

# NEW TRENDS IN THE THEATRE

## 1—Russia

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*THE modern theatre affords perhaps the most significant artistic commentary on the determining forces in contemporary civilization. The drama is groping its way, through numerous experiments, of which "Expressionism" seems to be the most fruitful, toward an interpretation of our social life. This article is the first of a series designed to present a survey of recent experiments in Russia, Germany, France, England, Italy, and America. It shows how completely Russia has swung away from Stanislavsky.*

NEW and divergent tendencies on the Russian stage have multiplied in Moscow during the long absence of the Art Theatre on its tour of America. While various schools are putting forth ideas differing widely from one another, it is conspicuously true that whatever is most distinctive in the modern Russian theatre is virtually in a state of revolt against the naturalist tradition so brilliantly upheld by Stanislavsky and his players. The pendulum of Russian theatrical taste has temporarily swung heavily away from the conception of the drama as a means of conveying a realistic impression of life. What is emphasized now is the technique of stagecraft, the achievement of maximum external effects by facial expression and bodily posturing, the trying out of new ideas in staging, scenery, and lighting. The content of a play is subordinated to its method of presentation. What one sees in Moscow to-day is an actor's, rather than a playwright's, theatre.

Not that the Russians have fallen into the American habit of presenting insipid plays for the sole purpose of displaying the talents of particular stars. The present-day Russian theatre will be remembered for its ensemble effects rather than for its individual actors. It is dominated not by any outstanding actor or actress but by the two leading directors who have committed themselves to the modern experimental tendencies. These directors are Alexander Tairov and Vsevolod Meierhold. Tairov, the director of the Kamerny Theatre, is convinced that the requirements of the naturalist tradition in the drama act like a ball-and-chain in limiting the scope of the actor's development. He does not believe that the actor can become a creative artist unless

he is released from the obligation of representing the processes of daily life on the stage.

"The Art Theatre believes that the actor must forget that he is on a stage," says Tairov. "We believe that he must keep this fact in mind all the time, if he is to rise to the height of his powers. The ideal of the naturalist stage is to represent life as it is. Against this we claim the right to act out our conception of life as it appears in our imaginations.

"One can have drama without costumes, without music, without words. Only one thing is indispensable, the actor; and it is just this indispensable element that is neglected and pushed into the background where the realistic tradition prevails. On one occasion one of the Moscow theatrical companies went so far as to take a beggar off the street and put him on the stage in order to enhance the realism of their performance. In my opinion this is naturalism run mad. It means the suppression of the actor's individual art and the degradation of the stage to a mere reflecting glass for everyday life.

"The Kamerny Theatre bases its work upon the conception that the drama is an independent art, with its own rules of aesthetics, which have nothing to do with actuality. We feel that the artist, like the painter, should have the right to alter or modify the facts of actual life as much as he pleases, so long as the desired effect is achieved. Our ideal is to produce actors who can play any rôle, tragic or comic, with equal competence and facility, and with this end in view we train our actors in a special school, where emphasis is laid on such subjects as facial expression, bodily posturing, and the most effective use of masks and costumes. We also give rigorous courses in physical training and acrobatic feats."

The results of this training are plainly visible in the acting of the Kamerny players. In the first place they resemble a group of expert gymnasts. Their bodies are slender, graceful, and wiry, and when the occasion demands they give really remarkable exhibitions of physical strength and dexterity. In the recent performance of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* there was an enormous amount of chasing up and down staircases and elevators, all carried through with the utmost agility.

Extraordinary versatility is a distinctive quality of the Ka-

merny actors. It would be difficult to imagine two plays more different in subject and spirit than Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and the nonsensical musical comedy, *Giroflé Girofla*. Yet the same actor who utters the tragic declamations of John the Baptist one night puts on an outlandishly grotesque costume and goes through all the extravagant foolery of one of the pirate chieftains in *Giroflé Girofla* the next. The same actors effect an equally striking transformation of rôles when they pass from Racine's *Phèdre* to the rollicking lines of *Princess Brambilla*.

Tairov's stage is always arranged in such a manner as to give the actor maximum freedom of movement. In *The Man Who Was Thursday* the equipment is quite elaborate, including an elevator, several raised platforms, with various means of ascent, a moving electrical sign, and a structure that might be taken to represent either a bridge or a city street. All this scenic paraphernalia conveyed pretty effectively the idea of a large city at night and also made it possible to run off scenes of rapidly changing movement with a very fair degree of realism. The stage equipment is not always so elaborate, but care is taken to give the actor plenty of ground for manoeuvring. The handicap of the flat stage is overcome by the employment of raised or sloping surfaces.

There is not a stage manager in the world who could not learn something from the Kamerny Theatre. A former actor himself, Tairov knows all the tricks of the trade. His presentations are masterpieces of sheer dramatic technique. The permanent value of his conception of dramatic art is somewhat more debatable. In its desire to escape from the prosaic and the conventional, the theatre runs the risk of expending all its energy in a wearisome chase after bizarre external effects. Even now, despite technical excellence, its performances can only commend themselves as fully satisfactory to a highly sophisticated observer who is willing to dispense with depth of thought and sincerity of feeling for the sake of constant and clever experimentation with aesthetic novelties.

Meierhold, to a certain extent, goes along the same road as Tairov. He also lays great stress upon the physical training of his actors, and his plays are more distinguished for their method of presentation than for their intrinsic merit. He employs, in fact he originated, some of the stage apparatus which one sees regu-

larly in the Kamerny productions. But in some respects Meierhold is a more austere and thoroughgoing dramatic revolutionary than Tairov. He resolutely rejects the accessory features of color, costume, and music upon which the Kamerny Theatre relies for many of its most effective scenes. More than any director in the world, perhaps, he throws his players upon their own resources.

An actor in Meierhold's Theatre has little to help him outside his own wits and muscles. All the ordinary illusion-creating devices are abandoned. The stage is directly connected with the main body of the house. There are no footlights and no curtain. The only background is a raised structure, which suggests the outlines of a partly finished building. The costumes are as undistinguished as possible, consisting of rough dark serge for the men and the plainest dresses for the women.

Under these conditions the attention of the audience is focussed entirely upon the actor. Meierhold's reputation is largely based upon two plays of very different character. One is called *The Magnanimous Horn-Carrier* and depicts the psychological agonies of a man whose obsession of jealousy leads him to a point where he insists that his perfectly loyal wife betray him with another man, so that his suspense may be ended. The acting in this play is so brilliantly expressive that a foreigner with only a limited knowledge of Russian can follow the developments without difficulty. Meierhold's actors make almost a second language out of gesticulation, writhing on the ground, posturing in striking bodily positions.

*The World Upside Down*, another of Meierhold's productions, might be described as a pageant of the Revolution. There is an enormous amount of mass action, of confused shouting and running about, all of which reflects rather vividly the spirit of the first few months of the Revolution, when all Russia was a seething, fermenting mass of discussion. Individual episodes are more or less broadly sketched. The Root Mission appears and gets a most inhospitable reception from the Russian workers. Some extremely broad jokes are cracked at the expense of the fallen Tsar and Kaiser. The seizing of power by the workers, the assassination of a revolutionary leader, the struggle of the new government with sabotage and treachery, — all these things are portrayed with convincing vigor and spirit. The play is frankly

propagandist, but the propaganda has in it a certain element of healthy vitality. It is devoted to a cause that has not yet been covered with the dry rot of age.

"Our theatre differs from the Kamerny in two important details," says Meierhold. "We reject the conscious aestheticism of the Kamerny. We are iconoclasts in our attitude toward music, costumes, lighting effects. Then our theatre is deliberately propagandist in the cause of the Revolution. We believe that the drama should be intimately related to life, and that the artificial wall between spectator and actor should be broken down as far as possible. So we encourage the audience to take an active part in the performance by singing, and even by acting in mass scenes where this is practicable. We are seeking out a road to a collectivist dramatic art that will reflect the new Russian social conditions. Our actors are banded together in a coöperative and make an equal distribution of the proceeds of their performances."

Somewhat similar to Meierhold's Theatre, but even more consciously revolutionary in its spirit and methods, is the Proletcult, an organization which is attempting to develop a new culture of, by, and for the working class. The Proletcult has its headquarters in one of the most beautiful houses in Moscow, a mansion that formerly belonged to the wealthy merchant family of Morozov. Here a group of working-class actors present plays. One of the most popular performances of the last season was *Do You Hear, Moscow?* a melodramatic depiction of the coming German Revolution. Another Proletcult piece, less serious in character, is a series of nonsensical and satirical skits on topical subjects, in which such enemies of the proletariat as Lord Curzon, the Russian émigrés, and the Ku Klux Klan all come in for unflattering attention.

There is wide variety in the theatrical life of Moscow. Every little group with a new idea, dramatic or otherwise, which it wishes to spread, instinctively takes to the theatre as a mode of expression. Recently an organization officially known as "The Active Atheists of Moscow" opened a small theatre for the purpose of carrying on their propaganda against religion. As a starter the Active Atheists gave a play which dwells on the horrors of human sacrifice in pagan times. Later productions will deal with the Spanish Inquisition and the modern church.

The Theatre of Improvisation is another Moscow "Little Theatre" venture. Its name is derived from the circumstance that the actors originally came out on the stage and asked the audience what sort of performance was desired. After the consensus of opinion had been taken there was a pause of fifteen to twenty minutes; then the actors reappeared, with lines and costumes adapted to the occasion.

Classical drama is by no means extinct in Russia. The comedies of Gogol and Ostrovsky are regularly given in the Maly Theatre, which is assailed by all the young radical critics as a stronghold of dramatic reaction. The four Studios of the Moscow Art Theatre, — bands of young actors trained in the methods and tradition of Stanislavsky, — still keep alive the memory of the parent organization. There has been a certain relaxation of the former austere standards of the Studios; along with works like *King Lear* and Aristophanes' *Lysistratae* they now give such colorful musical comedies as *The Daughter of Anjou* and *Princess Turandot*.

But the new Russian theatre finds its most characteristic expression in the work of Meierhold and Tairov. All the innovators are working along the lines of increased potency and expressiveness for the individual actor and enhanced flexibility and novelty in the stage paraphernalia. To the old time Russian intellectual, steeped in the traditions of the Art Theatre, these newer developments probably seem an intolerable combination of barbarism and dilettantism.

But this would be too harsh a judgment. The example of the French Revolution shows that a period of intense emotional strain and physical hardship, such as Russia has just passed through, is not conducive to the highest achievements of creative art. A certain degree of repose and security is essential to the development of finely wrought and carefully thought-out work, whether in music, in art, in the drama, or in literature. The Russian Revolution has awakened and pushed to the front new social elements, drawn from the masses of the people. The tremendous shake-up in Russian society could not but have its effect upon the character of the Russian stage. The theatre audience, like many other things in Russia, has been to some extent proletarianized, roughened, and coarsened in its standards of judgment.

The former worker who is now a Red Army officer, a government official, or a university student altogether lacks the refined and perhaps somewhat decadent tastes of the professional intellectual of the old school. His inclination, in this formative period of his development, runs strongly to the exciting, the picturesque, the spectacular.

But, judging again from the example of France, there is no reasonable ground to believe that the democratization of Russian society will mean the permanent degradation of Russian art. Give the new Russia two or three decades in which to settle down, to resume the habits of study and reflection that have been interrupted for almost ten years as a result of the numbing physical suffering that goes with war, revolution, and famine, and there is reason to believe that the rich dramatic content of the Revolution will be immortalized in novels as fine as *Anna Karenina* and in plays as gripping as *The Brothers Karamazov*.

*The second article in this series, by Barrett Clark, will deal with the contemporary stage in Germany.*

## FLOURISH

MARIE EMILIE GILCHRIST

*I have renounced humility  
And boast instead, with cheerful mirth.  
Seeing the meek inherit the earth  
Has been enough of a lesson to me.  
They may have my share for their poor souls' dearth;  
I've learned what one proud soul is worth,  
And I have renounced humility.*