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The Rise and Fall of Soviet Theater

According to Soviet playwright Eduard Radzinsky, theater — until recently a powerful force in his society — has lost its momentum. The mass media have usurped theater's role as outspoken critic of social and political life, leaving it without direction in the age of *perestroika*. To reestablish its prominent position will require setting off on unfamiliar terrain. "Soviet theater has come to a halt now, not because it lacks courage, not because it is not prepared for freedom. It has come to a halt because it is not prepared for art," said Radzinsky, who spoke to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute November 17, 1988.

Radzinsky chronicled "the rise and fall" of Soviet theater, from Stalin through Gorbachev, and concluded with reflections on how it might regain its rightfully important role in Soviet society. He noted that before *perestroika* and *glasnost'* so radically shook Soviet society, theater had established itself as a primary (if surreptitious) forum for social and political commentary. In an atmosphere of censorship and harsh constraints, the Soviet theatrical world flourished.

Shakespeare's Second Homeland

Starting in the 1930s, controversial plays were forbidden. All plays had to meet certain strict criteria; the fundamental conflict had to be that of "the good with the better," and every play had to have a happy ending. Radzinsky noted that this applied not only to Soviet plays, but to the classics and foreign plays as well. "And so, for example, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams ended very positively in the Moscow Theater."

Reacting to the "very bad" Soviet plays which emerged from that time, directors sought out new genres. They often resorted to deceptively benign foreign plays, particularly Shakespeare. "Imagine the 30's," Radzinsky bitinglly remarked. "Russia is called the 'Official Second Homeland

of Shakespeare.' One Shakespearean drama is played out on the stage, and another in life."

Radzinsky suggested that it is telling to look at which of Shakespeare's plays were most popular at a given time. At first, *Romeo and Juliet* and the comedies were the productions of choice. They served purely as entertainment, as an "escape from reality," because the theatrical world at that time had not yet realized the potential of art as a vehicle for political protest. Next, *Othello* became the most popular play. All of the national republics put on their own productions. Why *Othello*? Because the story of minorities — "who are so good, and so thirsty for love" and yet who are "surrounded by lies" and whom "everyone betrayed" — rang true in the provinces.

In 1954, after the death of Stalin, *Hamlet* came to the fore. Through the Soviet audience's eyes, it was the story of a young man who stopped believing in anything. "Time stopped for him. The world collapsed." The play enjoyed enormous success because it spoke to contemporary political and social concerns. The audience recognized that Shakespeare was a bold playwright, and that in *Hamlet* he had written a pointed play. Those who granted permission for plays, on the other hand, began to think that Shakespeare was a harmful playwright, and began to push for plays about "real, everyday life."

Nevertheless, up to the Brezhnev period, the most popular plays were *Richard III* and *Henry IV*, along with *King Lear*. "All the plays were about the struggle for power," said Radzinsky. "Everyday plays were not enough. The theater wanted to be a judge, although this did not suit it."

The *Glasnost'* of Darkness

According to Radzinsky, "audiences came to the theater at this time as the only place where people, gathered



together, truthfully could express their times. The first *glasnost* arose, the '*glasnost* of darkness,' in the darkness of the theater." By official standards, the audiences behaved very badly. Where they were not supposed to laugh, they guffawed. They applauded all the "negative" heroes. They were generally "uncontrollable."

Moreover, audiences occasionally snuck into rehearsals of plays that were not yet approved. Before a play could go into full rehearsal, it had to be shown to the leadership — in an empty hall, so as not to risk "infection" of those who might stumble in. At one rehearsal the leadership showed up to find an auditorium full of people. No one knew where they had learned about the play, although in Moscow, Radzinsky remarked, everyone knows everything. "In Russia, everything is a secret, but nothing is secret."

But however powerful the theater may have been during the time of stagnation, it had lost its artistic essence. The creation of "political theater" during these years represented the "destruction of art." As soon as the process of *perestroika* began, everyone waited impatiently for the emergence of a "new" theater to reflect the changing times. A new audience is arising, which is demanding new directors and new plays. But to this day the theater has not responded. Why, when so many of the other arts in the Soviet Union are revelling in their new-found freedoms, is the theater lagging so far behind?

Love and Art

To Radzinsky, it is because now "everything is in articles." All of the most pressing and interesting questions of the day — which were once addressed only in plays — are debated openly in journals, in newspapers, on radio and on television. Theater's role has been pre-empted by the mass media. In fact, it is in the media that one finds the most severe criticisms of today's theater. So to regain its visibility, theater must set off in new directions.

"Now we need to begin to devote ourselves to art. To return to that for which theater was created," Radzinsky explained. "But to return to art, as it turns out, is very difficult." In order to adjust to the new times, artists must "relax" a bit. They must abandon their battle with the Minister of Culture, with the leaders and with themselves, because the "main possibility, the sole possibility for an artist to create art is when he loves not himself, but loves others. It is impossible to create art based on hate."

Radzinsky said that when he is asked what were the most important problems for artists in the time of stagnation, he replies that "the most important thing in this period was not to forget these words: 'forgive them...' Only those who preserved love within themselves survived that period."

Reported by Lolly Jewett

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