NPC-3

Moscow State University
Moscow, U.S.S.R.
1 December 1984

I. November 7th Celebration (written with Volodya Padunov)
II. Rodina
III. Contemporary Soviet Drama

I. November 7th Celebration

The third snow of the winter has come and, true to the Russian belief, the ground has been covered with snow ever since. In the past few days the temperature has been between -10 and -15 degrees Fahrenheit, fulfilling all predictions for a severe winter. The windows are covered with ice patterns which completely obscure the view of the city. Everyone is now wearing some kind of headgear, except for a few ignorant foreigners, who are regularly stopped by total strangers and given a good, Russian scolding for their stupidity. Russians have very firm ideas about how you should conduct yourself in the winter, and do not hesitate to inform you of those ideas when your behavior deviates from their own. Such flagrant acts of social maladjustment as eating ice cream or having a cold drink earns you a well-deserved and extended reprimand, sometimes with the eager participation of other passers-by. One acquaintance, whom we had only just met at the home of a mutual friend, insisted we go home with her at once and take two winter coats for the next several months, as ours were obviously inappropriate for the Moscow winter.

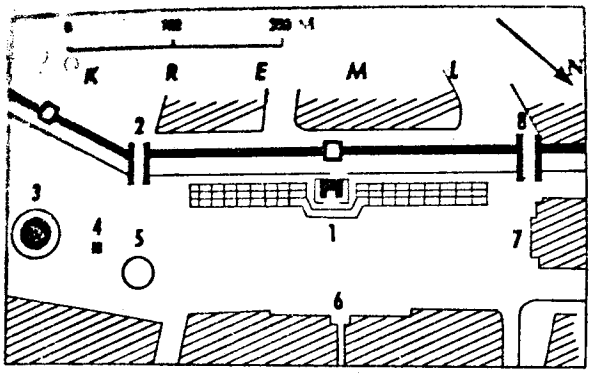
In the days before the November 7th holiday, the mood in the city was unusually cheerful, or so it seemed to those of us schooled to look with a jaded eye at official festivals. The atmosphere probably had less to do with the larger issues of political commitment, East versus West, than it had to do with the anticipation of two days off from work, special sausage in the grocery stores, and visual feast of color and lights in a city which, like most, is dull most of the time.

In anticipation of the holiday, every balcony, bridge, lamppost, electric cable, railing, and window in the city was hung with banners, flags, ribbons, placards, flashing lights, portraits, and red bunting. Placards were everywhere. The working class was portrayed not only larger than life, but larger than an entire department store; its young, virile, moustached face, or its gentle, full-lipped, kerchiefed profile plus the top of a pair of overalls were all that would fit on the facade of GUM in Red Square.[1]

---

[1] GUM (Gosudarstvennyi Universal'nyi Magazin) or State Universal Store is a shopping arcade of 130 departments, built by the architect Pomerantsev between 1888 and 1894. Located opposite the Kremlin on Red Square, this site has been the area of commercial transactions for centuries.

Nancy Condee is a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs and Assistant Professor of Russian at Wheaton College. Volodya Padunov is an exchange scholar with the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and an Assistant Professor of Russian at Hunter College (CUNY).



RED SQUARE

1 Lenin Mausoleum
2 Saviour's Gate
3 St Basil's
4 Minin and Pozharsky Memorial
5 Lobnoe Mesto
6 GUM
7 Historical Museum
8 St Nicholas Gate (closed)

Most prominent among the faces depicted, of course, was Lenin's. Images of the man whose remains are preserved in the Mausoleum on Red Square[2] are reproduced in living color in hundreds of icons throughout the city, nine-story Lenins on nine-story apartment buildings, inescapable signposts marking the Muscovite's progress through the urban landscape. Inescapable, but not indestructable; like the remains, the images too require periodic restoration. If Lenin's remains provide the historical justification for the Soviet Union's past, his images provide the present-day explanation of that history.

Throughout the city, no intermediary figures between Lenin and Chernenko were to be seen. Were Rip Van Winkle to awaken on November 7th, he would probably draw a strange conclusion about Soviet history. The juxtaposition everywhere of enormous color portraits of Lenin with more modest black-and-white photographs of Chernenko suggests a compacted history of the U.S.S.R. It implies a direct line of succession from Lenin to Chernenko, as if Chernenko had grown old and colorless holding the banner handed to him personally by Lenin. This, at least, is the symbolic truth. Historical memory of Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Andropov, to choose only the most obvious examples, is not so much an embarrassment as it is an exercise in revisionism. The object is not to forget history; on the contrary, interest in history is deeply embedded both in the official sphere (dialectical and

---

2 Lenin's mummified remains are kept on display in the Lenin Mausoleum, a red granite monument set against the Kremlin wall. After Stalin's death in 1953, he too was enbalmed and placed to Lenin's left. In late 1961, following the XXII Congress of the Communist Party, Stalin was removed to the Kremlin wall. Finally, in early 1962, Lenin was restored to his original place in the center of the mausoleum vault. Three times a week the mausoleum is opened to visitors, who queue up for hours in order to file past Lenin's remains.

historical materialism) and in the private sphere (memoirs continue to be one of the dominant literary genres in a way that is puzzling to many Western literary theorists). Rather, history has been rewritten so often that virtually any attempt at historiography must begin by revising yet again what has been printed as official truth. It is better and safer to present as history an homologous (Lenin-to-Chernenko), symbolic truth, preserving a national sense of unity than to undertake an empirical reexamination of events since the death of Lenin in 1924; to do so would run the risk of interfering with the linear march of official history.

On Red Square itself, Lobnoe mesto,[3] formerly the site of tsarist beheadings, was filled to overflowing with flowers and greenery. Muscovite families from toddler to babushka, Asiatic tourists from the eastern regions of the U.S.S.R., teenage lovers, military brigades, school children with their red Komsomol kerchiefs, old married couples all posed stiffly in front of this place of execution in order to be photographed by each other. As always, visual records, like verbal ones, induced great anxiety, and so it only those whom you trust that you permit to photograph you, once the scene is properly arranged. "Snapshots," those conveyers of a private, intimate history are singularly rare; instead, these group portraits at Lobnoe mesto, the unsmiling photographs of the members of the Central Committee, the staged and tradition-bound wedding-dress photographs on the top of Lenin Hills near the University. Posing for a photograph is a formal procedure which denies intimacy, immediacy, and serendipity as much as possible. As a result, photographs are a document of symbolic history, whether they portray the leaders or the costumed ceremonies of the citizenry. The unknown tourist-photographers induce suspicion as soon as they step outside their clearly-marked frame: they are to photograph tourist spots. The mere presence in a public place of a camera will guarantee negative comments at a minimum and expulsion at a maximum.

Back in the university dormitory, Soviet strangers and near-strangers greeted each other with the traditional "S prazdnikom!", a shortened version of the Russian phrase "I congratulate you on the occasion of the holiday!" Friends and relatives made mention in their conversations that they would meet again

---

[3] Lobnoe mesto, the Scaffold, or literally the Forehead Place, is a raised, circular platform on Red Square between the Kremlin and GUM. In the best of times in Russian history, it served as the place where the tsars' ukazes were announced. At more colorful moments, in particular during the rule of Ivan the Terrible, it was the site of many executions. Stenka Razin, the seventeenth-century leader of the Cossack uprising and subject of a well-known Russian song, was executed there in 1671. Peter the Great's Imperial Guard, the Streltsy, were executed in the same spot in 1698, following their rebellion. Peter the Great, it is said, took great pride in his ability to perform the beheadings with his own hands.

before the holiday, or only after the holiday, as if it were a month-long event. The foyer of the movie theatre Shockworker (Udarnik) was partially converted into a studio, where in the course of several weeks huge sections of some political placard were being painted. Since the only paints used were red and white, and since the shapes themselves were of such enormous dimensions that our close-up view could not discern any sense to them, these disjointed canvases, laid out across the floor to dry, resembled vast modernist paintings, exhibited horizontally. We movie-goers stood around and watched as the exhibit changed from week to week. Occasionally a single, vast Russian letter of the alphabet--a ж or a ш --would appear, further piquing our interest about the overall meaning of the canvases. Finally, just before the holiday, as all the Lenin floats were parked by the curb below Red Square and the city was waiting for the parade to begin, the canvases all disappeared from the Shockworker and we never did figure out what was being depicted.

The best way to see the Revolution Day Parade is, of course, in person and at a right angle to it. Yet no one except the few political leaders on top of the Mausoleum watch it that way. Everyone else either marches in it, watches it on television, or gives it a skip. In an attempt to see some of the parade first-hand, we hit upon the solution of reserving a telephone call for 9:00 a.m. on November 7th in the Main Telegraph Office on Gor'kii Street, the main Moscow thoroughfare that empties into Red Square. Getting to the Telegraph Office that morning was not easy. The center of the city was closed to pedestrians, except those with special passes. All traffic was banned within the so-called Garden Ring of streets circling the city. The metro does not stop at the Garden Ring stations during the parade hours. We decided to try to get to the center on foot, in hopes that the telephone reservation receipt might be acknowledged by the militia who were stationed every few feet to check passes. To our surprise, we were right and were permitted to make our way slowly to the Telegraph Office.

Gor'kii Street and the side streets nearby had been turned into barracks and parking lots, where tanks trucks, armored personnel carriers, "katiushas,"[4] and other vehicles were neatly lined up in rows, highly polished, engines warming, their crews in parade uniforms walking purposefully around them. Entire companies and battalions of every branch of the armed services stood in orderly ranks, awaiting the start of the parade. The Telegraph Office itself was deserted, except for a dozen militiamen and civic volunteers ("druzhenniki"), who ensured that no one clustered at the giant windows was there merely to observe the parade. Several people without telephone reservations were politely but physically escorted out. At 9:00 as the call came through, the loudspeakers began to broadcast patriotic songs, the whine of the engines grew louder, and the parade began. Once the call was over, we had to leave at once. The sidewalks belonged to the militiamen and the occasional passer-by, but the main streets were surging with thousands upon thousands of Soviets from various industries, agencies, professional organizations, sports clubs, institutes, and simply inhabitants from each of Moscow's neighborhoods, who had been

---

[4] Soviet multi-rocket artillery weapon.

waiting at points around the Garden Ring to march down from the far end of Gor'kii Street across Red Square.

Once the solemn part of the celebration was past, the evening narodnoe gulan'e begins. Literally translated as "public strolling," it is a peasant custom which has survived transplantation into twentieth-century urban life. For the ignorant foreigner, it seems like a spontaneous, popular response which mirrors the official parade: first the tanks and work brigades in the morning, then the people themselves parade in the evening. Muscovites turn out of doors for the strolling en masse. You can't really grasp the full dimensions of the term en masse until you've lived in Russia. Once you have seen the streets and squares overflowing with people, you don't feel too much like saying it in French any more. For those of us unused to crowds, or for whom crowds denote a demonstration of political anger, it is frightening simply to see so many people, all of whom, curiously enough, are there to enjoy themselves. Loudspeakers installed on streetcorners broadcast patriotic songs about rodina (the Motherland). Children, up past their bedtime and bundled up in scarfs, hats, coats, and mittens so that they resemble little sofa cushions on legs, tag along in a virtual trance from all the people, noise, and lights.

A huge light show was set up on the facade of the Main Telegraph Office on Gor'kii Street. The changing images, made of many small lightbulbs, depicted the achievements of Soviet astronauts, factory workers, construction workers, collective farm workers, scientists, and so forth. Each image had its own slogan ("On the Leninist Path to Communism!," "The October Revolution!," "Our Policy is Peace and Construction!"). Occasionally all the images would flash on together, producing the impression of an epileptic seizure. Below the light show hung portraits of six Politburo members, all in suits, ties, and frowns. Untrained in the vagaries of Kremlinology, we tried to remember the order of these male figures. In casual conversations with Russians alongside whom we were walking, we asked about the portraits. Opinions varied: Chernenko, Gorbachev, then a mystery figure, arguably, by popular opinion either Grishin, Romanov, or even Gorbachev, assuming the one before him was not also Gorbachev. Then Gromyko, Tikhonov, and Ustinov. On the other side of the Main Telegraph Office on a dark side street were other members of the Politburo. They posed insurmountable problems of identification for us all. Only Romanov could be recognised among the sidestreet leaders. As one elderly woman explained, "It used to be so easy. But now, you know, they're all so young" ("...oni vse takie moloden'kie"). Nevertheless, parents and grandmothers (grandfathers being, for historical reasons, a rare sight) patiently instructed the children about the portraits on the Telegraph Office walls ("These are our leaders..."), though they themselves had no firm idea who these men were: nameless crowds teaching the next generation about nameless leaders.

II. Rodina

While the city is dominated visually by political slogans, it is not politics in the narrow sense, but rural nostalgia which predominates in the cultural activities surrounding the holiday. Collections of essays and stories on the theme of rodina (the Motherland) appear in literary journals; television pro-

grams include lengthy recitations of poems on the theme of rodina. Radio broadcasts are devoted to rodina songs. Coming home one evening on the metro with my American friend, Volodya Padunov, I was allowed to listen to an extemporaneous lesson on the meaning of rodina by a kindly drunk who sat beside us. Evidently fresh from an evening of serious toasting, he listened intently to our conversation in English. Finally unable to restrain himself any longer, he began to pound Volodya vigorously on the arm: "Hey, you guys! Hey! Listen to me! I hear you speaking a foreign language. Do you understand any Russian? Good. Do you know the meaning of the word rodina ? Do you understand the difference between rodina and strana (country)? Rodina is very different from strana: it's more than the country you're born in. For us Russians, rodina is everything, everything we hold dear. It is dearer than our own mothers. Rodina is our own country, true, but it's more than that. It's a very complicated task explaining it to a foreigner. It's..," he raised his hand in an imaginary toast as the passengers across from us covered their mouths with their mittens, delighted at this bit of living theatre, "it's a live, breathing being, a vast being which has born us, which has nurtured us since infancy, and in whose bosom we always feel safe and warm. It's...how am I supposed to be able to explain it here sitting in the metro ? This is not the place for such conversations ! It's much too complex, too profound. Let's go to my place, what do you say ? Come on, let's go !" In the face of the drunk's mounting annoyance, Volodya explained that we would in fact love to go, but were invited elsewhere and our friends were waiting for us. A long, verbal tug-of-war ensued over the relative importance of manners versus the full comprehension of rodina, resolved at last by our apologetic but hasty exit at the Park of Culture metro stop.

Comical as this scene was to the other passengers, I doubt they would have disagreed with anything the drunk had said. Their amusement, I suspect, was more directed at the poor foreigners who could not possibly understand what the drunk was talking about, than it was directed at the absurdity of his speech. Judging from the reactions of Russian acquaintances in the U.S. when I left for Russia, or from the response here in Moscow to the news of the return of Chaliapin's remains for burial in Russian soil, or to the news of Svetlana Alliueva's repatriation, I would have to acknowledge that it is indeed hard for us Westerners to understand what rodina means to a Russian. For whatever social reasons, we cannot hear or say its English counterpart without a sense of irony. It is one of those words which does not translate well; it remains as alien in English as it was in the original.

It is precisely because of this overwhelming importance of rodina that Svetlana Alliueva's return to the Soviet Union was completely understood by the people I have spoken with here. Although the popular opinion is that the woman herself is unstable, her decision to return home is regarded as in contradiction of that verdict. To several people I wondered aloud about her physical safety, not that it would be threatened by the powers-that-be, but rather by one of the millions of people who had suffered, or whose family had suffered from the atrosities of her father. This trial balloon met with universal scorn. A number of friends and acquaintances rejected this, lamenting that the People (narod) have a poor memory for the crimes of the past, or worse yet, a real nostalgia for the "strong hand" her father represented. As

one friend put it, "You think like an American. In your country, she'd be in danger, but over here it's different: the masses will love her and the intelligentsia can't shoot."

III. Contemporary Soviet Drama

Contemporary Soviet drama, like poetry and prose, is currently in a slump, indeed for many of the same reasons that affect the other two forms of writing: bureaucratic and censorship procedures, favoritism, the very structure of the literary establishment itself. Volumes could be written on this topic with regard to drama alone. Because my interests lie elsewhere, I will not attempt to write about these issues here. They do, nevertheless, affect the kind of drama that reaches us, whether we are theatre-goers in Moscow or students of Soviet literature in the West. They also affect the kinds of plays that do not reach us. I am not speaking here of anti-Soviet writing, however that be defined, but rather of plays being performed in small theatre studios by non-professional or semi-professional theatre groups, in Houses of Culture, such as the House of Medical Workers on Herzen Street in Moscow, or even the "flying theatres," which put on performances wherever they can find space. I would like to write more about this later. For the time being, I will focus on contemporary theatre as it is available to the larger groups of theatre-goers, who really know nothing about these small groups.

In its broadest terms, contemporary Soviet theatre can be divided into two categories: plays on so-called production themes (proizvodstvennaia tema), in which the action centers on the workplace, and plays on everyday family life (semeino-bytovaia tema), sometimes also referred to as the everyday, psychological theme (semeino-psikhologicheskaia tema). That these are the two categories into which most plays can be separated is itself significant. Characteristic of contemporary Soviet literature as a whole, they define themselves by reference to their subject matter--public versus private, work versus home--rather than by style, form, or manner of presentation. Artistic value aside, sometimes--alas--very much aside, production plays serve as a means by which, for example, the audience is presented with two kinds of compromises: on the one hand, the "realistic" compromises which must be made to ensure production despite shortages of goods and services, delayed shipments, and inferior resources; on the other hand, compromises of moral conscience which attempt to justify bribe-taking, pilfering, and illegal selling of goods in short supply. In art as in life, compromises in service of the people and compromises in service of the self are not always easy to distinguish one from the other. It is that tangled skein that forms the substance of many production plays. At their best, these plays address sotto voce the corruption on which enterprises depend to fulfill monthly quotas. At their worst, they are a morality lesson of the most hypocritical kind, since the betrayal of moral conscience which occurs when scarce items are sold illegally is not separable from the moral compromise which occurs when those same items are bought to fulfill production quotas.

While the origins of this kind of play date back to the thirties, the contemporary prototype unquestionably is I. Dvoretskii's "Man from the Side" ("Chelovek so storony," 1972). The opposition in this play is not between good and evil, but between the modern rationalist, a "knight" of the scientific-techno-

logical revolution (nauchno-tekhnicheskaia revoliutsiia, or NTR in Soviet jargon), as one critic has ironically dubbed the play's hero Aleksei Cheshkov,[5] and the older generation of workers, whose instincts are more humane and work methods antediluvian. This conflict between the well-intentioned, but authoritarian rationalist, a future-oriented character, and the well-intentioned, but outmoded collective, survivors of the past, has remained a dominant theme in production drama since Dvoretskii's play was first staged. Other well-known production plays include Aleksandr Gel'man's "Feedback" ("Obratnaia sviaz'," 1977) and "Minutes of a Certain Meeting" ("Protokol odnogo zasedanija," 1975), G. Bokarev's "Steel Founders" ("Stalevary," 1973), and M. Shatrov's "Tomorrow's Weather" ("Pogoda na zavtra," 1974).

If production plays deal with the public face of contemporary Russia, the "everyday" plays deal with Russia's private face, the conflicts between generations and genders within the Soviet family, personal problems outside the workplace. Two of the best-known plays of this genre are "Valentin and Valentina" ("Valentin i Valentina," 1971) by M. Roshchin and "Duck Hunt" ("Utinaia okhota," 1967) by A. Vampilov, whose plays were staged only after his death in 1972 and whose impact on contemporary drama is exclusively from the mid-seventies on. The first of these two plays depicts the romance of a young couple whose mothers, both single, disapprove of their relationship. The second concerns the troubles in marriage, work, love, and friendship of a maladjusted young man who constantly longs, but never manages to go duck hunting until after his suicide attempt at the very end of the play. Unlike the production plays, in which the governmental finger-of-blame is always hovering somewhere offstage, ready to implicate some enterprise in the misdeeds depicted onstage, these psychological plays depict circumstances for which the government bears only mediated responsibility and over which it wields only mediated power. The Moscow theatre audiences, however, feel a strong sense of personal responsibility both for a play's subject matter and for its outcome. At a recent performance of Aleksandr Gel'man's psychological drama "The Bench" ("Skameika," 1984), a banal play about the failure of the two sexes to understand each other, members of the audience wept openly during the play, and many surged up to the apron for the curtain call, bearing bouquets of flowers for the two actors. In the coatcheck rooms the play was hotly argued about as the audience filed out.

---

[5] R.V. Komina, Sovremennaia sovetskaia literatura (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 1984), p. 80. For other recent Soviet discussions of contemporary theatre, see S.S. Imikhelova, Sovremennyi geroi v russkoi sovetskoi dramaturgii 70-x godov (Novosibirsk: Nauka, sibirskoe otdelenie, 1983) and Sovremennaia sovetskaia literatura: 70-e gody (aktual'nye problemy), ed. A.I. Metchenko, et al. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1983), pp. 180-230.

Not having a considerable investment in the conflicts between the party organizer and the director's secretary of a certain, unnamed enterprise, I am continually surprised at the popularity of the production plays, a phenomenon that I attribute to two factors. First, it seems to me, Muscovites will go to any performance. Unlike provincial theatres, which, according to one playwright friend, often play to half-empty houses, Moscow theatres are always sold out, even for the most dreary, dated production of Cyrano de Bergerac or Ladies and Hussars. In that context, the fact that they would attend a new production play such as Valentin Chernykh and Mark Zakharov's "We Are Conducting an Experiment" ("Provodim eksperiment," 1984) is not surprising. Second, as one intellectual sceptic put it, the audiences, like audiences everywhere, go to see their lives depicted onstage. This friend maintained that the typical Moscow audience was predominantly composed of characters from production plays, including the party organizer and the director's secretary. Having suffered through the classics in school, they delight in the opportunity for a cultural evening that depicts their own lives. "Face it," he explained, "whether you and I like these plays is not the point: we are not the audience. A Chekhov production at the Moscow Art Theatre had its audience. They watched the plays and wept openly. Their lives were on stage. The Moscow philistines (meshchanstvo) attend "We Are Conducting an Experiment" and experience the same sense of validation. For the time being, our views are irrelevant."

Needless to say, these two categories of plays do not cover all aspects of contemporary drama. Satirical pieces, such as Vasilii Shukshin's "Energetic People" ("Energichnye liudi," 1973) or S. Mikhalkov's "Foam" ("Pena," 1975), war themes, such as B. Vasil'ev's "The Dawns Are Quiet Here" ("A zori zdes' tikhie," 1971) or M. Roshchin's "Echelon" ("Eshelon," 1974), and plays on international politics, such as N. Miroshnichenko's "The Third Generation" ("Tret'e pokolenie," 1977), are representative of other genres.

The greatest hope for contemporary drama, however, focuses on two playwrights who represent what is called "new-wave drama." Why it is called new-wave has never been satisfactorily explained to me, other than that German new-wave cinema and British new-wave music have resulted in the renaming of everything that used to be simply new as now new-wave. Victor Slavkin, author of four plays which were published last year,[6] writes absurdist drama; the family depicted in "The Bad Apartment" live in a shooting gallery, with all the attendant dangers, until they receive permission at the play's end to move into a public bathhouse. The hero of Slavkin's "The Frost" spends his life

---

[6] Victor Slavkin and Liudmilla Petrushevskaia, P'esy (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1983). Slavkin's plays included here are "The Bad Apartment" ("Plokhaia kvartira"), "The Frost" ("Moroz"), "The Train to Chattanuga" ("Poezd na Chattanugu"), and "The Picture" ("Kartina"). Petrushevskaia's plays are "Music Lessons" ("Uroki muzyki") and "The Staircase Cage" ("Lestnichnaia kletka").

in one room, where he conducts all his affairs by telephone. Using the name 173rd, he provides callers with meaningless trivia from his card catalogue of facts, conducts a chess match by telephone, and even attempts to carry out an appendicitis operation on himself with a kitchen knife, according to the telephone instructions of his doctor.

Petrushevskaia's dramas are marked by black humor and an interest in the seamier side of semi-educated, urban life. Her "Staircase Cage" depicts the lukewarm attempts of two young men, funeral musicians, to pick up a woman whom they had contacted through a dating service. The encounter takes place in a stairwell outside her apartment, a setting which underscores the transitory and casual nature of their acquaintance. Unlike Slavkin's pieces, which abrogate any claim to realist drama, Petrushevskaia's work is very much in the realist tradition. Her settings are Moscow apartment houses; her characters are recognisable, if at times repulsive. She takes great care to construct dialogue to resemble spoken Russian rather than staged conversations. While these two playwrights have little in common stylistically, their works share a common concern about the deterioration of human relations in contemporary urban environments and express pessimism about the hope for amelioration of those relations. It would be a fundamental mistake to see in the works of these two playwrights a protest against Soviet society per se. The protest that is present is the fact of their literary non-conformity with the conventional optimism of Soviet drama. Petrushevskaia's non-conformity is nevertheless very different from Slavkin's. Hers lies in her grim presentation of contemporary life and engages the best-known plays of contemporary drama in a polemic over whose work is in fact more accurate in its representation of that reality. Slavkin's polemic with contemporary drama calls into question the primacy of realism itself. His substitution for realism is not even a symbolic representation, which, if accurately decoded, readily renders up a social message. On a superficial level, his "Bad Apartment" is a spoof in the Mayakovskii tradition, focusing on the housing shortage. Ultimately, however, it is not social commentary but a delight in the absurd that wins the playwright's attention. His plays are a farcical, nightmarish world unto themselves, a world in which the characters are trapped by circumstances dictated not by society, but by the imaginative and tyrannical humor of the playwright. Petrushevskaia's concern, as she herself has stressed repeatedly, is the depiction of life as it really is; for Slavkin, it is the depiction of life as it apparently isn't.

Nancy Condee

Received in Hanover 12/11/84