mise en scène* coming with new thoughts gives a new melody. We can sometimes be really astonished how new delicate traits of the form grow before our eyes thanks to the sudden and clear transition from one *mise en scène* to another.<sup>94</sup>

The conductor and the director attained a unity between dramatic thought, music and stage action, in which these elements grew from and supported each other. This produced new ways of hearing as well as seeing the opera.

The reforms in the stylistic genre of opera introduced a notion of operatic realism. Piotrovsky proclaimed: 'Meyerhold with his production brings realism into an operatic performance and this is new.'<sup>95</sup> In the production the forms of theatre and opera were coming closer together, conveying an artistic coherence and wholeness, a strong sense of artistic reality. As in *The Government Inspector*, in *The Queen of Spades*, musical or operatic realism became closely tied to the concept of a symphony. The fantastical elements, the juxtaposition of different tonalities, various associations and coded messages, all these elements were used to comment on and express a heightened reality.

Rather than falling into the general institutionalised view of realism, Meyerhold created a form of complex and organic realism that could only be seen in art. But it was the politically acceptable representation of the human body as seen on the stage that provoked a positive response in the press, in line with the dominant cultural climate of the day. Iakov Grinval'd wrote that in *The Queen of Spades* 'Meyerhold comes out finally freed from relapses into former formalism, rightly standing on the road to a full blooded and authentic scenic realism, big work with the actor being the soul of every performance'<sup>96</sup> The psychological line of the opera and the dramatisation of the art of opera singer, produced the effect of real and truthful characterisation, away from obscurity and paradox – politically unfavourable modes of representation.

It seemed that Meyerhold was on the path towards Stanislavsky, a practitioner whose own use of realism, although complex and always evolving, was generally politically recognized. At this stage of his career Meyerhold repeatedly pointed out that Stanislavsky and himself were not at opposing poles in the theatre, as they tended to be perceived, but that their systems were in dialogue with each other, stimulating and enriching each other.<sup>97</sup> In the pre-revolutionary period, Meyerhold consciously rejected certain principles of MAT's aesthetics, such as its emphasis on 'being the role' and inner experience, in order to reinstate the importance of physicality, theatricality and the use of masks in acting. However, in the production of *Revizor*, the use of the wealth of biographical material and psychological details in characterisation, redefined his acting methodology. In 1930s, as Robert Leach notes, Meyerhold 'began to use Stanislavsky's technique of creating a character's

biography.<sup>98</sup> These principles of acting were always a vital part of Stanislavsky's system, aiming to enhance the notion of truthful and believable characterisation.

Meyerhold incorporated in his work with the opera singers his mastery of the actor's art, which by now drew closer to Stanislavsky, yet still preserved his own elements. As Robert Leach notes, Meyerhold's aim in later years was to build the characterisation musically, 'phrase by phrase', to create 'an artistic whole, with melody, harmony, grace notes, percussion and strings, and movements in different keys and different tempi.'<sup>99</sup> His direction to opera singers would often contain musical terms, as when in the ball scene, he suggested to Lisa that her movements should initially be sharp and broken to indicate that she is glancing at Hermann, and then become legato.<sup>100</sup> His approach to musical characterisation diverged from Stanislavsky's notion of inhabiting the role. The other difference being that actors, for Stanislavsky were supposed to 'be' the part, while, Meyerhold believed that there should be a certain distance, an attitude towards the part, a commentary in the performance.

Meyerhold throughout his career sought to affirm the heightened artistic qualities in acting, as was particularly evident in his aim to enhance the execution of the Russian verse theatre. Stanislavsky in early years paid less attention to the external elements of acting, but the work on Pushkin's text made him re-examine his system. Mikhail Gnesin writes that, when working with Meyerhold in their studio in St Petersburg, they received a telegram from the Moscow Art Theatre, asking him to work with MAT's actors on rhythmical reading.<sup>101</sup> The musical and poetic elements of Pushkin's text brought the need of a new style of acting. This turning point in Stanislavsky's



system was further provoked, as Tat'iana Bachelis writes, by his work on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and on opera, which began in 1918 when he founded the Opera Studio of the Bolshoi theatre. In verse drama and opera Stanislavsky developed a feeling for the overall musicality of the performance, where the focus on the truth of inner feelings shifted towards the logic of action.<sup>102</sup> He incorporated in his system the notion of tasks in which actors would create their parts through following the right objectives – thinking and physical actions. It was precisely this emphasis on action that became the meeting point with Meyerhold's acting methodology, his technique of constant action.

If the stylised form of opera provoked Stanislavsky to reconsider his focus on inner experience, to Meyerhold it brought a need to reinstate the psychological truth in acting. Meyerhold aimed to eliminate the separation between sung and spoken words as a form of true-to-life expression, while realism in characterisation also resolved the problem of the unity between movement and the musical word. The director repeatedly strove to create a unified genre, abolishing the limits between theatre and opera. By employing all the artistic devices at his disposal, he wanted to make the audience an active part of the spectacle, to awaken their perceptions and experience of the theatre. In order to explore the full potential of this total theatrical experience the director fought for a new theatre building.

In the late 1920s Meyerhold discussed the project of a new theatre building with two young architects, Mikhail Brakhtin and Sergei Vakhtangov. Captivated by the idea of bringing together or merging house and stage, Meyerhold could visualise, as Alla Mikhailova notes, his 'new stage both rotating and moving right through the

auditorium and out into the court, or still further, into the crowded street.<sup>103</sup> The integration of the theatre building and audience alluded to a cathartic theatrical experience, sweeping aside the barriers between life and art.

The idea of unifying the stage and the audience referred back to the early revolutionary mass performances, as well as to the return of the Greek ideal in theatre. Asafiev believed that the reforms in opera are dependant upon reconstruction of its auditorium and it should, therefore, involve engineers and architects.<sup>104</sup> The construction of new opera houses were seen to be necessary in creating a new relationship between the audience and the stage, thus stimulating the development of new theatre genres. Mikhailova describes the specifics of the new theatre building:

The new theatre was to do away with traditional theatrical attributes like the footlights, the grids, the side scenes, the division of the playhouse into different prestige areas. The audience would be seated in a steeply rising amphitheatre, enclosing on three sides the jutting-out stage platform, which would be level with the first-row seats.<sup>105</sup>

The theatre accommodated 1600 people and it resembled a stadium, a concert hall with music, light-effects, radio, film and at its heart – the versatile actor. On its façade Pushkin's words: 'The spirit of the time requires important changes also on the dramatic stage' were supposed to be placed.<sup>106</sup> Mikhailova writes that even though the Commissariat for Education allotted the necessary funds, in 1933 the project was charged with being ultra-rationalistic and minimalist.<sup>107</sup> At that point in time in Soviet architecture, grandiose neoclassical forms were revived. Vkhutemas was closed in 1930 and the heyday of constructivism was long gone. Nevertheless, Meyerhold still hoped to set foot in his new theatre, planning an impressive repertoire of plays, such as *Boris Godunov* with music by Prokofiev, *Hamlet* with settings by Picasso and a revival of *The Bed Bug*.<sup>108</sup> It is interesting to note that his vision of a new theatre

building was later converted into a space for music, which became Tchaikovsky's Concert Hall.

Meyerhold's theatre building represented his own view of theatre and its aesthetic principles. The production of *The Queen of Spades* affirmed the director's conception of a total theatre. Not only were actors directed in relation to the musicality of the piece, but there was also a musical play of curtains and lighting on the stage. Gvozdev points out that, 'lighting does not illustrate but helps reveal the depth of the images...lighting creates an atmosphere which connects with the musical atmosphere.'<sup>109</sup> Both lighting and the play of curtains supported the musical and dramatic qualities in the production. The director's score describes that in the first episode the curtain went up after two bars, in the second episode on the fourth bar it came down, in the third episode the curtain slowly lowered down on the word 'Damnation', and so on.<sup>110</sup> The staging of curtains was orchestrated in relation to the score, while the use of small curtains helped the flow of music, avoiding pauses or sounds during scene changes. The unity between the design, lighting, actors' play, music and the staging represented a true operatic synthesis.

The production assimilated a more realistic style and emphasis on artistic synthesis, reminiscent of the director's work at the Imperial theatres and the principles of the World of Art, with the aesthetics of *commedia dell'arte*, biomechanics and reforms in the relationship between music and drama. It also brought together two masterpieces, from two main cultural periods of Russian, the golden (Pushkin's story) and the silver (Tchaikovsky's opera). St Petersburg was a political and cultural centre over the

course of both periods. The popularity of the great national poet was intensified with the coming of the hundred year anniversary of his death.

*The Queen of Spades* belonged to the same group of productions, such as *Masquerade*, that explored the notion of Russian identity. Kopytova points out that both *The Government Inspector* and *The Queen of Spades* conveyed the atmosphere of St Petersburg.<sup>111</sup> Pushkin's tale illustrates St Petersburg of his day with its gambling houses, the aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie. St Petersburg was also seen in such details as the lanterns, doors and the bars of the canal. The created associations with the capital of the Empire evoked a sense of history.

Meyerhold extended the opera's ideas into his own commentary on Russia and on European culture. By breaking the traditional operatic routine and pathos, the director created a contemporary operatic genre, the tragedy of a helpless man, the tragedy of an innocent victim, by giving no answers or resolutions but rather, as did the later twentieth century theatre, he presented the void between people and society, the void in people themselves. And just as Mikhail Chekhov's response after seeing Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector* claimed, the silent figure of the 'Blue Hussar' represented the empty space in man himself<sup>112</sup> *The Queen of Spades* also showed the pointlessness of life, metaphorically capturing the widening gap between Meyerhold and social change.

The complex ideas explored in the counterpoint of dynamics between the action and score, contradicted the dominant politico-cultural climate with its increasing portrayal of fixed and schematic feelings. At that time the melodramatic, all-or-nothing ethic

was being adopted in the conception of socialist realism, as exemplified in its virtuous and brave heroes and its corrupt and exploitative villains. Meyerhold's *The Queen of Spades*, therefore, resonated strongly in its time, subverting the dominant cultural thought of the day under the mask of a classical opera. The production challenged the modern conception of love and individuality, evoked the romantic notion of a man against society and presented the complex notion of transitional society.

*The Queen of Spades* provoked heated debates in the press and amongst artistic circles, becoming one of the director's greatest works. The press accused the director of changing the libretto, of cutting the score, in short, of being the author of the production. But as Kopytova points out 'the spectacle was on the stage for two and a half theatre seasons and was shown ninety one times.' This indicates that the production represented an 'intensive opera project', a great artistic achievement.<sup>113</sup> Most of the reviewers praised the acting, as well as the unity of music and the staging, above all the episodes, such as the 'Countess's Bedroom' and the 'Gaming House'. Shostakovich was convinced that Meyerhold's *The Queen of Spades* was one of the greatest achievements of the Soviet musical theatre, a production that truly revealed the opera's meaning.<sup>114</sup> Years later the composer wrote: 'Meyerhold was an exceptional musical director' and as far as *The Queen of Spades* is concerned, 'I think that this spectacle should be revived.'<sup>115</sup> Both Shostakovich and Asafiev strongly supported the operatic reforms.

*The Queen of Spades* assumed an important place in the development of Soviet music theatre. Fevral'sky proclaimed: 'The production should inspire composers towards creating a new Soviet opera.'<sup>116</sup> The reforms in the operatic form coincided with the

cultural quest of the time. The conductor and composer, Aleksandr Gauk, wrote to Samosud after seeing *The Queen of Spades*:

The production resolves important problems: Firstly it affirms the operatic form as a contemporary, in the full sense of the word, type of theatre art. Secondly, it gives a key to the creation of new contemporary works and shows the way in which composers and librettist should follow. Thirdly, the production solves the function of the opera actor as one of the links in a chain forged on the principles of symphonic development and finally, this production enhances the effect of the music by having at the base of its staging the organised rhythms and intonations.<sup>117</sup>

Meyerhold thus rejuvenated operatic art, his synthesised symphonic composition revealed new directions for the creation of Soviet opera.

But the advanced operatic experiments as well as Shostakovich's operatic career were sharply interrupted. In autumn 1936, Samosud became the main conductor and artistic director of the Bolshoi theatre. In the same year the campaign against formalism, headed by Zhdanov, closed Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth* at the Maly Opera and the increasing attacks in the press demanded that Meyerhold should be removed from his theatre. In response to these events in Leningrad, he gave a talk 'Meyerhold against Meyerholditis' defending his work and his favourites, including Shostakovich and attacking his followers that vulgarised the essence of his art by superficial representation. With his usual passionate zeal, Meyerhold talked about the close link between the form and content, of the artistic meanings that are sustained in the inseparability of these two devices.<sup>118</sup> But this had little effect on the dominant cultural institution. During the same year *The Queen of Spades* was withdrawn. According to the yearly review of the theatre, this was because the performance 'carried a whole weight of formalism and artistic mistakes of Meyerhold'<sup>119</sup> In autumn 1936, the director of the theatre Ruvim Shapiro, one of the initiators in

inviting Meyerhold to stage the opera, was declared an enemy of the people; soon after he was shot. The same fate befell Stenich and Piotrovsky, who headed the literary-repertoire section of the theatre.<sup>120</sup> The modernist promotion of 'false truths' had to be silenced. The positive historicism, the view of the better future expressed in contemporary images of people in art, as when waving while astride a tractor, validated its own utopian 'truth'.

Against this politico-cultural climate, Meyerhold struggled to make sense of his theatre. He attempted, but repeatedly failed, to produce a contemporary play, since there were always corrections he was forced to make. Meyerhold faced the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution with nothing to commemorate it with. Platon Kerzhentsev's article in *Pravda* 'Alien theatre' on 17 December 1937 used the opportunity to attack the director's formalist mistakes, his 'decadent' 'bourgeois' tendencies, distortions of classics, 'political deformation of Soviet reality', 'anti-Soviet ideological divertissements', 'Trotsky's inclinations', his failure to communicate with the contemporary Soviet people.<sup>121</sup> On the 8 January 1938 the State Meyerhold Theatre was liquidated. By that time more than five million people were imprisoned and more than three million had been killed or had died in camps.

In this tough and dangerous climate, the political machinery took over, its jargon, its particular logic would cut through all reasoning, those who dissented tried to adapt to it or kept silent. To stand up for or to help the outcast was an act of bravery. It was Meyerhold's old teacher who gave him a hand during these difficult times. After the

closure of his theatre, Meyerhold was taken as an assistant in Stanislavsky's newly organised Operatic-Dramatic Studio, as it was officially affirmed in the papers in May 1938. Stanislavsky's invitation possibly prolonged Meyerhold's life.

It is interesting to note that towards the end of their lives both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold turned increasingly to opera, the way they shared certain principles regarding the rejuvenation of the operatic art was striking. It seemed that opera brought their methodologies closer together. Both practitioners aimed to abolish convention in favour of reaching the hidden depths of music, which, in turn, would determine the staging of the drama. The aim was to bring a new dramatic importance to opera; to make the singer-actors synthesise the dramatic, musical and vocal art into an unbreakable pattern; to eliminate the divide between sung and spoken words as a form of true-to-life expression. Their experiments with the psychological and physical, with the inner and the outer makeup of the human being, sought to reveal the fundamentals of the thinking and emotional processes. Throughout their artistic career both artists were concerned with finding the 'truths' in art, of unravelling the reality hidden behind the surface, of establishing the principles of acting and theatre art, strongly believing in the great educative and reformatory possibilities of theatre. Their concern with developing the theatre's potential was always underlined by a great love and drive for the theatre. Unfortunately, their meeting was not long lived. On 7 August 1938 Stanislavsky died, two months later Meyerhold became the head of the theatre. Now, it can only be imagined to what heights their collaboration could have taken the art of theatre.



In his new theatre, Meyerhold was fully engaged with staging opera. He completed Stanislavsky's rehearsals of the opera *Rigoletto* that was premiered on 10 March 1939. Braun indicates that the plans for the following season included the productions of operas, *Don Giovanni*, *Semyon Kotko*, revival of Stanislavsky's *Eugene Onegin* and a revision of his own earlier version of *The Queen of Spades*.<sup>122</sup> The first production in rehearsal was Prokofiev's opera, *Semyon Kotko*. However, the opera shared the destiny of *The Love of Three Oranges*, *The Gambler*, *Boris Godunov* and *Le Pas d'acier*, a ballet banned from the Bolshoi stage by RAMP. Meyerhold-Prokofiev works found it difficult to satisfy the new demands. Although the artists shared a great mutual admiration, none of their collaborations ever saw the light of the stage, apart from the physical parade staged in 1939 in Leningrad. In this last work by Meyerhold, ironically, the ideals of Soviet state, that is youth, health and power, were celebrated. The actress, Serafima Birman, was asked to take over *Semyon Kotko* after Meyerhold's arrest by the NKVD on the morning of 20 June. The plans for staging other operas were sharply interrupted. Two weeks after his arrest his wife, who was his leading actress Zinadia Raikh, was murdered in their apartment. The same year, the Second World War broke out.

The cultural climate of the 1930s gradually demolished the musicality of Meyerhold, leaving behind all its possible developments and achievements. Perhaps, during this period opera provided a 'safer channel' for his art, but its reform was also a natural progression of his aesthetics. As in his dramatic theatre, Meyerhold approached the opera like a scenario of music-scenic events, creating orchestrated scenes and metaphors, enriching it with his own visions of the world and his principles of theatre art. Meyerhold's opuses, his director's scores, revealed the unique art of directing.

affirming the independent artistic initiative of a theatre director. In both the dramatic and operatic theatre his unique director's vision was reflected in his music, whether created on the stage, instructed to his composers or interpreted in his own way.

1. Asaf'ev Boris, *Ob Opere: Izbrannie statii*, (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1985). p. 35.
  2. *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
  3. Dansker Ol'ga (ed.) *S.A.Samosud: stat'i, vospominaniia, pis'ma*, (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1984), p.5
  4. *V.E.Mejerholjd O Pozorištu* (ed.) Miličević Ognjenka, (Belgrade: Nolit, 1976) p.249
  5. Dansker (ed.) *S.A.Samosud: stat'i, vospominaniia, pis'ma*, p.9
  6. *ibid.*, p.10
  7. Samosud Samuil in the programme of the premier of *Carmen*, (Leningrad: Gosudarstvenii Malyi Opernyi Teatr, 1933), p. 3
  8. Meierhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme of the premier of *The Queen of Spades*, (Leningrad: Akademicheskii Teatr Opory i Baleta, 1935), p.8
- Maly Opera Theatre was renamed Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet in 1934.
9. *ibid.*, p. 8
  10. *V.E.Meierhol'd Pikovaia Dama, Zamysel. Voploshchenie. Sud'ba; Dokumenty i materialy* (ed.) Kopytova G.V., (St Petersburg: Kompozitor, 1994), p. 131
  11. Asaf'ev, *Ob Opere: Izbrannie statii*, p. 39
  12. Piotrovskii Adrian, 'Pikovaia Dama v Malom Opernom Teatre' in the programme, as above, p.14
  13. Asaf'ev, 'O lirike *Pikovoii Damy* Chaikovskogo', in the programme, p.24
  14. 'Repetitsionnyi period' in *V.E.Meierhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, as above, p. 58
  15. Quoted in Sitkovetskaia Maia (ed.), *Meierhol'd repetiruet*, (Moscow: Artist.Rezhisser.Teatr, 1993), vol.2, p. 100

16. Kopytova (ed.), *V.E.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, p.27
17. *ibid.*, p. 54
18. Sokolova Agripinna in *V.E.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, p. 286
19. 'Repetitsionnyi period', as above, p. 101
20. Fevral'skii Aleksandr, 'Novaia *Pikovaia Dama*' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, p.271
21. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme, p. 9
22. Piotrovskii Adrian, 'Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia, posviaschennoe obsuzhdeniiu postanovki opery *Pikovaia Dama*, in *V.E.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, p.230
23. 'Repetitsionnyi period', p.64
24. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme, p. 10
25. *ibid.*, p. 10
26. 'Materialy rezhisserskoi razrabotki, Ustroistvo stsenicheskoi ploshchadki' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd, Pikovaia Dama*, pp.43-44
27. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme, p. 8
28. Glikman Isaak, *Meierkhol'd i muzykal'nyi teatr*, (Leningrad: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1989) pp. 275-308
29. Gres Samuil, 'Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia', as above, p.234
30. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme, p. 8
31. Meierkhol'd, 'Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia', p. 252
32. 'Repetitsionnyi period', p. 86
33. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme, p. 9

34. Vel'ter Nadezhda 'Meierkhol'd i ego *Pikovaia Dama*' in *V.S.Meierkhold. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 348
35. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol. 2, p.110
36. Meierkhol'd, 'Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia', p. 255
37. Kopytova (ed.) *V.S.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, p. 36
38. 'Rezhisserskaia partitura *Pikovoii Dami*' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, pp. 152-154
39. Kopytova (ed.) *V.S.Meierkhol'd Pikovaia Dama*, p. 36
40. 'Rezhisserskaia partitura *Pikovoii Dami*', as above, p. 156-163
41. *ibid.*, p. 165-166
42. Vel'ter, 'Meierkhol'd i ego *Pikovaia Dama*', as above, p.351
43. Solov'ev Vladimir, 'Sarabanda v manere Kallo' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, pp. 109-110
44. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii' in the programme, p.10
45. Matvei Kalaushin, 'Rabota Pushkina nad *Pikovoii Dami*' in the programme, p. 33
46. Kopytova (ed.) *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, pp.22-23
47. 'Rezhisserskaia partitura *Pikovoii Dami*', p. 172
48. 'Repetitsionnyi period', p.97
49. *ibid.*, p.97
50. Tarabukin Nikolai, 'Problema vremeni i prostranstva v teatre.Rabota Vs.E.Meierkhol'da i L.T.Chupiatova nad ofornleniem *Pikovoii dami*' in *N.M.Tarabukin o V.E.Meierkhol'de*, (ed.) Fel'dman Oleg, (Moscow: O.G.I. 1998, pp.76-80

51. Braun Edward, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, (London: Methuen, 1998), pp.280-281
52. 'Rezhisserskaia partitura *Pikovoï Dami*' p.196
53. Quoted in Kopytova (ed.) *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p.32
54. Piotrovskii, '*Pikovaia Dama. Leningradskii Mali Opernyi Teatr*' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 278
55. Fevral'skii, '*Novaia Pikovaia Dama*' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 273
56. *Meierkhol'd repertiruet*, vol.2, p. 144
57. 'Rezhisserskaia partitura *Pikovoï Dami*', pp.197-198
58. Gvozdev Aleksei, '*Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia*', p. 212
59. Abensour Gérard, '*Faut-il brûler Meyerhold? À propos de La Dame de pique (version de 1935)*' in *Meierkhol'd rezhissura v perspective veka*, (eds.) Picon-Vallin Béatrice and Shcherbakov Vadim, (Moscow: O.G.I., 2001), p.392
60. Grachev Panteleimon, '*Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia*', p. 248.
61. Koval'skii Nikolai in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p.284
62. Ivan Sollertinskii compares Herman and Hamlet's introspection as quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 279
63. Budiakovskii Andrei, '*Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia*', p. 204
64. *ibid.*, p. 213
65. Kopytova (ed.), *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 31

66. Derzhavin Konstantin, 'Tema spektaklia Meierkhol'da' in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 283.
67. Quoted in Kopytova, *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 31
68. Zolotnitskii David, *Meierkhol'd: Roman s Sovetskoii Vlast'iu*, (Moscow: Agraf, 1999), p.5
69. Sokolova Agrippina in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 287
70. 'Repetitsionnyi period' p.93
71. *ibid.*, 91
72. *ibid.*, 74
73. Asaf'ev, *Ob Opere: Izbrannie statii*, pp.32-33
74. 'Repetitsionnyi period' p.94
75. Vel'ter, 'Meierkhol'd i ego *Pikovaia Dama*' p. 346
76. 'Repetitsionnyi period' pp.80-81
77. *ibid.*, p. 81
78. Koval'skii in *V.E.Meierkhol'd. Pikovaia Dama*, p. 285
79. Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, p. 274
80. 'Repetitsionnyi period' p.96
81. Meierkhol'd, 'Pushkin i Chaikovskii', in the programme, p. 9
82. 'Repetitsionnyi period', p.96
83. Gvozdev, 'Zasedanie v gosudarstvennoi akademii iskusstvoznaniia', p.217
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## **Conclusion**

As this thesis has discussed at some length Meyerhold was the same director in operatic theatre as he was in the dramatic theatre. In both cases, it was the theatrical experience that he strove to intensify and broaden.

In Meyerhold's theatre, there was no real divide between music and drama since he drew on both forms to create a unified performance. Meyerhold employed operatic devices to extend the vocabulary of the dramatic theatre and to affirm the heightened form of performance. In turn he used his experience in the dramatic theatre to enrich and dramatise the language of opera. In both cases it was music that guided his theatre practice.

Like a musician, Meyerhold approached the text of opera or drama as a piece of music, feeling its melody, tone, tempo, rhythm, pauses, nuances, timbre, modulations, developments so as to capture its form and then convey his own experience of it. It was precisely the sound that became in his practice a material to be grasped, shaped and transferred onto the stage into dramatic-musical actions. This sensing of the quality of the sound of the text gave him an inner control of the sound so as to communicate it to his acting 'orchestra' and was crucial in determining the genre and form of the performance. The similarities between his own art and that of the conductor was striking.

By employing principles of music, Meyerhold professionalised theatre as an art form, as a discipline that needs to be studied and interpreted with its unique spatial and

temporal rules. In the last decades of his creative career, Meyerhold named his productions opuses and his director's transcript of a performance – the score. In his theatre, directing was an art that depended on rhythm and music to harmonise and unite the visual, audio and spatial elements of performance. The multi-layering of musical lines and rhythms in his performances, represented in sounds, actions, events, speech, acting, light, visual lines and patterns, demonstrated in detail how his score was composed. Rather than traditionally following the dramatic plot or development of character, Meyerhold elaborated upon the construction of musical lines, tempi and rhythms, and in this way, treated the staging of both opera and drama as a symphonic piece. The dense polyphonic orchestration of his performances affirmed the independent art of a director capable of creating scenic compositions in accordance with his own unique vision of the world and his interpretation of the work in hand.

It was precisely by listening to the world, by feeling its changing rhythms and melodies, that Meyerhold developed his genres of performance. From the slow tempi and suggestive melodies of his engagement with symbolism, through the dance-like rhythms and pantomimes of *The Fairground Booth* (1906), to the fast paced representations of the crowd in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), this change of rhythm reflected the director's search for artistic truth in the changing reality around him. Meyerhold's scores often contained abrupt chords, shifts of melody and harsh dissonances, challenging and attacking the audience's ears. This repeatedly used style of the grotesque, which synthesised visual and aural distortions, contrast and exaggeration in a tightly disciplined form, expressed the collisions of the epoch, such as the conflict between the utilitarian and the spiritual; Russia and Europe; the individual and society.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the formation of groups, small theatre venues and studios showed like-minded artists united by shared aesthetics. In an increasingly urbanised world, people turned to form their own small rituals and communities, as later in the century with music and club culture, which defined and separated them from others. This modern ritual of reinstating human identity within a community, suggested a need for belonging and communicating, a need for unity of thought in society. In Stanislavsky's theatre, acting became a way of life, actors came together to develop their creativity and technique so as to realise the subtext, the 'truths' of their character's existence and thus to enlighten their audience. Artistic practice merged with the needs of life, the boundaries dividing theatre and life dissolved.

During Meyerhold's creative career the immense amount and variety of artistic activity was dependant upon cross-fertilisation of ideas between artists across all sectors of the arts. This cross pollination resulted in new ways of looking at and practising art. Meyerhold's synthesis of different art forms and styles, as Diaghilev's productions of opera and ballet, strove for a unity of artistic expression and truth. On the other hand, the dialectical relationship between Meyerhold's practice and early Soviet politics further developed his aesthetics, committed to creating a new form of Soviet culture, a new form of collective experience. The influence of utilitarian ideas in art, such as the belief in technology and the moral concept of instrumental reason which was believed to bring freedom, was reflected in Meyerhold's constructivist productions and the work of the artists of Vkhutemas.

Meyerhold's scholarly research and knowledge of contemporary and traditional art forms, fired by his drive to make theatre relevant, expanded the boundaries of theatre and in so doing created new genres of performances. By abolishing operatic routines, by changing the libretto or cutting bars in the score, the director strove to reveal and interpret the hidden depths of the artwork so as to open up its relevance for the contemporary spectator. His attraction to masks and the physical expressiveness of the body, to eastern forms of theatre or *commedia dell'arte*, reinstated the importance of theatricality, of transformation and imagination. Acting here held a special place, since acting is an imitation of imagination, giving it a live form. It was precisely this emphasis on theatricality, that captured his aspiration of transforming the world, of presenting new ways of human expression and experience.

Meyerhold's use of music furnished a strong sense of theatricality, which together expressed and suggested ideas, directed the audience's attention and conveyed his commentary in a production. Whether utilising operatic or theatrical conventions, these elements always had to have a dramatic function, supporting the 'through line' of a production, which was the director's unique narrative. In *Masquerade* (1917), in his use of an exaggerated theatricality, Meyerhold emphasised the pretence and artificiality to suggest society's *spiritual impoverishment*. In his productions of the early 1920s, the dynamic representation of massed crowds, biomechanics and further reforms in the stage-audience relationship, expressed a sense of excitement and a great belief in humanity. By the late 1920s, as in the *Woe to Wit* (1927), slower tempos were introduced, the call for melody, lyricism and harmony was reinforced. In the associations created between his productions of *Masquerade*, *The Government Inspector* (1926) and *The Queen of Spades* (1935) the director reinforced his

commentary on Russia. Here the image of the gambler, which is widely used in Russian works of literature, became a theme of special importance in Meyerhold's career. If in *Masquerade* the gambler's downfall was shown to be due to his rejection of society, in *The Queen of Spades*, this solitary, driven and passionate man, torn between social aspirations and genuine feeling, became capable of risking all on the one card so as to earn 'entry' to the same repressive society. The development of associations and metaphors and the violent dissonances expressed in the contrasts between score, words and events on the stage, emphasised the divided and tormented consciousness of the gambler, whose individuality and destruction were a product of the society he inhabited and modernity.

The experiments with Gnesin on rhythmical reading and the work on Russian verse theatre and Russian opera, showed the director's concern with enriching the execution of the word to unleash the full power of its expressiveness. Meyerhold's direction to actors did not include explicit description of emotional states of the character, but rather musical examples, such as 'this arioso, don't break it, these are big words' or 'you are returning to the previous leitmotif, but now it is broken, we only get fragments' or visual suggestions 'this is Vrubel...all lines are broken'. To the director it was the sound, rhythm, timbre, shapes and patterns that moved, rather than the word alone.

Opera, with its combined force of music and words, held a special place in his practice. It was in Prokofiev's operatic work, that Meyerhold perceived that the composer's innovations in the word-music relationship were a true way forward for opera, which was to be the creation of a new musical-dramatic art. It can only be

regretted that their collaborations were never fully realised, since the composer was to Meyerhold in opera what Mayakovsky was for him in dramatic theatre, a contemporary who was able to introduce new forms of expression and by doing so to enrich his all-encompassing music-theatre.

Meyerhold lived during a time of heightened interest in the theatre. He embraced the shifting cultural climate, while at the same time stamping his own mark upon it. As Picasso did in visual art, so Meyerhold revolutionised the art of the theatre, which was never to be the same again. Eclectically utilising tradition to transform it, stretching the limits of the form so as to challenge comfort zones, both artists introduced new modes of perception and experience, a new view of the human being.



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