

How Meierkhol'd Never Worked with Tatlin, and What Happened as a Result

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In a letter to his daughter Kseniia, Konstantin Stanislavskii described a work by a certain "Futurist" artist and even drew a diagram so that his daughter would have a better idea of this strange creation: an iron bucket sliced in half and mounted on yellow wallpaper.¹ Little did Stanislavskii suspect that the bucket on wallpaper had a direct connection with those new principles of stage design, employed in the productions of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, that would so enormously impress him in the mid-1920s.²

A certain A. K. visited Vladimir Tatlin's studio and published a long article in the newspaper *Utro Rossii* (*Morning of Russia*). Having seen Tatlin's designs for Mikhail Glinka's opera *Zhizn' za tsaria* (*A Life for the Czar*), he praised the artist's theatrical talents, contrasting his designs with the "sickly-sweet confections and slovenly compositions" of Konstantin Korovin. And he judged Tatlin's reliefs to have "much in common with the art of the stage, the art of the director."³ Failing to discern their self-sufficient aesthetic value, he deemed the reliefs purely the product of Tatlin's involvement with the theater.

During a discussion in 1940 of Tatlin's set designs for Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Delo* (*The Court Case*), the artist Vladimir Dmitriev expressed admiration for them, saying that Tatlin had "succeeded in escaping from everyday life and Naturalism." Everything was done very simply, without any superfluous ornamentation. "Were it not for [Tatlin's] counter-reliefs, these designs would never have been."⁴ The teaching of counter-reliefs should, therefore, be introduced. Dmitriev, the chief designer at the Moscow Art Theater—whose statements were quite reckless for the times—had twenty years before, as a very young man, designed Meierkhol'd's production of Emile Verhaeren's *Les Aubes* (*Zori* [*The Dawns*]). He met Meierkhol'd's wishes ("We want our backdrop to be either an iron pipe or the sea or something built by the new man")⁵ only halfway, suspending planes of various shapes, attached to iron cables, above the stage. Meierkhol'd was not pleased. Dmitriev, he felt, hadn't gone far enough: he "doesn't want, or perhaps lacks the ability, to leave behind aesthetic theatrical trinkets."⁶ It was five years after the production's premiere, from the vantage of his Constructivist experience, that Meierkhol'd delivered this criticism of Dmitriev's failure to go beyond non-objectivity. Yet to hang a counter-relief above the stage did not mean that Tatlin's example had been followed.

No one artist, no matter how brilliant, is capable of remaking the theater on his own. "The theater is the pillar of art's decrepitude," said Kazimir Malevich, as he started work on the opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* (*Victory over the Sun*, 1913).⁷ But the bomb he set did not go off. The play belongs to art history. The "Futurist" clock ran fast. The clock in the theater was set to a different time.

Tatlin's counter-reliefs contained a threat to the "painterly prosperity" of the artist working in the theater. Although Tatlin's stage designs, virtually contemporaneous with his counter-reliefs, were very much in favor with the Mir iskusstva (World of Art) group.

An answer can always be found to the question of why an artist goes into the theater. It could be said that the World of Art types, with their love for the art of bygone eras, found in the theater an opportunity to realize their dreams about the past; that the Cubist suffocated in the space of his painting but on the stage let air into his constructions; that the Constructivist in a backward and destitute country had nowhere else to turn in order to realize his dreams of the future. A widespread theory assigns the theater the role of a psychotherapeutic workshop or of a valve for "letting off steam." Everything is

possible. Yet the question is improperly posed. An artist does not go into the theater. He must be summoned by it. And this occurs when the potential residing in an artist's works can be tapped to meet the needs of the theater.

History writes itself, without regard for how we later interpret it. It is a play with its own paradoxes. Though he constantly yearned to work with Tatlin, Meierkhol'd never collaborated on a single production with him.⁸

"The material of scenic production as such, devoid of any beauty, when subject to artistic reworking gives the viewer, strange as it may seem, pleasure precisely of an aesthetic order, gives beauty . . . No external conditions whatsoever affect us, for we always start from the ground, from the material (regardless of what kind it is), conquering it and organizing it."⁹ These words could well have been spoken by Tatlin. They belong in fact to a student in the classes on "material stage design" conducted by Liubov' Popova at GVTM, Meierkhol'd's Higher State Theater Workshops.

Meierkhol'd had invited Popova to teach this discipline not solely because he had been impressed by her work in the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition (Moscow, 1921) but, above all, because he had come to regard her highly during the course of their collaboration on Ivan Aksenov's *The Struggle and Victory of the Soviets*, a mass festival scheduled for Khodynskoe Field in Moscow in the spring of 1921. It was then that Meierkhol'd, in search of an artist who not only knew how to use material in three dimensions but could be an organic participant in the organization of the action onstage, made his choice.

Popova's set design for Meierkhol'd's 1922 production of Fernand Crommelynck's *Le Cocu magnifique* (*Velikodushnyi rogonosets* [*The Magnanimous Cuckold*], plate no. 628) is the first significant work by the Moscow Constructivists. It both influenced subsequent stage design and, to a large degree, defined a particular style of Moscow Constructivism. The "Popova canon" is easily discerned not only in Aleksandr Vesnin's maquette for G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (*Chelovek, kotoryi byl Chetvergom*)¹⁰—which marked Vesnin's transition to Constructivist architecture—but in Gustav Klutis's projects for street constructions (plate nos. 109–113) and in the way the students in Aleksandr Rodchenko's workshop at Vkhutemas (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) exhibited their projects.

Beginning in 1922, the theater, summoning the Constructivists to participate in its experiments, stepped into the vanguard of artistic life. It no longer employed forms that were the prior discoveries of the other arts but created that which did not exist before. It became an inventor.

In the 1920s, young people rushed to Meierkhol'd's theater in anticipation of revelations. The young artists of Vkhutemas, writers, film directors, and musicians were hungry for the new and unprecedented. They expected from the theater not so much a celebration of feelings as much as "insights that capture the imagination and before which there are seemingly no riddles or obstacles."¹¹

Exploratory productions in Meierkhol'd's workshops—conceived exclusively with the aim of making mastering the theater interesting for students (not results but the process of gaining proficiency counted) and conducted without adequate funds or performance space (which once again confirms that truism that the most intriguing and meaningful ideas are born outside theater walls)—were destined to become the manifesto of new theater in the twentieth century, launching an era in theater that to this day has not run its course. Popova's role in these productions was emphasized by Meierkhol'd numerous times.

The set design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was a collaborative venture. Meierkhol'd participated as an equal with Vladimir Liutse, Vasili Fedorov, and Sergei Eizenshtein, students who, under Popova's guidance, were working out design principles for stage action unconnected with the proscenium arch. The maquette was assigned to Liutse. Popova became involved only at the final moment, "editing" the construction. A children's playground became a work of art. Popova refused until the last to add her name to the poster announcing the production—although she considered the day when she saw the construction moved from the gymnasium on Novinskii Boulevard to the stage of the former Zon Theater on Sadovo-Triumfal'naia Street to be the happiest of her life.¹² Her fear was not unwarranted. The censure came without delay. Only two days after the April 25th premiere, she read her theses—an attempt at self-justification before her colleagues, the Constructivists-Productivists—at Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture).

Popova's observations about new form—"It is still a child with only possibilities, but the main thing is that it is a 'new life' because it is a 'new form.' It is not the end but a beginning. It is simply a new way of looking at form"—were notes to herself.¹³ Her theses on the design of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, written after the fact, were lines in a play called production art. At Inkhuk, Popova deployed the notions of "production process," "work," and "utilitarian devices," and wanted to convince her listeners that she had not set out to solve any formal or aesthetic problems. Yet her theme was also guilt and repentance. "It wasn't easy to renounce outmoded aesthetic habits and criteria. A circumstance of an aesthetic order—that the action had a built-in visual character—got in the way and prevented me from considering the action solely as an ongoing working process."¹⁴

The word *prozodezhda* (production clothing), which for all subsequent generations was inextricably linked with Constructivism's attempt to make a worker of the actor and to turn him into the appendage of a machine, turned up in Popova's lecture. And just as quickly disappeared, remaining only in the costume sketches for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (plate no. 629) that Popova made for an exhibition held after the premiere (although she dated the sketches 1921).

In her costume designs for Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Smert' Tarelkina* (*The Death of Tarelkin*, plate no. 626), the Meierkhol'd production that followed *The Magnanimous Cuckold* later the same year, Varvara Stepanova discarded this terminology, considering it to be nonconstructive. In fact, Popova's light and roomy blue costumes, made to Meierkhol'd's specifications,¹⁵ were the uniform of the theater-workshop collective engaged in creating a new theater. They were the blue jeans of 1922, a democratic form of clothing much more suitable for young actors than the tails and evening dresses worn in Evgenii Vakhtangov's 1922 production of *Princess Turandot*, designed by Ignatii Nivinskii. That production was conceived as an exposé of the secrets of the theater. With the aid of multicolored pieces of fabric, a Turkish towel, a tennis racket, and so on, the young actors transformed themselves into dramatis personae in full view of the audience.

But even the costumes that Popova labeled *prozodezhda* could not deceive the vigilant orthodox Constructivist Aleksei Gan. He chastised Popova with his typical fervor: "It is preposterous for Constructivism, as the formal expression of intellectual and material production, to participate in either the performance of bucolic pastorals or new productions of theatrical October Revolutions . . ."¹⁶

It is preposterous to participate, yet if one is to do so, it must be with the aim of hastening the death of the theater.

In the summer of 1922, when the Actor's Theater (where

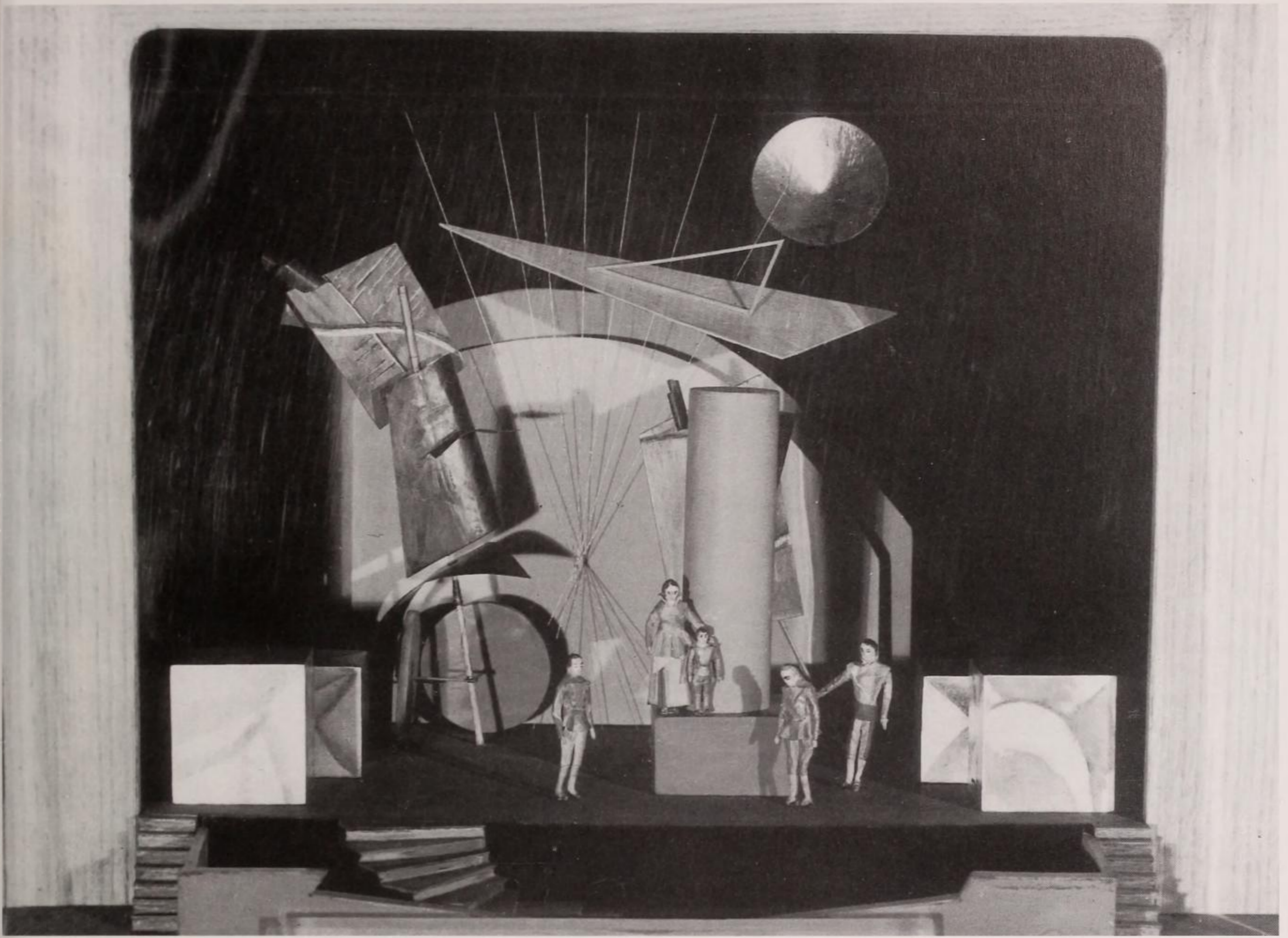


fig. 1
Dmitriev's maquette for Verhaeren, The Dawns, Moscow, 1920.

The Magnanimous Cuckold was staged) was closed, the First Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk came out in support of Meierkhol'd:

Having announced a relentless war on art in general, the Constructivists were never carried away by Comrade Meierkhol'd's productions, because they understood that all his work is built, on the one hand, on the restoration of individual monuments of the theatrical culture of the past and, on the other, in accordance with the eclecticism that is the hallmark of contemporary aesthetics. Meierkhol'd's service is that he demonstrates the canons of theatrical intrigues more fully than do others and doesn't conceal the original sources of stage trickery. In this sense, his activity is revolutionary and, for as long as speculative art remains dominant, is essential. To deprive Meierkhol'd of his theater would be to strike a blow to the cause of hastening the absolute disappearance of the theater.¹⁷

Meierkhol'd hardly attempted to hasten the disappearance of his own theater. That was more likely the goal of the powers that be.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he collaborated with Stepanova (who, as secretary of the group, had signed the Constructivists' statement) on his next production. Stepanova did not contribute to making *The Death of Tarelkin* a success—not because she didn't want to but because she couldn't do otherwise. Gan greeted the production's failure: "Constructivists, rejoice! Constructivism is victorious: in the present case we were witness to a lethal phenomenon in the house of the undead Tarelkin. We will work to see that the accursed Tarelkin dies at last."¹⁹ By Tarelkin, Gan meant art.

The "uninterrupted rumbling" about the abolition of art, which in 1922 accompanied artists' intense work on new forms, deafens the contemporary researcher. He willingly swallows the bait of "production artistry" and falls into the trap of insoluble contradictions, from which he is unable to extricate himself.

From the 1910s, the vanguard artist tried on, as it were, different roles: hooligan, philosopher, scholar, and artisan. (These roles would constitute, in essence, the repertoire of twentieth-century art.) It cannot be said that the artist chose the role of Productivist without some prompting. Tatlin's production, his notion of the work of art as a real, genuine object that "doesn't reproduce reality but is itself reality,"²⁰ by no means led inevitably to limitation of the artist's activity to pure "applied art." "[Let there be] more art of real, tangible, audible, visible, thoroughly sniffable, and, insofar as possible, edible" things.²¹ The summons is understandable. Especially in the conditions of a country torn by revolution. Just as it is understandable seventy-odd years later in Russia today. Yet this does not cancel the need for art. The essence of the Productivists' program, formulated during the discussions at Inkhuk once theorists had gained the upper hand over artists, had been spelled out by Osip Brik back in 1919:

A shoemaker makes shoes, a joiner makes tables. What does an artist make? He doesn't make anything. He creates. That sounds vague and suspicious . . . The commune has no need of either prophets or parasites. Only working people will find their place in it. If artists do not wish to share the fate of parasitical elements, they must prove their right to exist . . . Those artists who only "know how to create" and "somewhere serve beauty" will perish. Labor gives the artist the right to stand alongside the working groups of the commune: the shoemakers, joiners, and tailors.²²

Rodchenko was the only artist working in the theater who met Brik's standards. In his sets for Anatolii Glebov's *Inga* (1929). But that was already a different historical era. The heroic days of the theater were past. The plays of Soviet authors

with their hypertrophied themes, having little in common with dramaturgy, inundated the theater. Rodchenko entitled his article on his designs for *Inga* (a play about the life of a factory director) "A Discussion of the New Clothing and Furniture—A Task for Design." It had been of paramount importance in his designs "that the bed not interfere with daily life and the dining furniture not interfere with a night's rest." "I set myself the task of creating collapsible wooden furniture, that is, furniture for which the USSR has an abundant supply of raw material."²³ Rodchenko evidently didn't do a bad job. After the play closed, the most resourceful stagehand took the furniture home and put it to good use. A reviewer also confirmed the quality of the furniture: "In each act of the play there is something of interest for our working lives—an office desk or writing table, a bed, or a chair. Showing these objects on the stage is of enormous educational significance."

The same critic was unhappy with Meierkhol'd's 1929 production of Vladimir Maiakovskii's *Klop* (*The Bedbug*), whose second part, set in the future, was also designed by Rodchenko: "The need to subordinate the design to the satirical elements of the play has deprived Rodchenko's work of practical significance for our reality. Search as they might, the leaders of our woodworking industry will not find on the stage a single object they could take away with them to produce."²⁴

The word "utopia," so often used, appropriately and inappropriately, with regard to the theater of the 1920s, acquires a concrete meaning in this play. The action of its second part takes place, after all, in 1979. The play is not so simple as it seems. Maiakovskii not only shows the future through the eyes of a petit bourgeois but also parts with his own illusions as an active member of Lef (the Left Front of the Arts). His socialism is not only a *Schlaraffenland* with trees on which there are plates of oranges, apples, and bottles of perfume but also the dance of ten thousand workers, men and women practicing a new system of field work. It is radio loudspeakers instead of human voices. It is arms raised mechanically in a unanimous vote (as in Klutsis's famous poster *Rabochii i rabotnitsa, vse na perevybory sovetov* [*Workers, Everyone Must Vote in the Election of Soviets!*, 1930, plate no. 447]). It is "out of love"—that forgotten word—"one has to build bridges and bear children." In this world, the petit-bourgeois Ivan Prisypkin seems to be the only living being. It isn't surprising that the critics discerned in the languid waving of his hand a "shade of contempt for people who would dare to exhibit a person—even if he is behind the times and bourgeoisified, but, damn it, a person—in a cage along with a bedbug."²⁵ Maiakovskii created a dystopia.

Rodchenko made an enormous contribution to this production. The only thing not clear is the extent to which he himself was aware of it. From his comments: "The pink and light-blue costumes will show the bourgeois's conception of the future. The irony evident in Maiakovskii's depiction of the future is necessary in order to show—in such a short space of time, this entails the greatest difficulty—the surmounting of the morbid elements of our petit-bourgeois life."²⁶ These assertions are difficult to comprehend. Even Meierkhol'd, who normally treated artists with great respect and understanding, spoke of Rodchenko with a strange and noticeable scorn: "We're letting a certain Rodchenko, who dreams of future *prozodezhda*, etc., design the second half."²⁷ Be that as it may, Rodchenko perfectly expressed the intentions of Maiakovskii, whose play was one with the wicked pamphlets about socialism that had been written by bourgeois authors. The people of the future in Rodchenko's *prozodezhda* were impersonal, cold, and automatized.

In 1936, when a new production of *The Bedbug* was being discussed, it was proposed, above all, that the "elements of

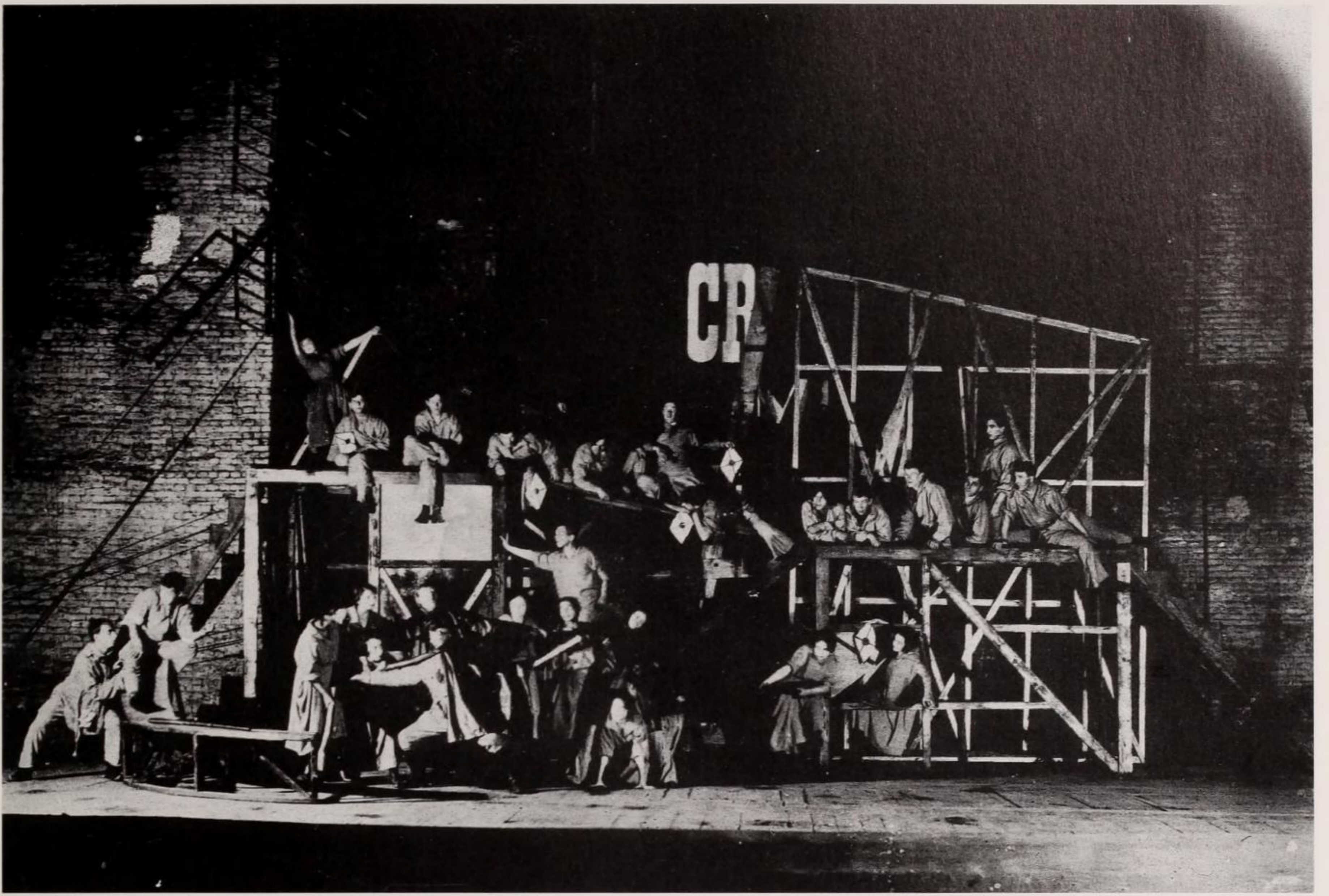


fig. 2
Scene from Crommelynck, The Magnanimous Cuckold, Moscow, 1922.

technical preoccupation and duality" be removed. The decision was made to eliminate Maiakovskii's incomprehensible future and to move the action from 1979 back to 1938, in order to show the achievements of the Stakhanovites, collective-farm workers, and polar explorers. And naturally, suggested Brik, the extremely unsuccessful scene with the mechanical casting of votes had to be excised.²⁸

In 1926, after having seen Meierkhol'd's production of Nikolai Gogol's *Revizor* (*The Inspector General*), Malevich wrote to the director. The production, in Malevich's opinion, "was very well executed." With this play, Meierkhol'd emerges from the "zone of economic revolutionary theater" and walks the line of art. "Revolutionary theater has vanished and it won't be forthcoming from the subsistence cooperative [the Productivists]. The only thing that will come out of that is grocery stores. That is the main policy of the Revolution. Art, though, has a different aim—it is not revolution . . . It's true that Marx, as people will tell you, said otherwise, yet you presented *The Inspector General* otherwise, by not even trying to show a healthy peasant spirit in Osip and the girl or bourgeois corruption in Khlestakov."²⁹ A staunch opponent of Constructivism, Malevich recognized the aesthetic merits of the production and urged Meierkhol'd to "go even further, to the final atrophy of the Constructivist legacy." Naturally, he did not see any connection between Meierkhol'd's masterpiece and the beginning of his "Constructivist run": *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *The Death of Tarelkin*, and *Zemlia dybom* (*The Earth in Turmoil*). *The Inspector General* synthesized all the formal achievements of Meierkhol'd's analytical period. Which the proponents of "subsistence cooperatives," who had previously regarded Meierkhol'd as the sole Productivist master, also failed to realize. *The Inspector General* represented the "limit of the fall from grace since [the] October [Revolution] . . . How the hell can we take to the streets when so-called constructions are infinitely heavier and richer than the old designs?"³⁰

The incisive Brik had observed as much even earlier, but phrased it more elegantly: "The dynamiter-detonators have conscientiously expended their reserves, but the result achieved was unexpected—instead of an explosion they got a brilliant fireworks display, all to the glory of that very same theatrical stronghold."³¹

The Magnanimous Cuckold was perceived primarily as a work showcasing actors' virtuosity. Joyous, deliberate, and effective virtuosity. The shroud of secrecy was removed from the actors' role playing, which was transformed into a creative activity. Intuition was placed under control, and "temperament held in check." The expedient gesture, that is, one purged of everything superfluous, chance, or ill-defined, stood in opposition to artificially "beautiful" movement. The actor's body became material that he consciously organized, laying out in space an image of his role, not identifying with it and not hiding behind a mask. By studying biomechanics, the actor learned the "ironclad truth of human nature." Biomechanical exercises were as necessary to the actor's training as the études of Czerny were to the musician's.³² They developed consciousness of each gesture, elasticity, balance, and a precise sensation of one's body in space. Each gesture is preceded by a pre-gesture. Not even the smallest movement exists in isolation. It reverberates not only in oneself but in one's partner. Actors studied this "electric reaction." Moving to music developed an actor's sense of time, calculated to the second. Exercises with an imagined object trained his fingers to react to a material's texture, be it wood, shards of glass, water, or iron. This technique of the new actor could be labeled

Constructivist, so long as one doesn't forget that Meierkhol'd arrived at these biomechanical exercises after analyzing the work of outstanding actors worldwide.

The technique displayed by the actors in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was truly dizzying. Their coordinated actions and sense of partnership made such a strong impression that "former critical skills for evaluating acting proved inadequate."³³ But the word "technique," in conjunction with the epithets "splendid," "brilliant," "perfect," and even "academic," was by no means indicative of a narrow technical preoccupation. "Technique" was synonymous, rather, with *mastery*. Meierkhol'd himself was called master. Tatlin was a master. The young artists who performed for the first time in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* would become masters. "Acting is shown [*igru pokazyvaiut*]," said the poster for the production, which was dedicated to Molière. Popova's identical blue costumes, with few individual details, did not hinder recognition of the types among which, as in the theater of olden times, the roles were distributed: "simple fellow," "boastful knave," "fop," and "sweetheart."

"An actor, clad in a blue coverall, metamorphosed into a mechanical robot, a mere appendage of the revolving wheels and doors of the construction."³⁴ These words come from a description of Meierkhol'd's *Magnanimous Cuckold* in a history of the Soviet theater compiled during Stalin's final years and published in 1954. Similar judgments can be found even today in certain Western writings, although their authors are clearly not acquainted with this Soviet publication.

Such is the description they promote of a production in which Crommelynck's rather scabrous farce—about the scribe Bruno, who suffers from unfounded jealousy and compels all the men in the village to sleep with his wife, Stella, in order to learn the identity of his rival (who does not show up)—turned into a tragic farce; in which the viewer was given a "condensed and purified image of emotion or thought that was convincing to the point of strangeness"; in which, "under cover of slapstick," images of a "frightfully naked truth" rhythmically accumulated;³⁵ and in which Stella (played by Babanova), "a fair-haired woman-child with a rattle in her hand and a musically deep voice ringing with the naïve purity of a silver handbell, expressed such bitter perplexity and such concealed feminine pain, that the whole theater, having just taken in the events on stage with their eyes only, shuddered from profound agitation in their hearts."³⁶

The production opened with a scene that the actor Erast Garin later recalled as one of the most convincing declarations of love he had ever witnessed in the theater: "From a distance an exultant voice was heard, full of life, love, and happiness, and Il'inskii's Bruno impetuously flew, truly flew up the stairs on the wing, not stopping, to the very top of the construction and gathered in his arms Babanova's Stella, who had run to meet him. His long legs spread apart like the arms of a compass, he glided unspeakably youthfully, resiliently, and athletically down the slide, which was polished to a sheen, and lightly and inconspicuously set down his weightless burden on the floor of the stage."³⁷

Popova's construction was created for action; it provoked action and was inextricably linked with it. The construction was essentially a new stage erected within the space of the old. The dernier cri in the new art—construction—turned out to be connected with the long-standing tradition of popular theater, where the designer never intervened, and at the same time directed toward the future—a model, as it were, of the theater of the future, its "original crystal."

In 1931, Meierkhol'd said—and not by accident—that the time had not arrived when constructions could be left entirely behind, since in order to do so the entire stage would have to

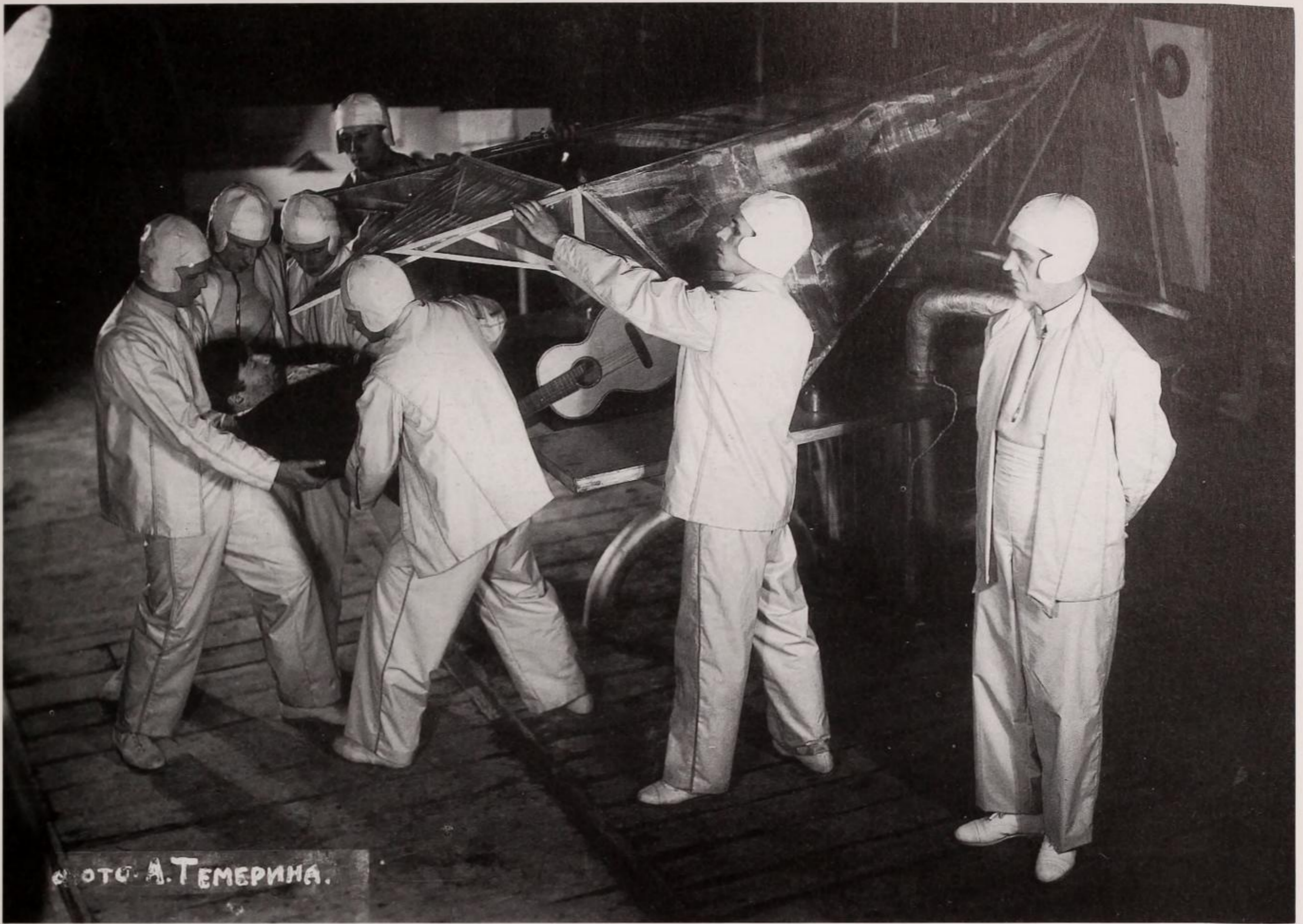


fig. 3
Scene from *Maiakovskii, The Bedbug*, Moscow, 1929.

be re-created.³⁸ For the time being, the construction—destroying one environment (Flanders, a flowering garden, or the scribe's house as the scene of the action) and disavowing everything that formerly constituted the secret and charm of the theater—elicited, by the real existence of its form, new sorts of associations in the viewer. The actor “embodied, as it were, a new man, freed from the power of things, from the power of an inert, immovable environment, [a new man] standing in a lofty, spacious world and full of that vital energy which makes it possible to calculate with utmost precision his every gesture or movement and to build anew the house of the world.”³⁹

“It is necessary to counter the influence of Bolshevik theater . . . We are witness to the most dangerous onslaught the theater has ever experienced. Everything in these productions—the sets, costumes, direction, and actors’ interpretations—is an encroachment threatening to destroy our dramatic art, which was created by several centuries of slow evolution.”⁴⁰

These remarks would seem to refer to *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. But that is not the case. This was, rather, the reaction in the land of Racine and Cubism to the Kamernyi Theater’s tour abroad in 1923. Clearly, the clocks in Paris and Moscow were set to different times. Moscow’s Kamernyi Theater, affiliated with the Association of Academic Theaters, had absolutely nothing to do with Bolshevism or politics of any other sort. It was a bastion of aestheticism. André Antoine, the author of these lines, might well have been unaware that the Kamernyi production of *Phèdre* represented the culmination of the work begun by Aleksandr Tairov, with Aleksandra Ekster, in 1916 with the production of Innokentii Annenskii’s *Famira Kifared* (*Thamyris the Cithara-Player*). Tairov, who enlisted artists in the theater “for the sake of the actor,”⁴¹ was the first to see in non-objective painting possibilities for creating a new three-dimensional environment on the stage. The contradiction between the surface plane of the painting and the physical definition of the actor was erased by the means of painting itself. Ekster was the first designer “who glues together a maquette and predetermines with her fingers each protuberance, each corner of the stage box.”⁴² Volume was returned to the stage, and the chance to move in unison with the rhythms of the created environment restored to the actor. This environment preserved the “spirit” of painting, directing currents of painterly energy toward the viewer. Color was symbolically orchestrated (as, for example, in the complex score for the movement of color in the 1917 Kamernyi production of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* [plate nos. 606–609]). The environment, constructed according to the laws of harmony in painting, had absolutely nothing in common with reality. The architectonics of painting, which inspired Aleksandr Vesnin’s designs for *Phèdre*, transported the action to a “universal, unbounded space.” The rhythmic purity of the actors’ movements, the resilience of the lofty delivery of Racine’s text, and the severe passion of *Phèdre* were kindred with the architectonic clarity of the stage environment. In his own way, Tairov had heeded the bidding of Edward Gordon Craig, who had urged that “so-called naturalness” be avoided, inasmuch as naturalness had appeared on the stage only because the artificial had begun to fade, had become affected and absurd. “But don’t forget, there is such a thing as noble artificiality.”⁴³

In the consciously closed space/canvas, executed according to the laws of post-Cubist painting, the actor was a module, a unit of scale. The Cubist costume—such were the dictates of its style—turned the actor into a kind of moving colored sculpture. The space/canvas was planned with the actor in mind, but he himself was in its power. Such sets antedated

constructions, yet did not prepare the way for them. Peacefully coexisting in time and even in the oeuvre of the same artist (not to mention in the pages of monographs or on the walls of exhibitions), they nonetheless, no matter how paradoxical it may sound, belong to different eras. One is the culmination of a long historical process, which began in the Renaissance theater and gave the designer pride of place. The other inaugurated a new timetable. The critics close to the Kamernyi Theater failed to understand this, suggesting that Constructivism originated at the Kamernyi. The only difference they discerned was that, in contrast to Meierkhol’d’s dry and colorless productions, the Kamernyi’s were colorful and bright.⁴⁴

Outstanding stage designers emerged from among Ekster’s students at her studio in Kiev. Popova’s pupils, who had studied “material stage design” with her, became directors. They thought primarily in categories of movement and aspired to penetrate to objective reality not by painting’s means but by the method of construction.

For Meierkhol’d, non-objectivity in the theater was equivalent to decorativeness. He was a convinced Constructivist. He did not justify the hopes of Malevich, who had at one time believed that “Meierkhol’d will stand at the head of the movement in theater and lead it along the same path with painting and literature to non-objective form.”⁴⁵

If the set for *Phèdre* was called a machine by Jean Cocteau, who desired to praise it,⁴⁶ the set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* suggested such a comparison itself. At the moments of greatest tension on stage, the construction’s wheels and windmill sails revolved—now in succession, now in unison; now clockwise, now counterclockwise. Thus the concept of movement in stage design, which would be developed in future productions, was proclaimed. The construction’s similarity to a machine frightened some, while others were delighted by it. The emphasis shifted imperceptibly, but already the chief component of theater was a moving machine and not the actor for whom it was built. “The machine—this is the main thing,” wrote the poet Sergei Gorodetskii after the production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. “Even the stage box, stripped of decoration and with the machine in its center, brings unprecedented joy. When it becomes possible to stand at this machine and dance around it, then the joy of theater will be complete.”⁴⁷ The invention of the construction suited, like nothing else, the burgeoning enthusiasm for “urbanization.”

In the 1922 production, designed by Iurii Annenkov, of Georg Kaiser’s *Gas* at the Great Dramatic Theater in Petrograd, the viewer was drawn into the spectacle of the mechanism on stage and forgot the existence of the actor. “The crane turned sullenly, the flywheel revolved animatedly, currents of color changed uninterruptedly, iron and steel structures appeared amid exhalations of gas, and, with a dry crackle, discharges of current pierced the whole stage; everything droned, breathed, moved.”⁴⁸

In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, directed by Tairov at the Kamernyi Theater in 1923 and designed by Aleksandr Vesnin, the metropolis was the chief protagonist. Vesnin’s set was a multistoried construction with three elevators, staircases, passages, moving sidewalks, and a flashing billboard—a kind of “urbanistic extract.” This architecture, which in the maquette seemed overly complicated and serious for the play for which it was intended, became almost self-sufficient in performance. It was as if the theater were trying to prove to itself that contemporaneity was a subject worthy of art. Tairov, a director who espoused beauty, had first to be convinced that engineering could be beautiful. “What previously was frightening in its complexity is now captivating in the

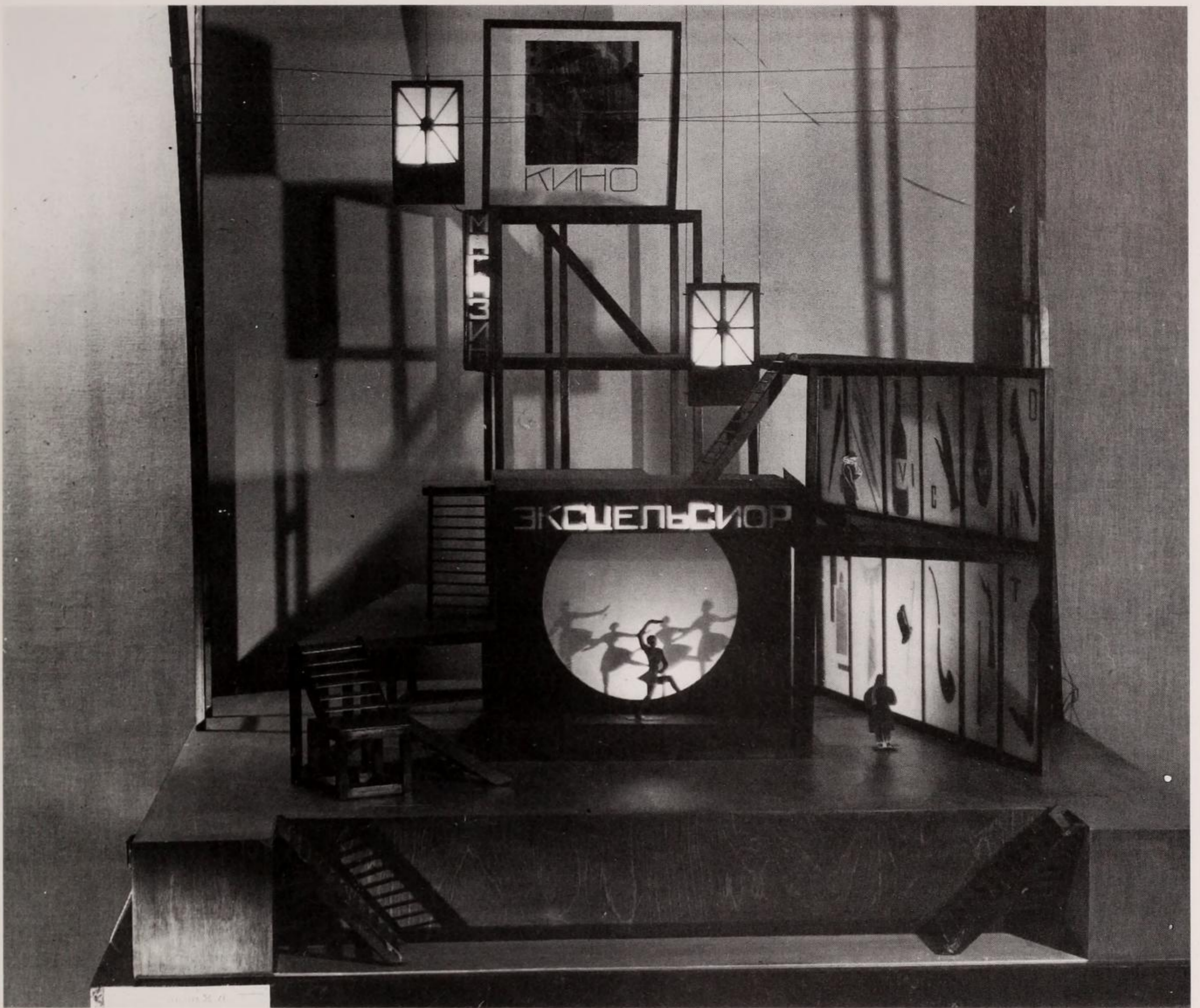


fig. 4
Sbestakov's maquette for Faiko, Lake Liul', Moscow, 1923.

classical simplicity of its construction; where in the past we felt like 'lost souls,' we now experience a sense of power and dominion . . . A man simplified to the point of schematization, active and strong, thinking and feeling mathematically, moves—in rhythm with the entire mechanism—among the objects of the constructive stage. He is lord of the city, yet at the same time he is only a part of it, a lever of a powerful and well-proportioned organism, one of the columns of the urban temple," said the newspaper *7 dnei Moskovskogo Kamernogo teatra* (*Seven Days of the Moscow Kamernyi Theater*) at the production's premiere.⁴⁹ Chesterton's play did not exactly warrant such profuse enthusiasm. It was only a pretext. Many found the production "heavy and boring." They preferred Meierkhol'd's production of Aleksei Faiko's *Ozero Liul'* (*Lake Liul'*) at the Theater of the Revolution. The "metropolis" in that production, cobbled together by the young artist Viktor Shestakov, was a simple construction that couldn't compare to Vesnin's "true," durable architecture. Meierkhol'd came to Shestakov's rescue. He created such a "whirlwind" of intense onrushing action, moving it in an instant from one part of the set to another, that the quality of the set itself was lost from view. A minute into the performance, all this Russian wood began "to shudder with the pulsations of European and American skyscrapers, cafés, and shops."⁵⁰

"The pathos of the modern age lies in simplicity . . . Realism organizes life, builds it. In the theater, such realism is based on a strict calculation of material, space, and time."⁵¹ So spoke Tairov, fully in the spirit of Constructivism, when, with Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, he inaugurated a new phase in 1924.

Having analyzed Popova's work in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Stepanova concluded that the construction in its entirety entered into the stage action only in the infrequent mass scenes. In general, the actors used individual parts alone—a bench, door, staircase, ramp, and so on—in their performance. She declared it impermissible to unite in a single construction elements serving different needs of the actors. Moreover, whereas Popova had many standards of varying "form," Stepanova wanted to reduce the construction to a single standard element. To the glory of logical Constructivist thought, the set design for *The Death of Tarelkin* embraced a number of individual "apparatuses for performance," which were united stylistically. They were all white and all made from laths.⁵²

Meierkhol'd's conception was incredibly complex. He wanted to present Sukhovo-Kobylin's play as a *balagan* (fairground booth)—one where the actors flew across the stage on ropes and clapped bull's bladders, where the action began with a whistle and ended with a revolver fired into the audience and the cry "Entr-r-r'acte!," and whose interior had to be eerie and frightening. The theme of suspicion and mystification ran through the entire production, which was itself supposed to reveal the "mechanics of an all-Russian fistfight."⁵³ "The actors were to play the genial farce eccentrically yet with a profound understanding of what was occurring . . . It had to be acted humorously and cheerfully—and strike the viewer as sad."⁵⁴ The production was constructed as a sort of chain of attractions, at the intersection of the actors' performance and the performing object.

The objects constructed by Stepanova—"as instruments of the present scenic production [*proizvodstvo*] and not with a decorative goal in mind"⁵⁵—did not fulfill their prescribed functions. That is, they did not jump, shoot, or twitch as intended. The object did not perform. "Though the word 'production' [*proizvodstvo*] is often used in the Gitis [State Institute of Theatrical Art] workshops, even the most

elementary conditions for production do not exist," Stepanova said by way of explaining her failure.⁵⁶ The objects stood still, eliciting reproaches for their "decorative illusoriness." Their associations with the furnishings of a "dacha" or "surgery" were clearly not planned. Stepanova's most successful construction resembled a hybrid cage-meat grinder, into which the enormous Aunt Brandakhlystova (played by M. Zharov) was stuffed. But this was no longer just an object in the performance. It was a metaphor.

The costumes—with which Stepanova personally was satisfied ("precisely executed, without special theatrical devices")—were taken by the audience to be either hospital gowns or artists' smocks or clowns' robes (which, incidentally, met Meierkhol'd's initial conception). Rejecting the concept of *prozodezhda* as nonconstructive and introducing several variations into her costumes, Stepanova—as Aksenov wrote (and not without irony)—"sensed [that the variations represented] a certain departure from collectivist principles and thus made a correction: she arranged the markings on the new stage clothing in such a way that when the actors stood in groups, they merged into one mass and the eye could not distinguish one actor from the other."⁵⁷ Meierkhol'd couldn't forgive Stepanova. Some years later, he said that Stepanova had "wanted to strike a blow at the late Popova. Ah, she does *prozodezhda*, and I have *prozodezhda* plus Mossel'prom. She made us this item and killed a wonderful play."⁵⁸ Meierkhol'd's mention of Mossel'prom (the Moscow Agricultural Industry) is an obvious reference to Mossel'prom's adopting for its salespeople's uniforms the hats Stepanova had designed for the creditors in *The Death of Tarelkin*. The link between her children's costumes and future athletic uniforms is also obvious.

Theater had reached a point beyond which it made no sense to go. Not just viewers but even the vanguard developed a "nostalgia for a more or less honest pavilion and even for . . . historically accurate costumes."⁵⁹

At times, it seems that we are playing the game that amused Hemingway's characters. Mantegna? Nail holes. Rubens? A lot of meat. Constructivism in the theater? Platforms and stairways, of course.

"All Russia built constructions for a while," said Meierkhol'd in a lecture he gave on October 24, 1923.⁶⁰ The enthusiasm for constructions was universal. Naturalistic theater eagerly donned a vest adorned with a straight line. This was both fashionable and revolutionary. Constructions were a "passport to revolutionariness." Constructions, which rejected the notion of decoration, themselves became a new style of decor.

In her designs for Meierkhol'd's production of Sergei Tret'iakov's *The Earth in Turmoil* (plate nos. 630–632), Popova broke with such an interpretation of Constructivism. She returned to the initial point of departure, to material. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, individual elements of Popova's construction had entered into the performance; Stepanova's constructions for *The Death of Tarelkin* had been "apparatuses for performance." In *The Earth in Turmoil*, the actors performed with real objects taken directly from life. A year before, Popova was designing a geranium in a pot. Now her diagrams included not only an automobile, a machine gun, and an airplane but also a camp bed, a table, a typewriter, and a coffin upholstered in red material. This was not the old Naturalism of the early Moscow Art Theater. Objects taken from life, "shown just the way today's laborer and peasant see them in their everyday work situation,"⁶¹ became material from which to construct the production. This constructing, as before, took place openly, in view of the audience, summoning them to

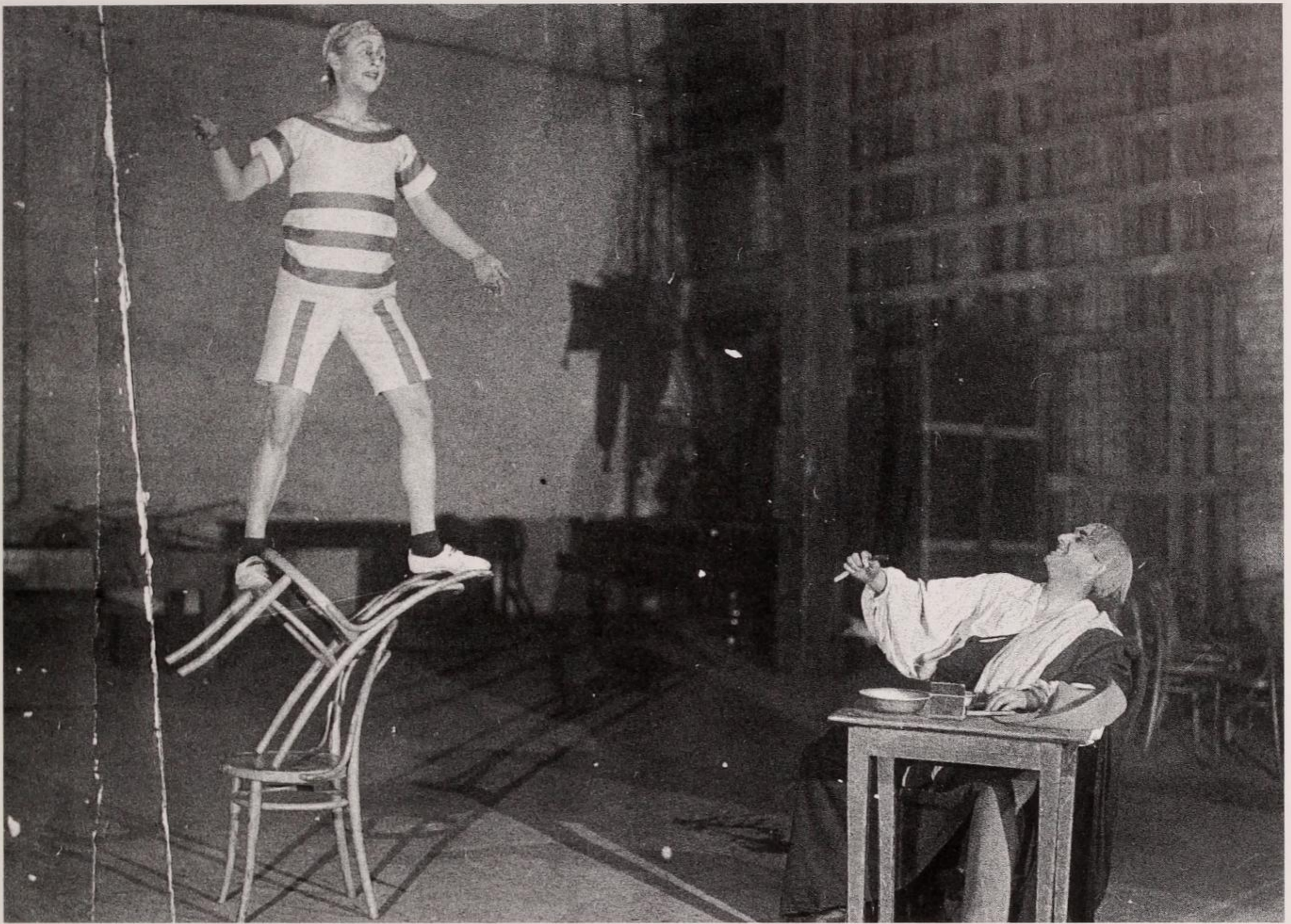


fig. 5
Scene from Ostrovskii, The Forest, Moscow, 1924.

participate actively in the construction-performance.

Machine guns and rifles fired, telephones rang. A cock being chased by a cook preparing soup for the generalissimo tried to flee the stage. The emperor Burbus sat on a bucket bearing an imperial monogram as if on a throne. His aide examined the contents of the bucket through binoculars and, holding his nose, carried the bucket through the audience. The doors of the theater were flung open and a truck drove in; the coffin bearing the body of the slain leader was loaded onto it.

"This is the end. Meierkhol'd the director can go no further in his self-negation and self-burial . . . Henceforth the stage of Meierkhol'd's theater might be an excellent hippodrome for motorcycle and bicycle races, for acrobats running, flying, and leaping hurdles through a most respectable audience, a training ground for the jockey, driver, and acrobat—but what scope is there for the actor's art here."⁶² Meierkhol'd's analytical period, during which he had examined anew each element of the theater, came to an end with *The Earth in Turmoil*.

If in *The Earth in Turmoil* the actors performed with rifles, machine guns, and threshing machines, in Meierkhol'd's 1924 production of Aleksandr Ostrovskii's *Les (The Forest)*, designed by Fedorov, the stage was transformed into a "moving system of things and objects, at the center of which stood the actor."⁶³ A piano, samovar, basins, dovecote with live pigeons, giant stride, and swing were carried on and off in view of the audience. Each character had his own milieu of things. The actors' interaction with the objects gave viewers a sense of an environment on the empty stage; and it created a hitherto unknown "resiliency of action," genuine dynamics, compared to which all the recent productions with their moving elevators seemed less theatrical. *The Forest*, according to Nikolai Chuzhak, marked the beginning of a curve leading to the "kingdom of old illusory theater"; *Mandat (The Mandate, 1925)* and *Bubus (1925)* were points along that curve and *The Inspector General* its culmination.⁶⁴ Yet *The Forest* and *The Inspector General* employed the same Constructivist method as *The Earth in Turmoil*.

Popova agreed with Dziga Vertov, who said, "My field of vision is life, the material of montage is life, [the stuff of] set design is life."⁶⁵ Stills from Vertov's newsreels, along with slogans and the portraits of heroes and political leaders, were projected onto the screen that Popova included in her set for *The Earth in Turmoil*. The screen played an active role. It injected itself into the action, anticipated the action or showed its result, and provided commentary on what was taking place. In short, it organized the viewer's perception of the production. The screen remained in *The Forest*. The titles of the episodes appeared on it. The montage of episodes used for the first time in *The Earth in Turmoil* was also employed in both *The Forest* and *The Inspector General*. Yet if in *The Earth in Turmoil* the screen and montage played the role of agitator and of a clamp for cementing Marcel Martinet's vague, obscure play (no stone in it was left unturned in Tret'iakov's adaptation), in *The Forest* and *The Inspector General* the same principle enhanced the multiple meaning and richness of the production's images.

"This play is crap," wrote Meierkhol'd about the play *Noch' (Night)*. "I hate it. Why put it on? Have to."⁶⁶ A play on a contemporary—that is, Soviet—theme is a concept known to anyone even slightly familiar with the practice of Soviet theater. This was a "mandatory program," the only one that entitled the director to stage other plays. Such was the director's alibi. The interest that Meierkhol'd the Communist showed in Crommelynck's farce struck many as unseemly. "Can it really be that everything that has swept over the country and the theater in the course of five stormy years amounts to biomechanics? The fact is, all of Meierkhol'd's revolutionariness is the revolutionariness of an anklebone."⁶⁷

The Death of Tarelkin was not universally acclaimed. There was no worthy contemporary play and no time to wait for one to be written. Thus Popova, Tret'iakov, and Meierkhol'd became the authors of a play with a "contemporary theme."

When *The Dawns* was staged in 1920, people who had just been seated in the audience found themselves the next moment leaving for the front, and the performances were punctuated with reports from the fighting. Although *The Earth in Turmoil* was labeled an agitprop production, who required converting to what cause in 1923? But how the language of art had changed in three years. It had become compressed and precise. Not a trace remained of such "aesthetic theatrical trinkets" as a counter-relief suspended above the stage. The theater "smelled of rubber and iron, military broadcloth and war." "The spectacle was perceived as equal to cinematography yet at home with the farces of Aristophanes," wrote an overly enthusiastic reviewer from Rostov-on-Don.⁶⁸

The theater gained reliable (for the time being) patrons. This time the production was dedicated not to Molière or (as was the case with *The Death of Tarelkin*) to little Serezha Vakhtangov, the son of the late director, but to the commander in chief of the Red Army, Lev Trotskii. The dreams of the Productivists, it seemed, had come true. Ten thousand spectators saw the performance given on September 2, 1923, in Neskuchnyi Garden. Twelve thousand turned out for the show in Khar'kov. Twenty-five thousand people attended the June 29, 1924, performance in Sparrow Hills, where fifteen hundred real soldiers staged real battles. On this occasion, Popova's theses concerning her "material stage design" were written in advance of the production and were, from the Productivist point of view, irreproachable. "Rejection of any aesthetic tasks; the Red Army, electrification, heavy industry, and development of the transportation system—they provide the elements of stage scenery . . . The artist's work in selecting and joining the material elements of the production so as to create the greatest agitprop effect."⁶⁹

Popova called her work a "machine bench-photoposter." The legacy of her collage designs for *The Earth in Turmoil* can be discerned, interestingly enough, not in the photomontage posters of the late 1920s and early 1930s, constructed so as to hammer a point home or to "attack the viewer's psyche," but in photo-frescoes, such as the photo-frieze by El Lissitzky and Sergei Sen'kin for the *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne in 1928.

From Boris Pasternak's letter of March 26, 1928, to Meierkhol'd:

Two things struck me about Cuckold. Your attitude toward virtuosity and your attitude toward material. I saw how you accumulate virtuosity, how you store it up—better, in what forms you harbor it. You assigned it precisely the role it deserves in great and gripping art. In your work it assumed the place of a fire extinguisher or Westinghouse Co. engine brake—carried to perfection, always at hand but unobtrusive when not needed . . . You didn't become the prisoner of reborn virtuosity, you didn't furnish your home exclusively with fire extinguishers, as happened, perhaps, with Briusov and as is now being repeated (strange as that may seem, given Maiakovskii's temperament) in the Lef circle. Your train doesn't come to a Westinghouse standstill of dulled formal habit but truly catches one up and carries him away.⁷⁰

"We expected *The Inspector General* from Meierkhol'd, but he showed us something else," Mikhail Chekhov would say of the production. "He showed us a world that in the fullness of its creation occupied a realm of such proportions that *The Inspector General* was only a particle, only an individual sound in the larger melody—and we were frightened. We artists



fig. 6
Scene from Gogol', The Inspector General, Moscow, 1926.

understood that Meierkhol'd was publicly laying bare our impotence in working with only fragments. We understood that the form of a Meierkhol'd production, subordinated to the powerful content Meierkhol'd has fathomed, shapes itself anew virtually on its own and is not susceptible to rational calculation, elicits no desire to outwit this form with the cleverness of intellect."⁷¹

In *The Inspector General* Meierkhol'd did not retreat from the principles of economy and self-limitation. The production's space was precise, its material concrete. The small platform on which Meierkhol'd concentrated the action allowed him to accommodate a lengthy text and save time on scene changes. This platform would come to be called one for "qualified experts," because a performance on it demanded from the actor the most precise and calibrated virtuosity. Actors who had studied biomechanics possessed such virtuosity. The furnishings with which the platform was equipped were arranged according to the laws not of real life but of theatrical expediency. These objects, while seemingly accurate representations of the furniture of the age of Czar Nikolai I, were constructed to suit the lines of the actors who performed with them. All these objects were a variety of "apparatus for performance," a kind of microstage on an already tiny stage platform. The actors performed with a wardrobe. The mayor's wife entered it to make innumerable changes of dress; a flock of admiring officers fluttered out of it. Doors concealed in the bow-shaped wall and made from plywood painted red and buffed to a sheen (evoking associations with mahogany, the nineteenth century's favorite material for furniture) opened at the same time only once—for the bribe scene. Petty officials simultaneously stretched out to Khlestakov envelopes containing money. Meierkhol'd showed the Russia of Gogol' via the texture of the objects with which the actor performed. Yet a piece of antique furniture never became the object of admiration. Meierkhol'd's task was to show the "swinish" in the beautiful. He resolved a formerly insoluble problem. Symbols do not stand in opposition to life but grow out of it. A genuine material environment is superimposed on new coordinates of time and space.

Time is relative. What has transpired at various times takes place all at once in Meierkhol'd. The past alternates with the future. In *The Forest* time was speeded up; in *The Inspector General* it "froze," became immovable. Space has the ability to contract and expand. The complex associative system into which the viewer was brought "put an x" through the little square emerging from the depths of the stage platform. The spectator saw all of Russia.

There was nothing topical in the production. No one waved red flags on stage and no one sang the "Internationale." But the rhythms of the times lived in it. The young actors of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* were replaced by a "many-headed society as the single hero," a "herd driven into a confined space."

In a letter of October 2, 1928, to Meierkhol'd, Shestakov wrote:

*Now about Bagdasar'ian's new play. The directors assigned to produce the play suggested the following artists as designers: Tatlin, Lavinskii, and Amosova. My opinion of the artists. Tatlin. By inviting Tatlin, they were hoping to profit from his name. Of course, Tatlin will answer for his work. It is not so much the theater as he who will have to answer to the public (which would not be the case with the work of the younger generation) . . . If you give your consent to Tatlin, I still think it necessary to have a long talk with him beforehand. First, so he won't raise another ruckus. Second, so that he'll fully understand the plans for the production and won't make overly abstract and aesthetic objects . . ."*⁷²

By "ruckus" and "abstract and aesthetic objects," Shestakov—the stage designer of the Theater of the Revolution and a pragmatist to the core—was obviously referring to the 1923 production in Petrograd of Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi*, which Tatlin had designed and directed and in which he had played the principal role (plate nos. 602–605).

Krovavaia pustynia (The Bloody Desert), fortunately, was not produced.

"Time through touch," was Tatlin's chief commandment in the theater. "We will make everything palpable so that it is felt with the eyes."⁷³ In his set design for *Business*, Tatlin "conjoined the hardened surface of stucco with the silken surface of the linden." This form, in his opinion, expressed Sukhovo-Kobylin. Tatlin was dissatisfied. "I am certain that if you appoint a commission, all the corners will be pronounced incorrect, crooked, slanted high or low. A strictly constructed object does not tolerate this. It turned out bad. Here it's not my fate that's being decided but Sukhovo-Kobylin's."⁷⁴ Dmitriev was delighted by the sharp effect of the material and the disposition of space in the production. "The single line for the curtain and the line of the cupboard said all that needed to be said."⁷⁵

In 1929 Tatlin turned down an offer to design Maiakovskii's *Bania (The Bathhouse)* for the Meierkhol'd Theater. He didn't like the play. At the time he was already working on *Letatlin* (1929–32). There was no money to build a time machine for *The Bathhouse*. At the end of the play, the actors, wearing costumes designed by Aleksandr Deineka (which resembled the space suits worn by today's astronauts), exited upward along the set construction—built by the young architect Sergei Vakhtangov—carrying small suitcases and food provisions . . .

"At age fifty-six," Tatlin would say in 1941, "I still haven't once worked tranquilly in the theater, with people who would heed and wish to fulfill my intentions. This hasn't happened thus far in my life, and I don't think it ever will."⁷⁶

—Translated, from the Russian, by Todd Bludeau

Notes

1. K. S. Stanislavskii, *Pis'ma*, vol. 7 of his *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1960), p. 604. Stanislavskii was describing his visit to the *Khudozhniki Moskvy—zbertvam voiny* (*Artists of Moscow for the Victims of the War*) exhibition in late 1914.
2. After seeing Meierkhol'd's 1925 production of *Mandat* (*The Mandate*), Stanislavskii would say: "Meierkhol'd has achieved . . . what I've been dreaming of." P. Markov, *Pravda teatra* (Moscow, 1965), p. 349.
3. A. K., "U V. E. Tatlina," *Utro Rossii*, May 15, 1914.
4. Minutes of the discussion of *Delo* at the Central Theater of the Red Army, 1940, VTO Library, Moscow.
5. Vs. E. Meierkhol'd, *Stat'i. Pis'ma. Rechi. Besedy* (Moscow, 1968), pt. 2, p. 17.
6. *Teatr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da. Muzei. Katalog vystavki "5 let"* (Moscow, 1926), p. 6.
7. *Za 7 dnei* 28 (August 15, 1913).
8. In 1916 Meierkhol'd had asked Tatlin to work as a designer on the film of Fedor Sologub's *Nav'ie chary*, but they had had differences of opinion. Tatlin designed not a "mystical tree" but one resembling his beloved ship's mast (see his set design for Richard Wagner's *Die fliegende Holländer* [*The Flying Dutchman*], plate no. 598). Tatlin's name had been suggested during a discussion of the productions of Maiakovskii's *Misteriia-buff* (*Mystery Bouffe*) and of *The Dawns*. Meierkhol'd had remarked during that discussion: "If we turn to the latest followers of Picasso and Tatlin, we can be sure of working with kindred spirits . . . We are building and they are building . . . For us, *faktura* [density or manipulation of material] is of much greater consequence than lovely little designs, patterns, and colors." Meierkhol'd, *Stat'i. Pis'ma . . .*, p. 16.
9. Theses on the constructive stage design of *Nora*, quoted in K. Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd* (Moscow, 1969), p. 259.
10. It was evidently for this reason that a design by Vesnin for *The Man Who Was Thursday* was presented as an initial sketch for the set construction of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in L. S. Popova. 1889–1924. *Vystavka proizvedenii k stoletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the State Tre't'iakov Gallery, Moscow (Moscow: State Tre't'iakov Gallery, 1990), no. 259.
11. A. Matskin, *Na temy Gogolia. Teatral'nye ocherki* (Moscow, 1984), pp. 88–89.
12. See I. Aksenov, "L. S. Popova v teatre," *Novyi zritel'* 23 (1924), pp. 5–9, and "Proiskhozhdenie ustanovki 'Velikodushnyi rogonosets,'" *3 afisha TIM* (Moscow, 1926).
13. Manuscript Division, State Tre't'iakov Gallery, Moscow.
14. L. S. Popova, theses on the "material set design" of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Inkhuk, April 27, 1922.
15. Meierkhol'd felt that light, loose-fitting clothing better revealed the actor's form than did snug costumes. The actors in his studio productions of *Balaganchik* and *Neznakomka* in Petrograd, moreover, wore identical costumes.
16. A. Gan, "Konstruktivizm. Otvet Lefu," *Zrelishcha* 55 (1923), p. 13.
17. "Iz protokola obshchego sobraniia I-i rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov," *Ermitazh* 8 (1922), p. 12.
18. "In the event of the demise of the Actor's Theater, I naturally and automatically will be compelled . . . in effect to cease my activity in the Republic, activity that evidently is deemed so injurious and loathsome that its abolition is an unalterable item on the agenda of our theatrical centers," Meierkhol'd wrote in "Komu eto nuzhno," *Teatral'naia Moskva* 46 (1922), p. 9.
19. A. Gan, "Smertel'noe iavlenie v dome neumershego Tarelkina," *Zrelishcha* 16 (1922), p. 11.
20. See N. Tarabukin, *Ot mol'berta k mashine* (Moscow, 1923), p. 8.
21. N. Chuzhak, "Ot illiuzii k real'nosti (Po povodu revizii 'Lefa')," quoted in V. Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo* (Moscow, 1925), p. 125.
22. O. Brik, "Khudozhnik i kommuna," *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* 1 (1919), pp. 25–26.
23. A. Rodchenko, "Diskussiiia o novoi odezhde i mebeli— zadacha oformleniia," in A. Glebov. "Inga" (Moscow, 1929).
24. N. Lukhamanov, "Bez slov," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 22 (1929), p. 4.
25. M. Zagorskii, "Tol'ko ob akterakh," *Sovremennyi teatr* 14 (1929), p. 2 17.
26. "'Klop' VI. Maiakovskogo v Gos. Time. Chto goroviat khudozhniki," *Sovremennyi teatr* 7 (1929), p. 111.
27. "Iz vystupleniia V. E. Meierkhol'da na obsuzhdenii p'esy 'Klop' V. V. Maiakovskogo v klube imeni Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii moskovskoi kazanskoi zheleznoi dorogi. II ianvaria 1929," in *Sovetskii teatr. Dokumenty i materialy* (Leningrad, 1982), pt. 1, p. 29 1.
28. *Tvorcheskoe nasledie V. E. Meierkhol'da* (Moscow, 1978), pp. 282–90.
29. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, January 1, 1927, Central State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 998, op. 1, ed. khr. 1933.
30. N. Chuzhak, "Opyt revizii 'Revizora,'" *Zhizn' iskusstva* 2 (1927), p. 10.
31. O. Brik, "Ne v teatre, a v klube," *Lef* 1 (1924), p. 22.
32. On the biomechanical exercises, see E. Garin, *S Meierkhol'dom* (Moscow, 1974), pp. 28–32.
33. A. Gvozdev, "Il'-ba-zai," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 27 (1924), p. 8.
34. *Ocherki istorii russkogo sovetskogo dramaticheskogo teatra* (Moscow, 1954), vol. 1, p. 411.
35. A. Smirnov, "Problema sovremennogo teatra," *Russkii sovremennik* 12 (1924), pp. 250–51.
36. P. Novitskii, *Obrazy akterov* (Moscow, 1941), pp. 274–75.
37. Garin, *S Meierkhol'dom*, p. 50.
38. Meierkhol'd, *Stat'i. Pis'ma . . .*, p. 250.
39. B. Alpers, *Teatr sotsial'noi maski* (Moscow, 1931), p. 28.
40. *L'Information*, March 22, 1923, quoted in *Politicheskie otkliki zapadnoi pressy na gastrol'i moskovskogo Gosudarstvennogo Kamernogo teatra* (Moscow, 1924), p. 31.
41. A. Tairov, *Zapiski rezhissera. Stat'i. Besedy. Rechi. Pis'ma* (Moscow, 1970), p. 295.
42. Ia. Tugendkhol'd, *Aleksandra Ekster kak zhivopisets i kak khudozhnik stseny* (Berlin, 1922), p. 18.
43. G. Kreg, *Iskusstvo teatra* (St. Petersburg, 1911), p. 31.

44. S. Ignatov, "Aki, Gitis i KAT," *Teatr* 4 (1922). Abram Efros expressed the same views in his *Khudozhniki Kamernogo teatra za dvadtsat' let* (Moscow, 1934).
45. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, April 8, 1932, Central State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 998, op. 1, ed. khr. 1933. Malevich wrote to Meierkhol'd after he had learned of Meierkhol'd's plans to build a new theater. It was becoming clear to Malevich that Meierkhol'd was "still stuck in the Constructivist wheel rolling down the path of the theater's destruction." Malevich was as certain as before that Constructivism "sets itself no artistic task, only naked utility, and in the theater only pure agitprop," which is perhaps "one hundred percent consistent ideologically, yet absolutely divorced from artistic problems." In Meierkhol'd's new theater, the stage jutted far out into the hall and had seats for viewers on three sides. Platforms for the actors could be placed anywhere and at varying heights. The entire space of the theater thus became material for the designer.
46. *Nouvelles littéraires*, March 17, 1923, quoted in *Politicheskie otkliki*, p. 25.
47. S. Gorodetskii, "O trekhmernom dialekticheskom teatre," *Izvestiia VTsIK*, July 27, 1922.
48. S. Iutkevich, "Odinnadtsat' slonov," *Zrelishcha* 25 (1923), p. 10.
49. K. Fel'dman, "Chelovek, kotoryi byl Chetvergom," *7 dnei Moskovskogo Kamernogo teatra* 7 (1923), p. 2.
50. M. Zagorskii, "Chelovek, kotoryi byl Chetvergom," *Zrelishcha* 67 (1923), p. 10.
51. Tairov, *Zapiski rezhissera*, p. 295.
52. *Teatr im. Vs. Meierkhol'da*, pp. 11-13.
53. D. Zolotnitskii, *Budni i prazdniki teatral'nogo Oktiabria* (Leningrad, 1978), p. 39.
54. Vas. Sakhnovskii, "Meierkhol'd," *Vremennik RTO* 1 (1925), p. 23.
55. "Beseda s V. Stepanovoi," *Zrelishcha* 16 (1922), pp. 11-12.
56. Ibid.
57. *Teatr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da*, pp. 11-13.
58. Meierkhol'd, *Stat'i. Pis'ma . . .*, p. 79.
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61. Meierkhol'd, *Stat'i. Pis'ma . . .*, p. 52.
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65. Dziga Vertov, *Stat'i. Dnevnik. Zamysly* (Moscow, 1966), p. 71.
66. Fevral'skii, *Zapiski rovesnika veka*, p. 236.
67. "Tartiufi kommunizma i rogonostsy morali," *Teatr i muzyka* 7 (1922), p. 24.
68. "Zemlia dybom," *Sovetskii iug*, June 15, 1923.
69. Central State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 963, op. 1, ed. khr. 324.
70. B. Pasternak, *Izbrannoe v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 450-53. The letter was written after Pasternak had seen *The Inspector General*.
71. M. Chekhov, "Postanovka 'Revizora' v teatre imeni V. E. Meierkhol'da," *Gogol' i Meierkhol'd* (Moscow, 1927), p. 86.
72. *Perepiska V. E. Meierkhol'da* (Moscow, 1976), p. 286.
73. R. Zakarzhavskaia, conversation with author, December 17, 1976.
74. Minutes of the discussion of *Delo*, 1940, VTO Library, Moscow. See also F. Syrkinina, "Das Theater Tatlins," in *Tatlin* (Weingarten, 1987).
75. Minutes of the discussion of *Delo*, 1940.
76. Ibid.

The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,
1915–1932*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

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*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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1915-1932*

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