INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NPC-13

Moscow, U.S.S.R.
1 January 1986

I. Borderline Theatre: The Southwest
II. Directions of Change in Theatre Today: The Discussion Begins

I

Its official name is cumbersome enough to twist the tongue of even an experienced actor: the Studio of the Cultural Department of the Executive Committee of the Gargarin Regional Council. It is informally known by the Moscow intelligentsia as the Southwest Theatre (Teatr na iugo-zapade), so named because of its location in the southwest of Moscow. In a city where even theatre-going inevitably becomes an act of homage to some political or cultural monolith--the Lenin Komsomol Theatre, the Red Army Theatre, the Pushkin, the Gogol', the Maiakovskii--the Southwest Theatre is blessedly modest both in its name and in its location in the basement of an apartment building a short bus ride from the Southwest metro stop.

Since its founding in 1976, this theatre has been a focus of interest among Soviet teatraly (theatre addicts) for three reasons: for its staging of Western works virtually never produced in the Soviet Union; for its unorthodox versions of Russian classics, such as Gogol''s The Gamblers, The Wedding, and The Inspector General ; and for its productions of politically ambiguous Soviet works, such as Evgenii Shvarts' The Dragon (1943-44), in which allegory critical of twentieth-century social reality can easily be deciphered by a public used to dealing in Aesopian language.

In its constant questioning of these boundaries--the theatre canon, the standards of traditional production, and the language of political orthodoxy--the Southwest Theatre, whose troupe is entirely made up of amateur actors, has maintained a twilight-zone existence between professional theatre and the short-lived "flying theatres," made up of students and other young people.[1] The Southwest Theatre has been permitted to exist precisely because it has remained restricted in its size (the entire theatre seats well under one hundred people), its artistic aims, and its appetite for publicity. As with most attempts at artistic experimentation, the theatre has had to temper its more unorthodox productions with less interesting works, such as a current play by Genrikh Borovik, best known for his play Agent 00. In some respects, and with the necessary adjustments for the changing spirit of the times, the Southwest Theatre occupies a comparable status in the 1980's as the Taganka Theatre did in the 1970's or the Contemporary Theatre (Sovremennik) did in the 1960's[2]: it is, on the one hand, a focal point for young people, a cultural symbol of their aspirations for contemporary theatre production; on the other hand, it is a magnet for the culturally effete, those seeking access to ever more rarified artistic treats, of which the broad theatre-going public has not yet even heard.

Nancy Condee, a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs and Assistant Professor of Russian at Wheaton College, is studying contemporary culture and cultural politics in the Soviet Union.

As is usually the case with the Moscow intelligentsia, opinions reveal more about the speaker's politics, generation, and social aspirations than they do about the object of scorn or praise. For a young woman painter, the daughter of a well-to-do surgeon, the Southwest Theatre is "fantastic, nothing comparable to it in Moscow, or in the Soviet Union for that matter"; for a gifted, middle-aged playwright, struggling to get his controversial plays staged in one of the major Moscow theatres, it is "a sham, philistinism, already compromised out of existence"; for an older literary scholar, a one-time devotee of the Contemporary Theatre in its heyday, the Southwest Theatre is a passing fad for the half-educated Golden Youth--a term of opprobrium for children of the Moscow élite--and for those who aspire to be mistaken for the Golden Youth. But then, for that scholar, the Taganka, too, was a pale imitation of the Contemporary Theatre, founded at the end of the 1950's by the playwright Viktor Rozov with the express purpose, as the name suggests, of providing an outlet for contemporary drama. "The Contemporary Theatre," explained my scholar-friend, "was attended by those who would receive their medical treatment at the Academy of Sciences Hospital; the Taganka was attended by those who worked as secretaries, chauffeurs, and hairdressers for those who received their medical treatment at the Academy Hospital; and the Southwest Theatre ?..."

Whoever in fact attends the Southwest Theatre, it was neither my husband Volodya nor I for several months as we cast about among our acquaintances for tickets. No one seemed to know how to get tickets, or at least was not sharing the information. We learned from one acquaintance the location of the basement that houses the theatre; from another, an official telephone number for tickets. We have been here long enough to realize that both pieces of information were useless, and would lead only to the claim that tickets were sold out, except for the tickets not yet on sale, and those were probably also sold out. In fact, this proved to be the case: all seats were reserved a month in advance, with little likelihood of their being available the following month. Finally, one friend, a literary critic, passed along our names to another friend, a teacher, who called us with the name and telephone number of a third friend, an artist, who knew someone working on a volunteer basis for the theatre; then the tickets materialized overnight for the next production of Shvarts' The Dragon.

While by no means an underground theatre, except in the literal sense, the Southwest Theatre is not eager to attract the attention of the Western scholarly, journalist, diplomatic, or business community in Moscow. Introduced to an official of the theatre just before the performance, I was led away from the other ticket holders as I asked the most benign questions about the theatre's offerings. Ushered into the hall by the same official, who was afraid I would have difficulties in getting a seat, I was introduced to his colleagues as "a friend from Riga." His caution was understandable: another such troupe, under director Viacheslav Spesivtsev, was disbanded for overstepping the limits of experimentation. The theatre clearly had its circle of devoted regulars. The last-minute wrangle for tickets, which had been in full swing when we arrived a half-hour before the performance, grew to an all-out assault once the theatre doors opened. The few of us who gained entry occupied every conceivable niche of the theatre. After all the seats were occupied, folding seats were carried in, people were seated on ledges, on the stairs, even--unheard of in Moscow--on the floor. The average

age of the audience was around twenty to twenty-five. Despite the many discomforts--hard seats, cramped quarters, sweltering heat, and no cloakroom, so that the audience had to sit through the performance in winter coats--they were wholely absorbed in the performance and engaged in none of the usual whispering, rummaging, and tittering of Moscow theatre audiences.

The theatre's staging of the Shvarts play, a fairy tale in which the villagers' acceptance of tyranny by an allegorical dragon is in fact a cautionary tale about political oppression, was both creative and simple in the extreme. Contrary to criticism I had heard about the artistic pretensions of the theatre's productions, The Dragon was staged so as to draw the audience's attention away from the physical presence of the stage and to direct it back on the spoken text itself, allowing the listener to concentrate on the dual discourse of fairy tale and political allegory. Any form of theatricalism, so beloved by Soviet playwrights and directors since Vampilov (1937-72) was avoided; in fact, the production had no backdrop, scenery, or props, except for a single battered wash basin, the makeshift shield for the tale's hero, Lancelot, played by the talented actor Avilov ("our Vysotskii,"[3] according to one of the theatre's admirers).

II

The Southwest Theatre is the best known of such studio theatres around the city. While not aimed per se at young audiences, nor concerned with staging youth-oriented productions, these theatres--the Southwest, the Krasnaia Presnaia Theatre, Nikita's Gates Theatre--are vastly more interesting to young audiences than are the offically designated Young Viewer's Theatres (TIuZy), where students are taken to view arch performances of Russian classics in which forty-year-old actors play the roles of sprightly teenagers. Young people's attitudes to these theatres are reflected in two letters sent to the Literary Gazette for the series "Youth of the '80's: Character and Problems." In response to the newspaper's invitation for letters on theatre, one teenage girl from the city of Kuibyshev wrote:

> Let's go to the theatre ! Anywhere, just not to the Young Viewer's Theatre. In fact, most kids would much rather get tickets to a drama [sic] or an opera than tickets to "their" [youth] theatre. They only go to the youth theatre when they are made to. Why ? It's boring, uninteresting, and sometimes, forgive me, tasteless.[4]

A Muscovite teenager, favorably comparing the studio theatres to the official youth theatres, writes: "It is precisely there [to the studio theatres] that people my age are looking. Precisely there, it seems to me, is the real youth repertory."[5]

It is not only young audiences, however, who would like to see changes in contemporary theatre. Older audiences lament that theatre, in moving away from the heroic epics of the Stalin era, became in the '60's and '70's a form of entertainment rather than a forum for social concerns. The theatricalism--

use of elaborate moving sets, lighting techniques, film, television, musical and dance productions, masks, et cetera--then heralded as innovative now appears devoid of intellectual and moral substance, as an avoidance of issues that can now, however cautiously, be broached.[6]

Many of those professionally associated with the theatre would like to see even more fundamental changes, including a complete revamping of administrative and economic policies. The most frequent complaint concerns the inflated number of untalented actors affiliated with major theatres, actors who, it is claimed, prevent younger actors from finding work. Director of Leningrad's Bol'shoi Drama Theatre (BDT), Georgii Tovstonogov, makes the following candid remark in a long article in the newspaper Literary Gazette:

> Let us admit an inescapable fact. There exists in our country hidden unemployment, especially in the major cities. A well-known disproportion has been created between the number of actors graduating from theatre institutions and the real chances of ensuring them the kind of work for which they have studied.[7]

This acknowledgement of hidden unemployment, however obvious to those associated with the theatre, is startling to encounter in print in a society that does not acknowledge the existence of unemployment.

In addition to the inflated size of major troupes, inflated repertory offerings are the target of criticism. Many theatre professionals complain of outmoded and lifeless productions that are designed to keep ungifted actors employed, but in fact result in long delays of more interesting works. Some have gone so far as to advocate the disbanding of theatre troupes altogether, or the closing down of provincial theatres that draw no audiences. One acquaintance recounts his visit to the opera in a major Central Asian city, where, in a hall that seats 800 people, he and his companion were among the eight members of the audience for that night's performance. Others recommend the scaling down of troupes to a bare minimum, with outside actors being hired on a temporary basis for specific productions.

The overwhelming sentiment among actors and directors alike favors less administrative and financial power in the hands of the theatre bureaucrats and more in the hands of the directors themselves, including the right to offer substantial salary differences to actors when they are hired. One director complained that the Party bureaucrat with whom he must confer concerning the theatre's artistic offerings had previously been in charge of a fire company: "for them, it doesn't matter--a fire company or a theatre; work is work." One retired actress regaled her listeners with a story of one such chinovnik who, upon hearing that the theatre to which he was assigned had bad acoustics, telegraphed Moscow to send along better ones.

If the Southwest Theatre's ascetic productions are a response to the call for greater intellectual substance, the Sphere Theatre, located on Karetnyi riad in Moscow, is an attempt to provide an alternate model to inflated troupes and moribund repertories. This theatre, organized by the director Ekaterina

Elanskaia, was founded with the purpose of bringing together the best actors from several different Moscow theatres in order to stage a specific play. The Sphere has no standing troupe; once a given play has run its course, it is removed from that theatre's seasonal offerings and the actors' affiliation with the theatre formally ends. Some attribute the origins of this alternative model to Rozov, who, upon his return from a trip to the United States, called for a re-examination of established theatre practices. Others point to the growing influence of television and film in eroding the traditional theatre troupe organization. Such current productions at the Sphere as Albee's "The Death of Bessie Smith" and Zoshchenko's "The Wedding" have been praised by directors and critics alike for their lively performances, demonstrating unusual interest and involvement on the part of the cast.

In theatre, as in the other arts, there is a growing sense that, with Gorbachev's coming to power, the time has come for major changes. The call for an easing of censorship and for greater sincerity in literature, such as that contained in Evtushenko's speech to the Sixth Congress of the Russian Republic branch of the Writers' Union this month, is heard over and over again in discussions at the All-Russian Theatre Organization, the theatre counterpart to the Russian Writers' Union.

Despite the fact that Evtushenko's speech and the Sixth Congress received considerable coverage in the Western press, it is not prose and poetry, but theatre and cinema that have been undergoing the most significant changes in the past year. One friend, an internationally known writer whose work has been refused Soviet publication for nearly a decade, lamented recently that he did not understand a thing about literary politics, although he had been enmeshed in it since he could remember. "Changes are certainly taking place in the cultural sphere," he acknowledged, ticking off the names of Moscow literary bureaucrats who have been removed from their posts in the past month, "and yet everything seems to happen backwards. Cinema is by far the most heavily censored art form, and yet it has had several major victories in the past year: the appearance of Klimov's Agony, German's My Friend, Ivan Lapshin and Roadcheck, all of which were shelved for years, Abdrashitov's and Mindadze's Parade of the Planets and The Train Stopped.[8] Theatre is the second most censored art form, but it has seen two plays by Petrushevskaia staged in the past year, not to mention a whole series of other controversial plays.[9] Only prose, the art form that has the greatest opportunity to circulate without censorship, is still held up in endless negotiations about what cannot appear and why not."

While interesting manuscripts have been circulating unofficially, the past couple of years has produced few startling official publications, few breakthroughs of literary works long held back from print. Evgenii Rein's collection of poems, Names of Bridges, is one such breakthrough; Sergei Esin's "Imitator," a short story à clef directed against the society artist Il'ia Glazunov, is more a local sensation than a literary coup. The publication of writings by Leningrad's unofficial group Club-81 is an important moment in contemporary literary politics, if not in literature, but its existence is not known even to the most informed readers of contemporary literature. Despite the fact that the volume opened a new series, entitled "The Studio" ("Masterskaia"), by the publishing house Soviet Writer, no announcement of its appearance in December, 1985 was made, as is traditionally the case with forthcoming books here.[10]

One writer here has suggested that recent breakthroughs in cinema and theatre are due to a more efficient system within those establishments of restricting the initial audience, gauging a work's impact, building a concensus within the Party hierarchy in favor of a controversial work's release, and thus minimizing the likelihood of political repercussions or the temptestuous changes of fortune--works being released and then pulled--that characterized the Khrushchev era. The practice within the cinema establishment of releasing a film gradually to an increasingly wide circle of viewers is referred to indirectly and with wry humor by director Rolan Bykov in an article on the reception of his film "Scarecrow":

> The picture "Scarecrow" acquired a controversial reputation even before it appeared on the screen. The logic of those who saw the film was approximately the following: "We understood it, of course, but will the broad masses understand it correctly?" The first viewers thanked me for the picture practically with tears in their eyes, but for all that expressed concern that teachers, of course, wouldn't understand the film correctly. The overhwelming majority of the teachers enjoyed the film wholeheartedly, and understood it on a deeper level than other people, but many of them said that it wouldn't be worth it, after all, to show the picture to children--they wouldn't be able to figure it out.
>
> For children's audiences, the entire story repeated itself as a reflection of the adult world: the older children doubted that the younger ones would understand the picture; the tenth-graders felt that we couldn't count on the seventh-graders; the seventh-graders had doubts about the fifth-graders. The film was shown to 3,000 officials of high-school Komsomol [Young Communist League] organizations, who gathered together from different cities and republics at a camp of the Central Committee of the Komsomol near Moscow. The film was discussed in their own detachments, and to the general discussion they invited me as well.
>
> Some of the children, clearly the gung-ho leadership types [zarukovodivshiesia] , expressed doubts: "A marvelous film; we understood it correctly, but will the rank-and-file Komsomol members understand it equally correctly?"[11]

One friend, a prose writer, explained it more simply. "The Party officials see a performance and demand certain changes," he said, "The playwright changes as little as possible and shows the play to them again. The second time through, the officials are more used to it and, little by little, the play's shocking moments lose their impact." Moscow playwright Liudmila Petrushevskaia's four controversial one-act plays, now showing at the Contemporary Theatre, were long held up in such open rehersals, as negotiations were carried on about what could and could not be staged.

Among theatre critics, there is an increased call for an expansion in the number and quality of theatre journals, for greater innovation in the playscripts themselves, and for the publication and staging of works by more controversial playwrights.[12] In the following newsletter I would like to examine one such writer, Liudmila Petrushevskaia, whose plays have elicited considerable praise and criticism here for her candor in depicting contemporary Soviet reality.

Nancy Condee

[1]For an excellent overview of avant-garde art in Moscow, see Serge Schmemann, "Avant-Garde Russian Arts Evolve on the Brink of Dissidence," The New York Times, 5 February 1984.

[2]In its heyday, the Contemporary, like the Southwest, became the focal point of discussion for its production of a play by Evgenii Shvarts, in this case The Naked King (1934), based on the tale by Hans Christian Anderson.

[3]Vladimir Vysotskii (1938-80) was best known as a bard and an actor at the Taganka Theatre. He became, particularly after his death, a cult figure for Soviet citizens from every walk of life.

[4]Literaturnaia gazeta, 23 October 1985, 8.

[5]Literaturnaia gazeta.

[6]For relevant background material leading up to this period, see Harold B. Segel, Twentieth Century Drama: From Gorky to the Present (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 407-456.

[7]G. Tovstonogov, "Razmyshleniia v den' prem'ery," Literaturnaia gazeta, 25 December 1985, 8. Tovstonogov's article is one in a series of articles on contemporary theatre, including by the playwright Aleshin and by current Director of the Taganka Theatre Efros. The series is in response to Mark Zakharov's "Aplodismenty ne deliatsia," Literaturnaia gazeta, 31 July 1985, 8.

[8]For further discussion of these films, see Vladimir Padunov and Nancy Condee, "Recent Soviet Cinema and Public Responses: Abdrashitov and German," Framework, No. 29, 42-56.

[9]Other productions that have caused considerable discussion here include Julii Kim's anti-nuclear musical production "Noah and His Sons," in which the two superpowers are equally indicted for their role in the arms race; Edvard Radzinskii's "Theatre in the Days of Nero and Seneca," with its Aesopian analysis of contemporary politics; and a whole series of plays either by Bulgakov ("Days

of the Turbins," 1925, "Flight," 1927) or based on his writings ("Theatrical Novel," based on his memoirs of the same title, 1937; "Moon in the Window"; and "Ball by Candlelight,"based on his novel Master and Margarita).

[10]Evgenii Rein, Imena mostov (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1984); see also NPC-7; Sergei Esin, "Imitator," Novyi mir, No. 2 (1985); Krug, ed. B.I. Ivanov and Ju. V. Novikov (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1985). This group has essentially attempted the same kind of unofficial existence as the writers of the Moscow group Belleletrists' Club (Klub Belletristov), who produced the digest Catalogue (Katalog) before they were disbanded by Moscow authorities. The success of the Leningrad group in reaching a modus vivendi with local authorities has been attributed both to the group's willingness to negotiate with those authorities and to the fact that the group is located away from the country's capital, residence of many foreign correspondents and diplomats.

[11]Rolan Bykov, "Do i posle 'Chuchela'," Iunost', No. 9, 1985, 98.

[12]See Igor' Zolotusskii, "Idei i igry: kriticheskaia tetradka v al'manakhe 'Sovremennaia dramaturgiia'," Literaturnoe obozrenie, No. 6, 1985, 94-99; M. Liubomudrov, "Teatr nachinaetsia s rodiny," Nash sovremennik, No. 6, 1985, 172.

Received in Hanover 2/14/86