

# Constructivism and Russian Stage Design

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As we grow more familiar with the history of modern Russian stage design, we come to appreciate a point of great significance to the history of modern Russian theatre: that while the Diaghilev *Ballets Russes* were enjoying fabulous success in Paris and London just before and after the Great War (and their success was, above all, a visual one), the Russian stage at home was no less productive and no less innovative even though its purpose and scope were very different. In 1910 Paris audiences beheld the sensuous magnificence of Lev Bakst's designs for *Scheherazade* and were stunned by its vivid colors and occult symmetries. Three years later the St. Petersburg bohemia produced the "transrational" opera *Victory Over the Sun* and encountered wonderment and derision. Both pieces were Russian, both were essentially visual, but the differences between them were very great. In the history of stage design, *Schererazade*, like most of the Diaghilev productions, served as the *conclusion* to a preceding tradition; *Victory Over the Sun* was the *introduction* to a new era. In simple terms, the *Ballets Russes* acted as the grand culmination to that same decorative style which had inspired designers of the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Romantic and the Naturalist theatres. The fortunate elite who saw those memorable productions of 1909-14 (and who were themselves, so to speak, the decorative culmination to a passing social order) were captivated by the sheer ornamental force of Bakst and they were charmed by the pedantic accuracy of Alexandre Benois. The decor, as one critic said, functioned like a spider's web and any artistic unity between actor and spectator was achieved simply by shock and bewilderment.<sup>1</sup>

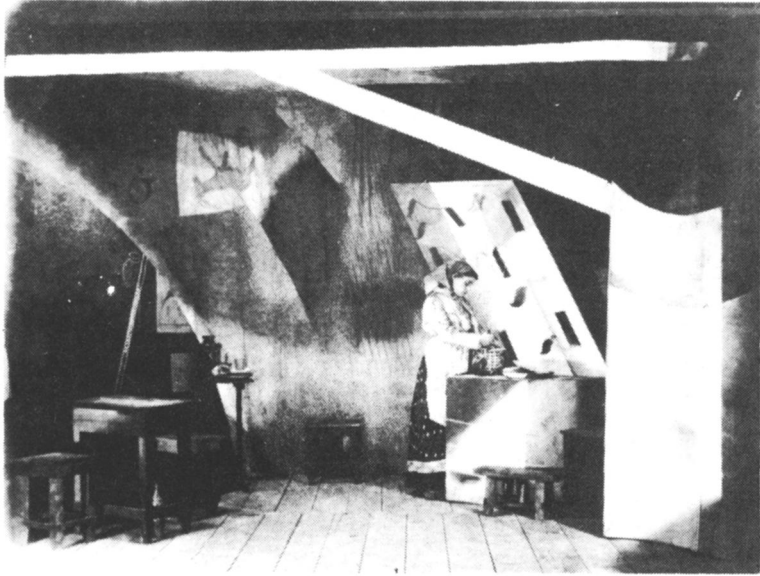
When we look back at those "banquet years" with a more measured eye, we can see that the set and costume designers who worked for Diaghilev, at least before the 1920s, were still operating within the traditions of studio painting: they depicted episodes, they illustrated plots, they evoked a his-

torical time by ethnographical and archaeological compilation. In other words, for Benois, Mstislav Dobujinsky, Sergei Sudeikin, even for Bakst, theatre was a narrative experience and their decorations, precisely, decorated it, remaining a two-dimensional art. Even when an artist possessed a sculptural and volumetrical perception, he was, more often than not, "tamed" by the conventions of the *Ballets Russes*. This happened, for example, in the case of Natalia Goncharova's Neo-Primitivist and Rayonist costumes for *Liturgie* (1914-15) and *Rhapsodie Espagnole* (1916). Certainly, Diaghilev's production of *La Chatte* in 1927 was a Constructivist one and relied on a three-dimensional system both in decor and in choreography, but it did not derive from the internal tradition of the *Ballets Russes*. In fact, if we are to discover the real stimulus to the emergence of Constructivism in Russian stage design, then we must discount the Diaghilev era and look elsewhere—namely, to the theatres of St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Moreover, if we are to trace the derivation of Constructivism in Russian stage design, then we must concern ourselves with that point at which stage design in Russia moved from surface to space. Examination of this process reveals a tradition normally overshadowed by the achievements of the *Ballets Russes*, i.e. an alternative tradition supported by the foremost members of the Russian avant-garde—Alexandra Exter, El Lissitzsky, Kazimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Alexandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, Georgii Yakulov, etc. Other interesting circumstances also emerge. For example, certain modern designers who are often categorized as "Russian" were, strictly speaking, not of Russian origin and their inspiration owed much to national traditions outside Russia: Yakulov's spontaneity and love of movement is more the product of his beloved Armenia than of Moscow or Paris; the curious dichotomies of sophistication and vulgarity are common to the Ukrainian mentality of Alexandr Bogomazov, Vadim Meller and Anatolii Petritsky. Differences and distinctions are to be found not only in individual and national resolutions of artistic problems posed by a given costume or decor, but also in the choice of medium. In the modern context Russian stage design denotes much more than ballet, opera and the theatre: the circus, the movie, the mass dramatization (see below), the cabaret and operetta—all were vehicles of experiment of the Russian avant-garde. Consequently, if we are to acknowledge the full worth of the Russian achievement on the modern stage, then we must suspend our academic reserve and approach the "lower" forms of theatre with particular attention. After all, it was the great producer, Vsevolod Meierkhold, who declared the circus to be nobler than the theatre.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of Meierkhold and of other celebrated producers during the avant-garde period was of formative importance to the evolution of twentieth century Russian stage design. For example, the Constructivists—Popova, Rodchenko and Stepanova—all worked with Meierkhold in the 1920s; Yurii Annenkov collaborated several times with Nikolai Evreinov; Exter, Alexandr Vesnin and the Stenberg brothers, Georgii and Vladimir, formed a close alliance with Alexandr Tairov; Ignatii Nivinsky introduced his conception of "oriental Constructivism" to the historic production of *Princess Turandot* by Evgenii Vakhtangov in 1922. Above all, it was Meierkhold who provided artists with the opportunity to use the stage as a space for the integration of actor and set, i.e. to regard the theatre as the extension of the actor (a three-dimensional, kinetic form) and not of the

producer, the playwright or the artist. It was this fundamental and very simple principle that served as the common denominator in the endeavors of Meierkhold, Popova, Rodchenko, Stepanova and, to a lesser extent, of Lissitzky, the Stenbergs and A. Vesnin. This emphasis on the movement of the actor and not on the historical, emotional or thematic value of the spectacle inspired a drastic transformation in the whole conception of set and costume design.



Marc Chagall: Sets and costumes for Sholem Aleikhem's *Good Luck*, Jewish State Theatre, Moscow, 1921.

Although Constructivism in the Russian theatre produced extraordinary results, thanks to the efforts of Exter, Lissitzky, Popova, Rodchenko, the Stenbergs, Stepanova, A. Vesnin, its development was the natural and inevitable culmination of an indigenous tradition and it relied on many "proto-" or "pre-" Constructivist trends. The main part of this essay, therefore, concerns not only the Constructivist movement itself of the 1920s, specifically the two factions within Constructivism (what the critic Alexei Gvozdev described as the "abstract" and the "realistic" phases of Constructivist design)<sup>3</sup>, but also the precursors of Constructivism. How did Constructivism on stage extend Meierkhold's theory of bio-mechanics? How did the Constructivists resolve the division between the conventional, two-dimensional scenario (the *bella prospettiva*) and the three-dimensional actor? How did designers of the Russian avant-garde interpret the sudden, fashionable belief that pure movement was the real basis of all theatre? In order to answer these questions and to appreciate the universal value of

Russian Constructivism on stage, we must first investigate the tentative move towards *Buhnenarchitektur* which was evident in Russia just before the Great War.

Like all the secular arts in Russia, the theatre—in the professional, Western sense—is a relatively new phenomenon. While the folk theatre in its forms of the *skomorokhi* (itinerant minstrels and buffoons) or the *balagan* (popular farce resembling the Punch and Judy theatre) had existed for centuries (a mediaeval fresco in the Church of St. Sophia, Kiev, depicts acrobats, dancers and musicians), the dramatic theatre, like the circus, had arrived in Russia only in the late eighteenth century, mainly as a result of Catherine the Great's cultural preferences. The Russian theatre began to achieve momentum only in the mid- and late nineteenth century with the advent of the playwrights Alexandr Ostrovsky, Alexei Tolstoi and, of course, Anton Chekhov. Accordingly, Russian set and costume design for the professional theatre also appeared at a very late date. But despite this backwardness, the Russian theatre carried certain advantages. For example, its disciplines of acting and stage design were (and are) vigorous and flexible, and were not deadened by the heavy conventions of the Renaissance and Baroque styles as the Italian stage was. The Russian theatre had no Bibiena, no Gonzaga or Basoli; and, fortunately, in the 1880s when the freedom of Russian stage design was at length being threatened by the dry canons of the Imperial stage, there swiftly emerged a new conception of theatre in the private troupe of Savva Mamontov. His theatrical and operatic productions at his estate near Moscow, and then in Moscow and St. Petersburg, attracted many important artists of the time including Konstantin Korovin, Viktor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Vrubel. Without exaggeration, it may be said that Mamontov's commitment to the stage influenced the development of theatre in Russia as much as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's did in Germany. In the particular terms of stage design, the artists employed by Mamontov made a decisive step away from the stereoscopic backdrop of the Imperial theatre towards new principles of asymmetry, intense decorativism and even (in the case of Vrubel) towards the concept of scenic architecture, i.e. towards the manipulation of the three-dimensional space. Despite these important innovations of the 1880s onwards, the Russian theatre, like its European counterpart, was not a synthetic art form. As a rule, one artistic discipline dominated (cf. the primary role of the dramaturgist in the late eighteenth century, of the declaimer in the late nineteenth century or of the decorator in the early twentieth). Consequently, there was no effective combination of the various arts. While the theatre contained the potential of a truly synthetic art, it resembled a mere conglomeration of disparate units, a "hotel" as the critic Vladimir Piast once said.<sup>4</sup>

In order for the theatre to become synthetic, a coordinator was needed. The rivalry between the producer, the artist, the musician and the actor had to be overcome. The great producers of the avant-garde period—Meierkhold, Nikolai Okhlopov, Tairov and Vakhtangov—did precisely that, and not just by appreciating the worth of each respective art form, but also by revealing the intrinsic, abstract basis of theatre. Meierkhold and his colleagues realized that "in the theatre words are merely patterns on the canvas of movements,"<sup>5</sup> and it was this realization that affected stage design in the most decisive manner. In the Russian context, the first con-

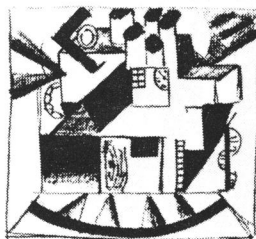
scious effort to expose the essence of theatre was with Meierkhold's production of Alexandr Blok's play *Balaganchik* (*The Fair-Ground Booth*) in St. Petersburg in 1906. The play was born of a profound disillusionment in the ideals of Symbolist philosophy and in its treatment of certain themes—the double, the “inescapability” of existence, depersonalization—satirized the Symbolist movement. In keeping with this mood of spiritual emptiness, Meierkhold and his designer, the talented Nikolai Sapunov, dismissed the conventions of backdrop and wings and created instead a stage within a stage. The inner stage was “undressed” so that the trappings of ropes, footlights, boards, prompter's box, etc. were fully visible to the audience, thus lending the scene the condition of artificiality and duality which the play required. True, the dramatic narrative and not the actor was of primary importance; but the rejection of heavy decor or of a naturalist setting, the exposure of the scenic space and the attention given to gesture and to mime (and hence to movement) anticipated methods which became fundamental to Constructivist theatre.

Of course, in Meierkhold's production of *Balaganchik* there were many influences at work, both domestic and foreign. Both Blok and Meierkhold were aware of the strong tradition of the *balagan* and of other manifestations of popular culture such as the *narodnoe gulianie* (public fete) and the religious procession. At the same time, the new principles which Meierkhold experimented with in *Balaganchik* demonstrated a knowledge of new trends in European theatrical thought. For example, Meierkhold (like Tairov a little later) was familiar with the aesthetic systems of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia and he sympathized with their conception of the actor as the center of all components in the theatre—although he soon rejected Appia's constant concern with the psychological and emotional state (which Tairov, however, always retained). Meierkhold was also an admirer of George Fuchs and, in the 1920s, elaborated the principle of bodily rhythm into the theory of bio-mechanics. It is important to realize that these forces were active in the Modernist theatre in Russia and that, in the case of Meierkhold and Tairov, they encouraged the producer and his artist to regard the stage as a three-dimensional space interacting with the three-dimensional actor. In *Balaganchik*, therefore, Meierkhold prepared the ground for the constructive approach to design—as opposed to the standard compositional one. Unfortunately, at this time Meierkhold had no adequate counterpart in the world of stage design—even Sapunov was, essentially, an easel painter, and for all his decorative gift, had little feel for volume and relief.

While the beginning of the constructive principle in Russian stage design can be traced to *Balaganchik*, its development and elaboration occurred in ventures immediately outside Meierkhold's orbit, specifically in the productions of the folk drama *The Emperor Maximilian and His Disobedient Son Adolph* and the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, both undertaken by the Union of Youth organization in St. Petersburg in 1911 and 1913. The visual importance of both pieces lies in the fact that Tatlin and Malevich respectively worked as the designers. Essentially, there was little in common between the simple narrative of *The Emperor* (edited by the Futurist poet Vasilii Kamensky) and the partially “transrational” libretto of *Victory Over the Sun*, but both spectacles advanced new concepts of stage decor or, rather, of stage construction.



Vladimir Tatlin: Costume for *The Emperor Maximilian and His Son Adolph*, St. Petersburg, 1911.



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Kazimir Malevich: Backdrop for the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, St. Petersburg, 1913.

Although Tatlin designed his costumes before his momentous “discovery” of Picasso’s reliefs in Paris in 1913 and, therefore, before his own constructive work, he already expressed a spatial and volumetrical sensation. His costumes for *The Emperor* and for *Ivan Susanin* of 1913 seem intended for a moving, three-dimensional construction (the human body) and not for a static surface. The emphasis on spiralic structure (a method favored also by Yakulov) provides the designs with a distinct vertical impulse and continuum absent in, say, a Benois or Dobujinsky of the same period. Tatlin’s attempt to “put the eye under the control of touch,”<sup>6</sup> already evident in these costumes, was also expressed in his sets for both *The Emperor* and *Ivan Susanin*: the Gothic architecture for the former and the pyramidal construction of the forest in the latter pointed towards certain Constructivist designs of the 1920s, particularly to the simple combinations of arches and columns used by Isaak Rabinovich. Furthermore, as the critic Sergei Auslender noted unwittingly,<sup>7</sup> there was an obvious effort to integrate actor and audience in *The Emperor*: footlights were absent and actors passed freely from stage to audience.

The production of *The Emperor*, both in St. Petersburg and in Moscow (1912), alluded to possibilities but did not confirm them. A greater force was needed to bring about a “complete fracture of concepts and words...old-style decor...and musical harmony.”<sup>8</sup> Such a force was provided by the opera *Victory Over the Sun*, staged in St. Petersburg at the end of 1913. This curious spectacle with text by the Futurist poet Alexei Kruchenykh, score by the painter-composer Mikhail Matiushin and designs by Malevich, was an attempt at “transrationalism” in literature, music and painting, although it failed in this respect. Modern historians, perhaps, have tended to exaggerate the innovative significance of *Victory Over the Sun*: the libretto, apart from a few transrational interpolations,

was comprehensible and narrated how a band of Futurist strongmen set out to conquer the sun; the music was chromatic and dissonant, although not revolutionary; Malevich himself drew quite logically on sequences of objects and ideas described in the text. Although the costumes may strike us as very "theatrical" in their exaggeration of salient features in a given character, they are not the most important part of the visual component. The fact that Malevich—at heart a painter and not a designer—depicted all the characters in profile indicated that he did not envisage them in volumetrical terms. In *Victory Over the Sun* Malevich perceived the actor as an extension of the Cubist canvas and not as a mobile, constructive form. Of course, Malevich is not alone in this failing and this same contradiction occurs again and again in stage design: suffice it to recall Larionov's totally impractical designs for *Histoires naturelles* (1915) or for *Chout* (1921). Visually, Malevich's costumes have great appeal and resemble a gallery of buffoons and clowns from some old fairground burlesque, but it is hard to imagine them functioning as real actors' costumes. They do not, as Goncharova would have wished, "create the material aspect of an imaginary personage."<sup>9</sup>

That *Victory Over the Sun* may have succeeded as a Cubist picture but failed ultimately as theatre is actually not of primary importance. What it did do was to question conventional attitudes to the theatre and to suggest new directions. Probably, its most important innovation was the application of mobile lighting and the distribution of various abstract forms on stage. The Futurist poet Benedikt Livshits described his impression:

Painterly stereometry was created within the confines of the scenic box for the first time, and a strict system of volumes was established, one which reduced the element of chance (which the movements of the human figures might have introduced) to a minimum. These figures were cut up by the blades of lights and were deprived alternately of hands, legs, head, etc. because, for Malevich, they were merely geometric bodies subject not only to disintegration into their component parts, but also to total dissolution in painterly space.

Abstract form was the only reality, a form which completely absorbed the entire Luciferan futility of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Malevich was using light to create abstract forms in the space of the stage forestalled the many exciting experiments with light in the 1920s. Popova and A. Vesnin resorted to light configurations in their project for the mass spectacle *Struggle and Victory* in 1921 (not produced); Rabinovich used light as a creative, kinetic device in his sets for the movie *Aelita* (1924) and for Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* (1927); Exter also used light for its abstract and formal value in her project *Lumiere* (1927).

While *Victory Over the Sun* broke with many traditions of the theatre, it did not define and categorize new systems: it posed more questions than it answered. It was this transitional quality, this ambiguity that attracted several artists of the later avant-garde, not least Vera Ermolaeva and Lissitzky. What a pity that Lissitzky's ten figures for "Die plastische Gestaltung der elektromechanischen Schau 'Sieg über die Sonne' " of 1923 were not used in an actual production of the opera. The Old Fogy and The Anxious One, "costume" designs from this set, are entirely theatrical beings, as absurd but as credible as Benois' designs for *Petrouchka* (1911). The importance of Lissitzky's costumes lies precisely in their destruction of

a central axis and in their reliance on the principles of disharmony, asymmetry and arhythmicity. Instead of one focus, the Lissitzky figure has many; instead of one particular "entrance" and "exit" for the spectator, the figure is open on all sides; instead of terrestrial dependence and gravity, the figure almost floats in space. Lissitzky's frustration of our conditioned responses to space destroys our equilibrium, makes us "circle like a planet"<sup>11</sup> round the figure. In this sense, Lissitzky's figures for *Victory Over the Sun* are subtle extensions of his theory of the Proun (Project for the Affirmation of the New):

PROUN is the creative building of form (deriving from mastery of space) via the economic construction of the material being used. The aim of the PROUN is to be a halting-place on the path of concrete creativity and not a foundation, a clarification or a popularization of life...<sup>12</sup>

The disturbance of the traditional axis in the work of art—that *sdvig* (displacement) so fundamental to the development of Russian Cubo-Futurism—had occurred simultaneously in all the arts just before the Great War. Conventional progressions changed: one no longer "read" the painting, one now perceived it simply as a combination of colors, forms and textures; the poem no longer described concrete reality, but lived as a self-sufficient experiment in sound and rhythm; music abandoned its social or religious subservience and returned to its abstract principle. Correspondingly, Russian stage designers also began to seek the essence of stage design and of the theatre itself.

The nineteenth century stage had presented an encyclopedic compendium of historical or social data; the early Modernist stage had been no less illustrative. Despite the weight of names such as Chaliapin, Mariia Ermolova, Nijinsky, Pavlova, Alexandr Yuzhin, the performer had played a role auxiliary to the visual effect. With the advent of Tairov, however, and then of Meierkhold, primary attention passed to the *actor* and hence to movement as the central force of theatre. It was within the perimeter of Tairov's famous Chamber Theatre, established in Moscow in 1914, that the theatre once again became a kinetic rather than a literary or decorative experience. Suffice it to recall some of the names of artists who worked for Tairov—Exter, Goncharova, Aristarkh Lentulov, Konstantin Medunetsky, the Stenbergs, A. Vesnin, Yakulov—to understand the importance of the Chamber Theatre as a forum for the propagation of new and vital ideas in stage design.

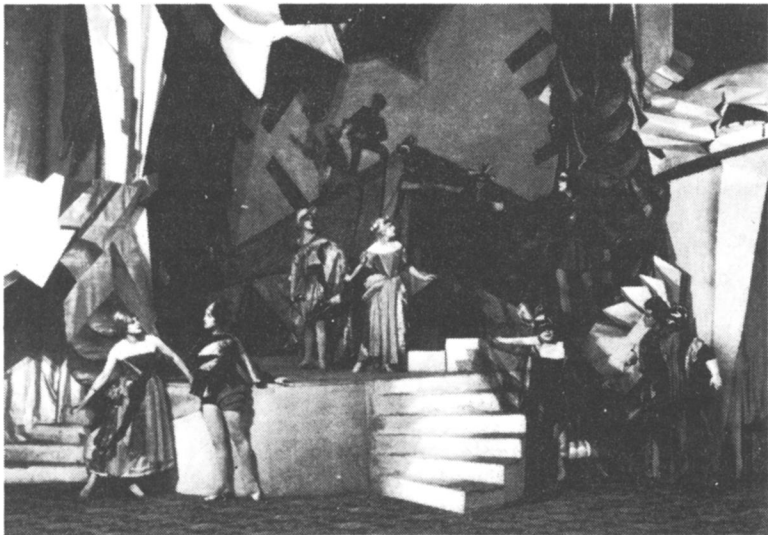
It was a fortunate combination of circumstances that one of the foremost stage designers of the twentieth century, Alexandra Exter, should have returned from Paris to reside in Russia also in 1914, and that she should have accepted Tairov's invitation to work at the Chamber Theatre. As Tairov himself wrote later: "[Exter was] an artist with an extraordinary sensitivity, one who was very responsive to my stage projects and who, from the very first, manifested a wonderful sense of the active element of the theatre."<sup>13</sup> Along with Popova, Exter was among the very few members of the Russian avant-garde who was really able to transcend the confines of the pictorial surface and to organize forms in their interaction with space. Her profound awareness of this interaction became very apparent in her first collaborations with Tairov on the productions of *Thamira Khytharedes* (1916) and *Salome* (1917) and then in her later endeavors such as *Romeo and Juliet*



(1921) and the *Death of Tarelkin* (1921, projected, but not produced). When the critic Yakov Tugendkhold observed of *Thamira Khytharedes* that Tairov and Exter had aspired to “make an organic connection between the moving actors and the objects at rest” and had resorted to “the dynamic use of immobile form,”<sup>14</sup> he was already indicating the direction which Exter would follow. Exter’s concentration on the rhythmic organization of space, on the “rhythmic frame of the action”<sup>15</sup> anticipated her Constructivist theatre, her dress designs and marionettes of the 1920s.

While Exter emerged as a pioneer of Constructivist design, she was not the most austere or laconic of artists. In her fashion projects of 1923, for example, she favored a richness of pattern and even a melange of styles which combined Suprematist shapes, Egyptian motifs and fur appendages. Similarly, in her designs for *Romeo and Juliet*, Exter used a rhetorical, rhapsodical flourish which, for Tairov at least, was already too visual. In their decorative excess, in their Bakstian splendor, Exter’s costumes seemed more suitable for pantomime or circus, and the production was a failure. For Tairov, nurtured on the strict canons of Appia and Craig and convinced of the supremacy of the actor over all other attributes of the stage, Exter’s conception was very foreign. Some critics even referred to the *Romeo and Juliet* of 1921 as the “most bitter page”<sup>16</sup> in the history of the Chamber Theatre. Although Tairov never lost his admiration for Exter, they did not collaborate in the theatre again. Although Exter often tended towards a luxury of forms quite impractical in the post-Revolutionary theatre, she never lost sight of the medium with which she was dealing, i.e. the total space of the stage. After her interlude with Tairov, Exter worked on a variety of projects, not least Yakov Protazanov’s production of the

Alexandra Exter: Sets and costumes for *Romeo and Juliet* produced by A. Tairov, Chamber Theatre, Moscow, 1921.

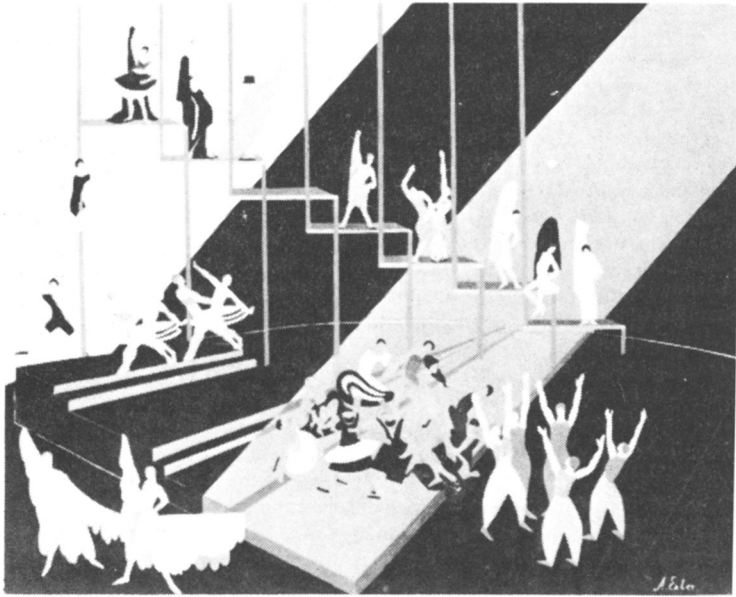


movie *Aelita* in 1924 (for which she and Nadezhda Lamanova designed the costumes and Rabinovich designed the sets), her collection of marionettes (which she designed together with Nechama Szmuskowicz in 1926) and her interior decor for Elsa Kruger's Berlin apartment in 1927.

Exter's costumes for *Aelita* are remarkable. Alexei Tolstói's fantastic story of men from Mars and proletarians from Earth, on which the movie was based, dictated a highly imaginative and "unreal" scenario, while the characters themselves (e.g. the Queen of the Martians) had no parallels in theatrical literature. On paper, Exter's costumes look unwieldy and rather absurd, but in the movie they function perfectly. The medium of film provided Exter with a high degree of momentum: just as she intended her marionettes to operate as a kinetic totality (also for a movie), so she relied on the cinematic method to "move" the characters and provided the spectator with several successive points of view. In turn, the cinema supplied Exter with an additive or artificial space—one reason why film also intrigued Meierkhold. The bizarre designs of the costumes, their asymmetries and mechanical attributes, were appropriate to the constantly changing space in which they functioned. Exter ensured the success of her costumes by the care and deliberation with which she constructed them. They are very different from the exuberance of her pieces for *Romeo and Juliet* and, in many cases, have something in common with the simplicity and severity of A. Vesnin's costumes for *Phedre* (1922). Knowing that in the black and white film, color in her designs would be superfluous, Exter resorted to other systems of formal definition. This, together with her acute awareness of space as a creative agent, prompted Exter to use a variety of unusual materials in the construction of the costumes and to rely on sharp contrasts between material textures—aluminum, perspex, metal-foil, glass. Such "industrial" materials, of course, were part of the Constructivists' cult of the machine, and in some instances they were applied without any authentic, utilitarian purpose. But with *Aelita*, the industrial materials served a definite objective: they defined form in the absence of color; in their transparency or reflectivity they joined with the space around them and created an eccentric montage of forms.

Exter's constructed costumes (their subtle combinations of perspex and metal remind us of Tatlin's reliefs or of Sofia Tolstaia's glass reliefs of 1916) harmonized well with the sets by Rabinovich. Like A. Vesnin in *Phedre*, Rabinovich relied on a "geometry of mood," interchanging three-dimensional solids (walls, columns, cubes) in order to transmit a necessary psychological or emotional signal. Rabinovich's conception of the stage was essentially an architectural, not a decorative one, and even in the most ornamental period of Soviet art (1930s-1950s) he remained loyal to this conviction. In his designs for *Aelita* verticals played a very important role, whether as unrelieved "metal" (plaster) columns ascending in elliptical form or as semi-transparent curtains of cord or metal. The austerity of these surfaces was relieved both by the actual progression of the film and by the extensive use of light—either through the mirrors incorporated into various parts of the floor or through material representations of beams of light cutting across the background. Rabinovich's panels of light, expressed in real or in symbolic (material) terms, constituted a formal device which Exter also used extensively in her designs of the mid- and late 1920s.

Much more could be said about *Aelita*. Important issues such as the rela-



Alexandra Exter: Stage design for a revue, Paris, 1929.

tionship of *Aelita* to the Futurist movie, e.g. Bragaglia's *Thais* (produced in 1916 with abstract decor by Enrico Prampolini) or Rene Clair's *Reflets de lumiere et de vitesse* (1922-23), its debt to, or influence on, Kasian Goleizovsky's experimental ballets of the early 1920s (e.g. his *Eccentric Dance* produced in 1922 with costumes by Petritsky) fall beyond the scope of this essay. But the points which we have mentioned certainly allow favorable comparison of *Aelita* to, say, *La Chatte* of 1927. Many of those principles often regarded as innovative in *La Chatte* (Gabo's and Pevsner's introduction of abstract shapes on stage, their use of lighting and of transparent, reflective materials) were already operative in *Aelita*. In this context, *La Chatte* loses some of its historical significance as a stage experiment, although, undoubtedly, it was the first ballet design in the West to use volumetrical and spatial ideas with any measure of success.

The fact that Exter worked with Rabinovich on *Aelita* was not fortuitous. Exter, perhaps more than any of the Russian avant-garde, can be said to have created a "school." In Kiev, between 1916 and 1919, Exter was in close contact with many young Ukrainian artists, among them Bogomazov and Petritsky. Some, such as Meller, Nivinsky, Rabinovich, Nisson Shifrin, Tchelitchew and Alexandr Tyshler, even received lessons from her. In greater or lesser degree, these artists became supporters of Exter's more lyrical adaptation of Cubism and Constructivism. For example, there is a striking similarity between the costumes of Bogomazov, Meller, Petritsky and Tchelitchew: Petritsky's dance designs of 1923, Tchelitchew's of 1919-21 rely on a sculptural, spiralic structure which provides an immediate sensation of movement—something which also brings to mind Exter's costumes for Tairov's productions. But whereas Exter was working for a re-

pertoiré of high tragedy, at least until 1921, her disciples became involved in much lighter genres of theatre. In Petritsky and Tchelitchev, for example, there are elements of the burlesque and the music-hall which could have had no place in the pre-Revolutionary, professional theatre. Petritsky's costumes in particular seem to have been projected for some gaudy circus event, for clowns and not for tragediennes, and his designs are at once decorative, hyperbolic and very "theatrical."

If understatement had been the hallmark of the pre-Revolutionary productions of Tairov and Meierkhöld, then exaggeration was the salient feature of the post-Revolutionary theatre. And within this "eccentric theatre"<sup>17</sup> Meller, Petritsky and also Khodasevich could be easily accommodated. The absurd element in Petritsky (and we remember that he and Nikolai Gogol were compatriots) is present, above all, in his treatment of geometric composition and montage as methods of caricature. There is something of the Russian/Ukrainian *balagan* and *skomorokhi* here, theatrical forms which were also used as media of political and social satire. Petritsky, in fact, was regarding the stage design on the same level as the *lubok*,<sup>18</sup> and so returned the theatre from its intimate, enclosed locus (cf. the Chamber Theatre) to its function as a popular and public spectacle. However, although Petritsky wished to reach a wide, proletarian audience, he did not neglect the formal construction of his sets and costumes. He applied subtle combinations of materials—gold paper on cotton prints, geometric forms on florid, folk motifs. Perhaps in this curious dissonance we can detect the very spirit of the Ukrainian avant-garde, at once sophisticated and primitive, constructive and decorative. As the critic V. Khmuryi wrote in 1929, Petritsky gives "decorative functions to constructive deformation."<sup>19</sup> Evidently, it was this ability to deal simultaneously with surface and space that enabled Bogomazov, Meller, Petritsky and Tchelitchev to work successfully both as easel painters and as stage designers throughout their lives.

The elements of caricature, farce and buffoonery germane to the work of Meller, Petritsky and Tchelitchev testify to a vital change which occurred in the Russian and Ukrainian theatre just after the Revolution. While, obviously, there are organic connections between pre- and post-Revolutionary designs, we must not forget that during the decade 1917-27 the whole concept of theatre underwent complete re-examination in the Soviet Union. The establishment and liquidation of so many experimental theatres during the early years (Safonov's theatre on the Taganka, Meierkhöld's theatre workshop, Alexandr Granovsky's State Jewish Theatre and the Habima, etc.) is sufficient proof of the diversity and vitality of the new Russian theatre. The fact that the circus, the cabaret, the mass, open-air spectacle became very prominent as theatrical genres just after the Revolution is symptomatic of the general, abrupt changes which occurred in the orientation and objectives of the traditional theatre. Reasons for this move towards the "lower" forms of spectacle are several: the theatre-goer was no longer part of a privileged intelligentsia and plutocracy; the circus or farce could easily be forged into a political and agitational weapon: the conventional Russian theatre had no contemporary repertoire (something which Meierkhöld had been complaining about since 1910).<sup>20</sup> The last point explains why such anachronisms as *Phedre* (1922) and *Lysistrata*, (1923) were staged in the early Soviet theatre and why Meierkhöld, for example, was overjoyed when he received "contemporary" scripts from Vladimir

Maiakovskiy and other modern writers in 1928. As public entertainment, therefore, the conventions of the professional theatre were superseded by those of the circus, the cabaret and the so-called "mass action" or "mass spectacle" at least in the early years of the Soviet regime.

Both the circus and the mass action could boast a long lineage in Russia. The famous annual fairs, the religious processions, the public fetes of old Russia had expressed the love of festivity and festival fundamental to the Russian character. In these forms of popular culture the spectator was also the actor, limited only by very simple canons and quite at liberty to make "mistakes." Except for isolated experiments such as *Victory Over the Sun* which, *mutatis mutandis*, might be considered as a popular burlesque, the professional theatre before the Revolution had neglected this strong, indigenous tradition. A direct outcome had been a loss of communication between actor and audience, a condition exacerbated further by the existing division between actor and decor.

Shortly before the Revolution there were some attempts to regenerate a sense of totality in the theatre. One manifestation of this, for example, was the establishment of the "intimate theatre" such as Baron Drizen's and Evreinov's Antique Theatre in 1907 and Meierkhöld's House of Interludes in 1910. In these enterprises the audience scarcely outnumbered the cast, the social and intellectual composition of both sides was always very similar and the productions favored carried ideas readily accessible to the chosen few. The bohemian "cellar" or cabaret such as *The Stray Dog* and *The Comedians' Halt* in St. Petersburg and the *Cafe Pittoresque* in Moscow may also be regarded as part of this endeavor to reunite actor and spectator. The poet Livshits alluded to this in his recollections of *The Stray Dog* (founded in 1911):

On so-called "extraordinary" Saturdays and Wednesdays, guests were required to put paper hats on their heads. They were handed these at the entrance to the cellar. Illustrious lawyers or members of the State Duma, famous the length and breadth of Russia, were taken unawares and, uncomplainingly, submitted to this stipulation.

At masquerades, Twelfth-night and Shrove-tide actors, sometimes whole companies, would turn up in theatrical costume....

The programs were the most diverse—from Kulbin's lecture "On the New World-view" or Piast's "On the Theatre of the Word and the Theatre of Movement" to the "musical Mondays," Karsavina's dancing or a banquet in honor of the Moscow Arts Theatre.

...However, the main point of the program was not the scheduled part, but the unscheduled one—the appearances of which had not been foreseen and which would usually enthrall us the whole night through.<sup>21</sup>

It is relevant to note that the most bohemian and the most eccentric of the Russian designers—Georgii Yakulov—was a frequenter of the night-spots in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Yakulov, like Petritsky and Tchelonine, cannot be contained within one stylistic category: he gave his artistic allegiance neither to Cubism, nor to Futurism or Constructivism, and yet he derived much of his strength from all these movements. As one critic said, Yakulov, like Meierkhöld, carried the theatre within him, "his own evolution was a theatre unto itself."<sup>22</sup> It was Yakulov who was responsible for the interior decoration of what came to be the first Soviet "cellar"—the *Cafe Pittoresque*.

When the businessman Nikolai Filippov, owner of the famous Filippov Cafe on Tverskaia Street (now Gorky Street) and a chain of Moscow patisseries, bought premises on Kuznetsky Bridge in Moscow, it was natural that he should have invited Yakulov to design the interior. Within the interior of the Cafe Yakulov was able to unleash his passion for the exotic and the ornamental. In order to overcome the stark angularity of the glass, hangar-like roof, Yakulov treated it as a complex of planes colored variously in red, yellow and orange; the walls he decorated according to the theme of Blok's play *The Unknown Woman* (produced there by Meierkhöld and with sets by Lentulov in March 1918). Yakulov ensured that particular attention was paid to the appurtenances (he asked Rodchenko to design the lamps, for example) and enlisted the support of many leftist artists, not least Lev Bruni and Tatlin. Although the Cafe did not open until January 1918, by which time it had been renamed The Red Cockerell, and although it existed as an intellectual and bohemian center for only a few months, the Cafe Pittoresque, together with The Stable of Pegasus (another cafe which Yakulov also decorated) provided Yakulov with useful experience for his several theatrical commissions of 1918 onwards.



Georgii Yakulov, artist: *Girofle-Girofla* produced by A. Tairov, Chamber Theatre, Moscow, 1922.

It was in two productions in particular—*Princess Brambilla* (1920, in which Yakulov himself performed) and *Girofle-Girofla* (1922) both of which were given at the Chamber Theatre—that Yakulov transformed the theatre into circus. The critic Evgenii Znosko-Borovsky even went so far as to assert that *Girofle-Girofla* at least was based wholly on acrobatics and clowning.<sup>23</sup> As a matter of fact, Yakulov's set and costume designs for these two spectacles seem destined more for "happenings" than for theatre. Exter, Popova, the Stenbergs, etc. used a particular conjunction of forms and textures for a particular, predetermined effect; Yakulov used chance, coin-

cidence, intuition—resulting either in total failure (as in *Signor Formica* of 1922) or in extraordinary success (as in *Girofle-Girofla*). This element of guesswork makes Yakulov a very human artist and one who won wide sympathy with the common people. As he said himself: "Art exists for the ignorant. The greatness of art lies in its right to be illiterate."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Yakulov saw theatre as a mass experience and, in turn, tried to emphasize its simplest and most basic ingredient—"the principle of perpetual motion, the kaleidoscope of forms and colors."<sup>25</sup> In order to express this movement in *Girofle-Girofla*, Yakulov resorted to an involved system of kinetic "machines" which "moved forward some parts, took back others, rolled out platforms, let down ladders, opened up traps, constructed passage-ways."<sup>26</sup> This crazy, chaotic spectacle could not fail to evoke mirth and it was the most popular entertainment in Moscow in 1922. As Anatolii Lunacharsky said, the common man had the right to relax after the hard days of the Revolution, and Yakulov gave him the opportunity to do so.<sup>27</sup>

Suddenly everyone wanted to laugh and to enjoy the innocent pleasures of life. No doubt, it was in this mood that Exter and Popova started work in the Moscow Children's Theatre in 1920 or that such diverse individuals as Kandinsky and Meierkhold both professed a deep faith in the art of the clown. But it was the spontaneous, instinctive quality of the circus that interested Kandinsky, Meierkhold and Yakulov—and not its reliance on mechanical reflex and gymnastic exercise which, for example, attracted the Italian Futurists Fortunato Depero and Prampolini. The critic Alexandr Fevral'sky summed up the situation:

The essential material in the theatre is the living, human body. Our main attention should be given to its correct and intensive development. More sharp and bold movements, more acrobatics, more tricks. Take everything we can from the circus. Discount literature and "psychology."<sup>28</sup>

These ideas were well expressed in a number of stage productions of the early 1920s, including Meierkhold's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and Annenkov's *The First Distiller*.

Parallel to the revival of the circus just after the Revolution, there emerged a new aspect of theatre called *massovoe deistvo* (mass action). The several mass actions projected and/or produced in the early years derived directly from the religious or political demonstration and, more topically, from the program of monumental and agitational propaganda instituted by Lenin in 1918; furthermore, there were, of course, historical counterparts such as the various public fetes organized in France in the 1790s and designed by David, De Machy, Naudet et al. In general terms, the mass action was the loosely dramatized re-enactment of a revolutionary social or political event, the most famous of which was *The Storming of the Winter Palace* planned by Annenkov et al. in September 1920. Mention might be made also of *Towards the World Commune* designed by Natan Altman in June 1920 in Petrograd, of Alexei Gan's *We* for which Rodchenko designed the costumes (1920, but not produced) and the Meierkhold/Popova/A. Vesnin *Struggle and Victory* proposed for Moscow in the Spring of 1921. Gan, one of the more ebullient theorists of Constructivism, saw the genesis of Constructivism—"labor, tectonics, organization"<sup>29</sup>—to lie in the mass action movement. He expounded his ideas in a long article on mass action in 1922:

The "mass action" is not an invention or a fantasy, but is an absolute and organic necessity deriving from the very essence of Communism....The "mass action" under Communism is not the action of a civic society, but of a human one—wherein material production will fuse with intellectual production. This intellectual/material culture is mobilizing all its strength and means so as to subordinate unto itself not only nature, but also the whole, universal cosmos.<sup>30</sup>

To a considerable extent, *The Storming of the Winter Palace* embodied these very principles.

The proposals to reproduce the historic events of 1917 as in *The Storming* or to celebrate the Communist International as in *Towards the World Commune* were grandiose, but rather unnecessary ventures. Both mass actions expressed the concept of total theatre and, with a cast of thousands and an audience of tens of thousands, could have implemented the old exhortation of the Symbolists—"zu schaffen, nicht zu schauen."<sup>31</sup> In the case of *The Storming* decor in the traditional sense consisted of very little—wooden platforms in front of the Winter Palace in Petersburg and a diorama of agitational hoardings on the buildings themselves, and the real spirit of the production was to have been expressed precisely by "mass action." Ultimately, the spectacle merely regenerated and confirmed historical facts and called for no interpretation or act of imagination on the part of cast or audience. This mechanical and very rational aspect of theatre appealed to Annenkov and Evreinov at this time, and Annenkov, at least, regarded the factory produced object to be an art form higher than anything produced by man. As one of the producers of *Towards the World Commune* indicated, the mass action proved to be a tedious and uninspiring experience:

The spectacle begins....We have flags, telephones, electric bells in our hands. Actors come out on to the steps of the Stock Exchange. I press the bell and, obediently, they all sit down. I make a pause...ring again, and they take off their hats. I ring once more, and they open their books....There were four hundred Red Army soldiers who had been rounded up goodness knows from where....They moved, wandered about, sang, ran... just as all soldiers do at parades when they're fed up with the whole business. It was obvious that they were not touched or excited by the idea of the scenario or by the project itself....<sup>32</sup>

Whatever the faults of the mass action, it did achieve one very important objective: it transferred the stage from the intimacy of the theatre-house to the public square. The theatre, like the *balagan* and the traveling buffoons and minstrels of old, once again became itinerant. Meierkhold's earnest desire that the theatre become part of everyday life, accessible to the worker, the peasant, the intellectual at any time and at any place, seemed about to be fulfilled. After all, this conception lay at the basis of one of the most famous of the Constructivist productions, Meierkhold's *Earth on End* with sets by Popova.

Constructivism affected not only the "decorative" aspect of theatre, transforming the stage into a truly three-dimensional experience, but also the dramatic text, the musical (or other) accompaniment and the actor himself. Meierkhold's system of bio-mechanics, for all its debt to the eurhythmic principles of Jaques-Dalcroze, to the work-study programs of Frederick Taylor and to the devices of the Japanese theatre, was a con-



scious application of Constructivist ideas to the performer: the attempt to achieve maximum effect through minimum effort and thus to learn that function determines form. General concepts such as economy of visual and verbal form and the emphasis on construction as an expedient integration of forms ("the safety-razor") and not on composition as an assemblage of disparate units ("the bunch of flowers")<sup>33</sup> were already evident in Meierkhold's *Balaganchik* of 1906. Subsequently, the Futurist productions and the staging of *Thamira Khytharedes* and *Salome* at the Chamber Theatre also prepared the ground for the advent of Constructivism.

In November 1920 Meierkhold presented *The Dawn*, adapted from a poetic drama by Emile Verhaeren. The play had direct social and political value since it dealt with a Capitalist war which turned into a revolution of the international proletariat. As such, it was an excellent way to mark the grand opening of Meierkhold's new theatrical enterprise, *RSFSR Theatre No. 1*, even though Meierkhold had only three weeks in which to prepare the play. However, the proletarian audience found certain methods—the presence of a "Greek" chorus in the orchestra pit, the constant and deliberate interruption of the narrative by episodes of a purely agitational nature and the experimental use of montage on all levels—very perplexing indeed. In particular, the sets designed by Dmitriev, a disciple of Tatlin, met with a very mixed response. Dmitriev treated the stage as an architectural medium and assembled various cylinders, spheres, cones, discs (for the most part, non-representational) in a haphazard and illogical manner. Obviously, the artist wished to renounce the aesthetic and illusionist function of decor, but, in fact, his conglomeration of volumes produced merely another kind of "decoration," and one which hindered the progression of the play.

For all his good intentions, Dmitriev failed as a designer since his sets did not illustrate the play, they did not express a particular psychological or emotional value and they did not extend the actors' movements into space. What Meierkhold needed was a stage designer who, above all, would be able to use material in close conjunction with the essential concept of movement on stage. A. Vesnin, in his effective sets and costumes for Tairov's production of *Phedre* in February 1922 certainly approached this, although at heart he still relied on an Expressionist interpretation (and the parallels between *Phedre* and some of Appia's pre-War designs are very evident). In fact, it was in the art of Rodchenko, Stepanova and, above all, Popova that Meierkhold found a necessary support for his "art of conscious theatre."<sup>34</sup> With Popova Constructivism on stage became a reality and it is to her designs, therefore, that we should give particular attention.

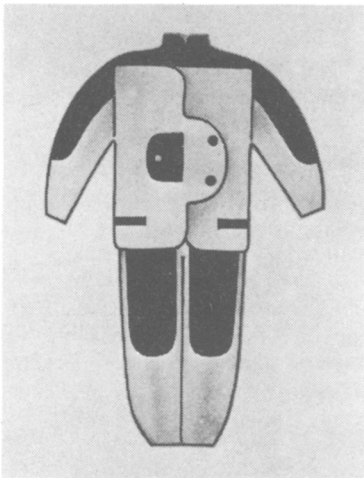
Liubov Popova brought to the world of stage design a very rich and varied artistic experience. She had moved rapidly from Cubism (she had studied with Le Fauconnier and Metzinger in Paris in 1912-13) to her "painterly architectonics" in 1916 and had taken part in major avant-garde exhibitions. Popova was one of the most austere and principled members of the Russian avant-garde, and however diverse her activities, she remained faithful to certain basic concepts of form and space. Unlike many of her fellow designers, Popova possessed the rare faculty for thinking in terms both of two dimensions and of three, and so, ultimately she could not remain satisfied with the flatness of the pictorial plane. Her desire to introduce space as a creative agent—encouraged by her friendship with the sculptress Vera Mukhina and with Tatlin—was already apparent in 1915 in

her series of still-lives and portraits which she subtitled "plastic painting" and in her occasional reliefs of 1916. But it was in her stage (and textile) designs that Popova finally gratified her wish to build with real materials in real space.

Popova felt that the theatre would allow her to use space to the maximum and to avoid the "frontal, visual character [of art] which hindered one from examining its function simply as a fluent and working process."<sup>35</sup> It was here that Popova showed herself to be one of the very few authentic Constructivists of the Russian theatre. In her economy of means, her severity of organization, her subtle combination of real form and real space Popova expanded the elementary concepts of Rodchenko's wooden and metal constructions of 1918-21 and anticipated a number of Constructivist stage productions of the mid- and late 1920s. Popova was first involved in stage design in 1920 when she was commissioned to design costumes for the children's play *The Tale of the Priest and His Workman Balda* at the Moscow Children's Theatre. In 1921 she designed costumes for Anatolii Lunacharsky's play *The Locksmith and the Chancellor* at the Korsh Theatre. In the same year she worked on sets and costumes for Tairov's production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Moscow Chamber Theatre, although her non-sequential planes of color and illogical deflections of light, transposed into an illusionistic setting with stairs and vaulted ceilings, created an awkward and unacceptable contradiction. Nevertheless, her friend A. Vesnin took the designs, simplified them and created a much more pragmatic ensemble which was then used by Tairov in his production in May 1921.

Liubov Popova: Costume for *A High Priest of Tarquinia*, Moscow, 1922.

Alexandr Rodchenko: Costume for *The Bed Bug* produced by V. Meierkhöld, Moscow, 1929.



The turning-point in Popova's career as a stage designer came in the Fall of 1921 when, after her participation in the "conclusive" leftist exhibition *5x5= 25*, she was invited by Meierkholt to compile a program for a course in "material stage design" at his State Higher Producer Workshops in Moscow. It was here that Popova created her extraordinary construction and costumes for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* staged by Meierkholt on April 25, 1922. Meierkholt took Fernand Crommelynck's rather indecent farce about a miller who suspects his adulterous wife and used it merely as an experiment in pure acting and pure form. Although, in her resolution of the design, Popova was indebted to ideas produced by artists already working in the workshop including Sergei Eisenstein and Vladimir Lutse, she bore responsibility for the definitive construction. This was of unprecedented appearance:

On the evening of the first presentation of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* Muscovites...saw—on the stage completely denuded of curtain, backdrops, portals and footlights—a wooden installation of the strangest shape, a construction. It was assembled to look like a peculiar windmill and was a combination of platforms, ladders, gangways, revolving doors and revolving wheels. The box itself did not depict anything. It served merely as a support, a device for the actors' performance and resembled something in the order of an intricate combination of trampolines, trapezes and gymnastic installations. The wings of the windmill and the two wheels revolved slowly or quickly depending on the intensity of the action and the tempo of the spectacle. The clever young actors and actresses, without make-up and in blue workers' overalls (the same for men and women), played out a firework-like symphony of movements with the ease of virtuosity for three hours....<sup>36</sup>

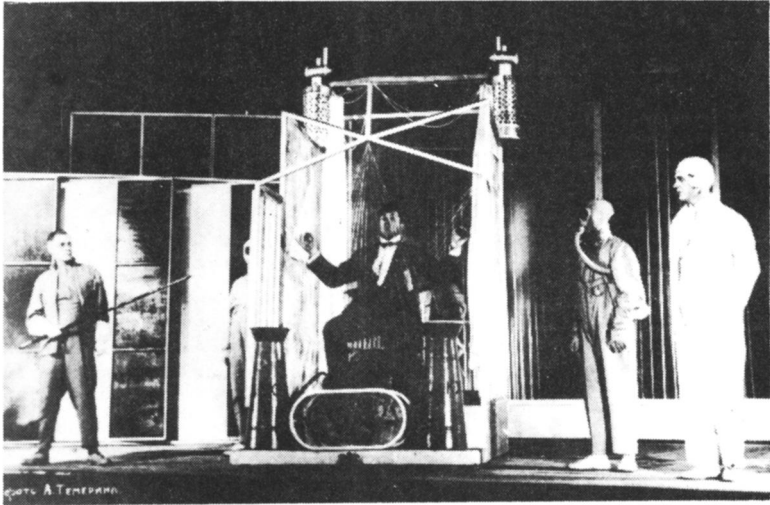
Popova's construction for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* demonstrated a new concept of stage design and made a radical break with both Russian and Western traditions. Inevitably, Popova's influence was appreciable. For example, Stepanova's sets and costumes for Meierkholt's production of *The Death of Tarelkin* in November 1922 owed much to Popova's ideas and Meierkholt even went so far as to speak of Stepanova's jealous wish to "outdo" Popova.<sup>37</sup> Still, we should not allow the rivalry between Popova and Stepanova and the strained relations between Meierkholt and Stepanova to influence our judgment of her work. From her costume designs for *The Death of Tarelkin*, it is clear that Stepanova was deeply concerned with economy of means, simplicity of form, maximum of effectiveness. As in her famous *sportodezhda* (sports clothes) of 1923, Stepanova was guided by very specific rules in her choice of forms. Like Popova and Rodchenko, Stepanova stood in complete antithesis to the *World of Art* designers. As one observer said: "The *World of Art* wrapped up the actor like candy in a pretty piece of paper."<sup>38</sup> Stepanova and her colleagues unwrapped him. This return of the *Korpergefuhl* to costume design was paralleled by Meierkholt's rejection of make-up and, in broader terms, by the general concern with mass gymnastics and athletics in the 1920s.

Stepanova's utilitarian costumes functioned very well within the sets which she used on stage. By employing a series of wooden constructions of abstract form, Stepanova produced a very varied scenario: as the actor moved about the stage, his vision of the environment changed drastically

because the lathes and slats of the constructions served as a kind of Op-Art mechanism. It was a simple device which Lissitzky also used in his interior designs for the exhibitions rooms in Dresden and Hanover in 1926 and 1927-28. Moreover, we can detect a similar conception in Stepanova's theatre bills for *The Death of Tarelkin*: these are not just sources of verbal information, but are also "abstract" designs in their own right. The red wedge in the center of the first poster is merely another component in the whole sequence of horizontals and verticals. This reliance on two levels of perception, i.e. on the semantic value and on the formal or abstract value, creates the same kind of constant modulation and ambiguity as the disharmony between the narrative and the sets for *The Death of Tarelkin*.

The constructions of Popova and Stepanova were followed by a number of less distinguished experiments. A. Vesnin's peculiar mechanisms for Tairov's production of Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* in December 1923 derived their basic idea from Popova's "windmill," although they carried a highly representational value and were meant to transmit the reality of the big city through their elevators, billboards, etc. There is no doubt, however, that it was the Stenberg brothers, Georgii and Vladimir, who upheld the purest traditions of Constructivism on stage. Even though they worked mainly for Tairov and hence, in theory, were closer to the more intimate and psychological direction of the Chamber Theatre, their sets (with Medunetsky) for *The Storm* of March 1924 had more in common with Popova than with Exter. Like Meierkhöld, Popova and Stepanova, the Stenbergs regarded the actor and not the text as the central attribute of theatre and ensured a maximum of movement by using multi-level constructions, ladders, inclines, etc. The actors, therefore, were able to operate in a variety of positions and to relate to each other and to the audience vertically, horizontally, diagonally. The Stenbergs' costume designs were, however, less satisfactory and in *The Storm*, for example, their representational or narrative quality clashed with the abstract sets. Several observers noticed this discrepancy, not least Lunacharsky: "[*The Storm*] was presented as a strange mixture of completely realistic performance (in the style of the Little Theatre) and rather artificial, constructive decor."<sup>39</sup> In ensuing productions, the Stenbergs followed a more logical progression, often achieving an effective synthesis of designs as in Tairov's staging of Shaw's *St. Joan* (October 1924).

The Stenbergs' partial return to an illustrative, although still geometric, conception of theatre design was indicative of the general move back towards Realism in the 1920s both in the Soviet Union and in the West. We must not forget that the austerity of the 1922 productions was alien to the average theatre-goer who was operating with a nineteenth century concept of spectacle and who, like most of us, was not eager to create his own illusion in the absence of illusionist decor. What the Soviet audience wanted, in fact, was either melodrama on stage or the epic movie, i.e. a distracting entertainment. They urged that "Constructivism be covered with a haze of fantasy."<sup>40</sup> The direct result of this pressure from below (and not just from above) meant that by the late 1920s Soviet stage design had returned from construction to decoration, from space to surface. Of course, there were a few major exceptions such as Meierkhöld's production of Maiakovsky's *The Bed Bug* with costumes by Rodchenko et al. in 1929, but they did not halt the inexorable progression back towards the Classical tradition.



Alexandr Rodchenko, artist: *The Bed Bug* produced by V. Meierkhold, Moscow, 1929.

Just as Soviet painters of the Stalin era painted faces smiling in the sunshine amidst sheaves of corn, so Soviet stage designers cast the beautiful prospects of a utopian socialism into the *bella prospettiva* of the theatrical decor. In 1938 Iliia Shlepianov, one of Meierkhold's closest associates and designers of the later period, wrote that "Moscow theatres...are now like a row of interlocking retorts in which the water level is the same."<sup>41</sup> Fortunately, this is no longer the state of affairs. Exter, Lissitzky, Popova, Stepanova, Yakulov are now gaining wide recognition in the Soviet Union and are serving as a vital source of inspiration to young Soviet designers. After almost forty years of eclectic decoration which relied on the out-moded methods of the Classical, the Palladian, the Baroque and the Realist styles, Soviet stage design is at last moving once again from surface to space. In this important development lies the most fitting monument to the beliefs and ideals of the Constructivist stage designers of the 1920s.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>W. R. Fuerst and S. J. Hume: *Twentieth-Century Stage Decoration*, New York, 1967 (1929), vol. 1, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>This according to A. Lunarcharsky: *Teatr segodnia*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1928, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup>A. Gvozdev: *Khudozhnik v teatre*, Leningrad-Moscow, 1931, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>V. Piast: "Teatr slova i teatr dvizheniia" in K. Erberg (editor): *Iskusstvo staroe i novoe*, Petersburg, 1921, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup>A. Gvozdev: "Vместо pre-disloviia" in *Teatralnyi Oktiabr*, Leningrad-Moscow, 1926, no. 1, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted from A. Strigalev: "O proekte 'pamiatnika III internatsionala' khudozhnika V. Tatlina" in *Voprosy sovetskogo izobrazitelnogo iskusstva i arkhitektury*, Moscow, 1973, p. 411.

<sup>7</sup>S. Auslender: "Vecher Soiuz molodezhi" in *Russkaia khudozhestvennaia letopis*, St. Petersburg, 1911, no. 4, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup>M. Matiushin in *Futuristy. Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov*, Moscow, 1914, no. 1-2, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup>N. Goncharova: "A Few Words on Theatrical Costume" in H. Rieschbieter: *Art and the Stage in the 20th Century*, New York: New York Graphic Society, 1968, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup>B. Livshits: *Polutoraglazyi strelets*, Leningrad, 1933, p. 188.

<sup>11</sup>El Lissitzky: "Suprematism in World Construction" in S. Lissitzky-Kuppers: *El Lissitzky. Life, Letters, Texts*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1968, p. 328.

<sup>12</sup>E. Lisitsky (El Lissitzky): "Tesizy k Prounu (ot zhivopisi k arkhitekture)" (1920) in M. Barkhin et al. (editors): *Mastera arkhitektury ob arkhitekture*, Moscow, 1975, vol. 2, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup>A. Tairov: *Zapiski rezhissera*, Moscow, 1921, p. 141.

<sup>14</sup>Ya. Tugendkhold: "Pismo iz Moskvy" in *Apollon*, Petrograd, 1917, no. 1, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup>K. Derzhavin: *Kniga or Kamernom teatre 1914-1934*, Leningrad, 1934, p. 68.

<sup>16</sup>A. Efros: *Kamernyi teatr i ego khudozhniki*, Moscow, 1934, p. XXXII.

<sup>17</sup>An allusion to the so-called "Factory of Eccentrism," a theatre-workshop which Grigorii Kozintsev, Leonid Trauberg et al. established in Petersburg in 1921. Elements of the circus were used widely in this enterprise. It was inspired in part by Annenkov's production of *The First Distiller* in Petrograd in 1919 when he incorporated acrobatics and circus stunts.

<sup>18</sup>The *lubok* was a cheap popular print or woodcut produced during the seventeenth century onwards. It was similar to the old English broadsheet.

<sup>19</sup>V. Khmuryi: *Anatol Petritskii. Teatralni stroi*, Kharkov, 1929, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup>See Meierkhold's untitled contribution to the collection of articles *Kuda my idem*, Moscow, 1910, pp. 104-105.

<sup>21</sup>B. Livshits, op. cit., pp. 258-59.

<sup>22</sup>N. Giliarovskaia: *Teatralno-dekoratsionnoe iskusstvo za 5 let*, Kazan, 1924, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup>E. Znosko-Borovsky: *Russkii teatr nachala XX veka*, Prague, 1925, pp. 388-90.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted from Giliarovskaia, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>26</sup>Efros, op. cit., p. XXXVI.

<sup>27</sup>A. Lunacharsky: "Zhirofle-Zhiroflia" in *Kamernyi teatr. Stati. Sametki. Vospominaniia*, Moscow, 1934, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup>A. Fevralsky: "Dialektika teatra" in *Zrelshcha*, Moscow, 1922, no. 7, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup>A. Gan: *Konstruktivizm*, Tver, 1922, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup>A. Gan: "Borba za massovoe deistvo" in *O teatre*, Tver, 1922, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup>V. Ivanov: *Po zvezdam*, St. Petersburg, 1909, p. 205.

<sup>32</sup>Quoted by Znosko-Borovsky, op. cit., pp. 428-29.

<sup>33</sup>The definitions are Lissitzky's. See his "New Russian Art: a lecture" in S. Lissitzky-Kuppers, op. cit., p. 336.

<sup>34</sup>The sub-title of one of the most penetrating studies of Meierkhold's work, i.e. M. Hoover's *Meyerhold. The Art of Conscious Theater*, Amherst, 1974.

<sup>35</sup>From a lecture on *The Magnanimous Cuckold* which Popova gave at the Institute of Artistic Culture, Moscow in April 1922. Quoted from E. Rakitina: "Liubov Popova. Iskusstvo i manifesty" in E. Rakitina et al. (editors): *Khudozhnik stsena ekran*, Moscow, 1975, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup>Yu. Elagin: *Temnyi genii*, New York, 1955, pp. 248-49.

<sup>37</sup>V. Meierkhold: "'Uchitel Bubus' i problema spektaklia na muzyke" in A. Fevralsky et al. (editors): *V.E. Meierkhold. Stati. Pisma. Rechi. Besedy*, Moscow, 1968, vol. 2, p. 79.

<sup>38</sup>A. Ivanov: "Teatralnyi kostium" in E. Gollerbakh (editor): *Teatralno-dekoratsionnoe iskusstvo v SSSR 1917-1927*, Leningrad, 1927, p. 157.

<sup>39</sup>A. Lunacharsky: "K desiatiletiiu Kamernogo teatra" in *Iskusstvo trudiashchimsia*, Moscow, 1924, no 4-5, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup>Quoted from T. Strizhenova: *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma*, Moscow, 1972, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup>I. Shlepianov: "Zametki po

voprosam iskusstva" in S. Dunina (editor): *Iliia Shlepianov. Stati. Zametki. Vyskazyvaniia*, Moscow, 1969, p. 22.

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