

# SERGEI RADLOV

## THE SHAKESPEARIAN FATE OF A SOVIET DIRECTOR



David Zolotnitsky

Sergei Radlov  
The Shakespearian Fate  
of a  
Soviet Director

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Sergei Radlov  
The Shakespearian Fate  
of a  
Soviet Director

by David Zolotnitsky

*Russian Institute for the History of Art  
St Petersburg*

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# CONTENTS

<i>Introduction to the Series</i>	ix
<i>List of Plates</i>	xi
<b>Part One A Study in Scarlet (1917–1937)</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One A Running Start</b>	<b>3</b>
• The starting point	3
• The <i>Popular Comedy</i> theatre	7
• An encounter with M. Gorky and the crisis of the agitational satire	13
• Tests for entertaining action	15
• The influence of the circus on the heritage	18
• The decline of the <i>Popular Comedy</i>	23
<b>Chapter Two Laboratory Experiments</b>	<b>27</b>
• The experimental workshop	27
• Meyerhold in Radlov's laboratory	31
• The College for Stage Arts	35
<b>Chapter Three The First Encounters with the Academic Drama Theatre</b>	<b>41</b>
• <i>Poor Eugen</i>	41
• Anonymous productions	44
• <i>Lysistrata</i>	47
• In the Academic Drama Studio	49
• <i>Othello</i>	51
<b>Chapter Four In Different Moods</b>	<b>55</b>
• At the head of the Narodny Dom Drama Theatre	55
• Directing the operetta	58
• <i>Bridegrooms on Wheels</i>	63
• In the open and under the Big Top	67
• <i>Ædipus Rex</i> in the open	70
<b>Chapter Five The Opera: 'Modernity' and Academism</b>	<b>73</b>
• The expressionist opera: <i>Der ferne Klang</i>	73
• <i>The Love for Three Oranges</i>	75

• 'Modernity' and tradition	77
• Towards the genuine <i>Boris Godunov</i>	79
• A new search for scouts	86
<b>Chapter Six Findings and Losses on the Studio Theatre Stage</b>	93
• In the Young Theatre	93
• A farewell to expressionism	97
• The Young Actors' <i>Othello</i>	101
• The affirming Ibsen	106
<b>Chapter Seven The Academy Theatre and the Studio Theatre</b>	109
• At the head of the Academic Opera	109
• <i>Romeo, Juliet, and Radlov</i>	113
• <i>Romeo</i> at the Studio Theatre	115
• Youth and passions	120
<b>Chapter Eight In Moscow Theatres</b>	123
• Meetings with the State Jewish Theatre	123
• <i>King Lear</i>	125
• <i>Othello</i> in the Maly Theatre	130
• Again <i>Othello</i> in the Studio Theatre	132
• Once more about the Moscow version	135
• Meyerhold as a critic of <i>Othello</i>	138
• 'It is difficult to work at an alien theatre'	143
<b>Part Two A Study in Purple (1938–1958)</b>	149
<b>Chapter One The Director and his Theatre</b>	151
• The last 'tour' of the director	151
• For the sake of his home	157
• The Pushkin year	161
<b>Chapter Two On the Eve</b>	169
• <i>Hamlet...</i>	169
• ... and vicissitudes of fate	173
• The Lensoviet Theatre	178
• Ostrovsky or Wilde?	181
• Before the thunderstorm	185
<b>Chapter Three Events are Overtaken by the War</b>	191
• Under siege	191
• 'On the cliff-face...'	197

## CONTENTS

vii

• On the edge	205
• The zone of wandering	211
• Light through the clouds	215
<b>Chapter Four The Outcome</b>	223
• What is the finale?	223
• The end of Shakespeare	230
• Thank you, Latvia!	237
• An awkward ending	242
<i>References</i>	245
<i>Index of names</i>	265
<i>Index of titles</i>	285
<i>Sergei Radlov's Productions</i>	291
<i>A Radlov Bibliography</i>	301
<i>Major Works on S. E. Radlov</i>	315



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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The Russian Theatre Archive makes available in English the best avant-garde plays from the pre-Revolutionary period to the present day. It features monographs on major playwrights and theatre directors, introductions to previously unknown works, and studies of the main artistic groups and periods.

Plays are presented in performing edition translations, including (where appropriate) musical scores, and instructions for music and dance. Whenever possible the translated texts will be accompanied by videotapes of performances of plays in the original language.



1 Sergei Radlov, 1920s.

# PLATES

- 1 Sergei Radlov, 1920s.

## Part One

### *Between pp. 25 and 27*

- 2 Popular Comedy Theatre. The stage of 1920–1922.
- 3 Popular Comedy Theatre. *The Adopted Child* by Sergei Radlov; second act. A draft by Valentina Khodasevich.
- 4 Faina Glinskaya. From the portrait by Nikolai Kulbin, 1916.

### *Between pp. 92 and 93*

- 5 *The Love for Three Oranges*. Scale model by Vladimir Dmitriev. Theatre of Opera and Ballet. Leningrad, 1926.
- 6 *Boris Godunov*. Draft of Decoration by Vladimir Dmitriev. Theatre of Opera and Ballet. Leningrad, 1928.
- 7 Nikolai Pechkovsky.

### *Between pp. 108 and 109*

- 8 The cover of *Ten Years in the Theatre* by Sergei Radlov, 1929.
- 9 *Othello*. Othello – Georgi Yeremeyev, 1934.
- 10 *Othello*. Iago – Dmitry Dudnikov, 1934.

### *Between pp. 122 and 123*

- 11 *Romeo and Juliet*. From left to right: Tybalt – Nikolai Kryukov, Romeo – Boris Smirnov, Mercutio – Georgi Yeremeyev.
- 12 *King Lear*. Scale model by Alexandre Tyshler, State Jewish Theatre. Moscow, 1935.

### *Between pp. 147 and 149*

- 13 *King Lear*. Lear – Solomon Mikhoels, 1935.
- 14 *King Lear*. Lear – Solomon Mikhoels, Fool – Veniamin Zuskin. 1935.
- 15 *King Lear*. Lear – Solomon Mikhoels, 1935.
- 16 *Othello*. Othello – Alexander Ostuzhev. Maly Theatre, Moscow, 1935.

## Part Two

*Between pp. 168 and 169*

- 1 Sergei Radlov, 1930.
- 2 *Hamlet*. Hamlet – Dmitry Dudnikov, 1938.

*Between pp. 189 and 191*

- 3 Anna Radlova and Sergei Radlov, 1939–1940.
- 4 Vladimir Chobur.

*Between pp. 221 and 223*

- 5 *Guilty though Guiltless*. Otradina – Tamara Yacobson.  
Murov – Nikolay Kryukov, 1943.
- 6 The Poster of the Lensoviet Theatre, Marseilles, December 1944.
- 7 Design by Jean Cocteau, Paris, 1945.

Part One

# A Study in Scarlet

## (1917–1937)

*Translated from the Russian*  
*by Tatiana A. Ganf and Natalia A. Egunova*



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## Chapter One

# A Running Start

The starting point • The *Popular Comedy* theatre • An encounter with M. Gorky and the crisis of the agitational satire • Tests for entertaining action • The influence of the circus on the heritage • The decline of the *Popular Comedy*

## The Starting Point

Sergei Radlov started as director proceeding straight from the world of literature, passing by the phase of acting. He appeared as an actor at the age of about fifty. It happened in the besieged Leningrad, in the winter of 1941, when an actor who suddenly broke down had to be substituted immediately. The debutante did not spoil the ensemble, nor did he produce any sensation. It was not a time for sensations: theatrical art still remained within the framework of respectable academism. The ideas and designs of Radlov as director had been developing within these bounds, revealing their literary origins. Sometimes Radlov tried to free himself from the impact of literature, only to return to it again.

He was born in St. Petersburg in 1892. His father, Ernest Lvovich (or, more exactly, Leopoldovich) Radlov, was professor of philosophy and then director of the Imperial Public Library. Having graduated from the University where he had got his philological education, Sergei Radlov took a deferential interest in the Antiquity and the Renaissance.

He was not yet twenty when his translations of poems by Stefan George appeared in the *Apollo* magazine. His original poems were published in St. Petersburg newspapers. Here is one of them:

*Let it be so* \*

*Let a wave play in a drowsy sea*

*Or angry crests show white... Let it be so.*

*The joy of the sun, the dark cloud's sorrow –*

*All of this I've long known by heart.*

*There are no habitual charms in the breakers' chorus.*

---

\* rendered in prose by the translators

*Sorrow is evenly spreading its fogs.  
The world grows cold in a unanimous verdict:  
Death shall swallow you soon, soon,  
Death shall swallow you? Let it be so.*

This melancholy omniscience with respect to fate was rather a romantic pose. Of course Radlov was far from guessing that forty years later his sombre presentiment would come true so perfidiously.

So far, it was nothing but a young poet's fancy. And it was just as a poet that the theatre first claimed him. He was invited by Nikolai Evreinov, baron Nikolai Drizen, Natalia Butkovskaya and Konstantin Miklashevsky to the *Ancient Theatre*; they asked him to compose rhymed prologues to two plays of old Spaniards. This attracted Radlov's attention to the history and the techniques of the theatre of old times and made him interested in the interaction of a word written and a word spoken, of dialogue and action, as well as in the actor's improvisation, pantomime, and playing understood in a broad sense. The old theatre gave Radlov the initial impulse, whereas a more advanced course in traditionalism was taught to him by Vsevolod Meyerhold.

Meyerhold's studio was opened in Borodinskaya Street, St. Petersburg, in 1913. Radlov joined it as a poet and a neophyte. His poems ('I believe embracing is ardent, / I believe kisses burn like fire') may be appreciated from different points of view. Somebody is likely to think them too rational. However, they were printed in the studio's magazine *The Love for Three Oranges*, and Meyerhold, being its editor, recommended them to Alexander Blok, who managed the poetry section. Following the poems, Radlov's articles on Sophocles's tragedies and Menander's comedies were published, and one of the magazine issues (1915, Nos. 4–7) contained his translation of Plautus's comedy *Twins (Menaechmi)*.

Meyerhold singled the gifted studio member among all the others. Radlov was part of the studio's nucleus. There were two groups in the Borodinskaya Studio at that time: according to their inclinations, the students did their course of studies either in the group referred to as the 'Grotesque' or in the other called the '18th Century'. Alexei Gripich, who belonged to the 'Grotesque', recollected afterwards: 'The leading position in the "18th Century" group was held by Sergei Radlov. The group was characterized by a preference for romantic subjects and the softness, elegance, and even affectation of performance. Its members were Elagin, Landau, Trusevich, who later became actors of the Theatre of Experimental Productions directed by S. Radlov'.<sup>1</sup>

A performance following Russian traditionalism imitated the style of one or another past epoch in the history of the theatre. It could be deliberately 'common', in the rather rough fashion of popular or outdoor spectacles, or, conversely, fine and aristocratic; emphatically verbal or improvisational throughout: in other words, the text could be uttered as a prayer or treated as freely and unceremoniously as one liked. The performance could be synthetic, making free use of performing arts, or strictly static, verbal, one of good recital and restrained action. The basic peculiarity of almost every experiment, whatever might be its stylistic

purpose, was the fact that it would mainly occur within the studio walls. A student acting as director tried to make use of anything that came to hand. A regular stage would have required too much creative effort. What was necessary in the studio was the devotion of co-believers, the fervour of neophytes. Traditional productions on academic stage, even when directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold or Fedor Komissarzhevsky, were achieved with difficulty and soon went off the repertoire. Meyerhold's *Don Juan* and *The Masquerade* in the Alexandrinsky Drama Theatre were rare exceptions.

A mild echo of the studio traditionalism was the Theatre of Experimental Productions mentioned by Gripich. Radlov organized it in the summer of 1918 when, following his teacher Meyerhold, he joined the broad activity network of the Theatre Department (Teo) attached to the People's Commissariat of Education. Radlov became member of the Teo repertoire section headed by Alexander Blok; in June 1918 he began teaching at the Classes for Mastership of Scenic Productions (Kursy Masterstva Scenicheskikh Postanovok, *abbr.* Kurmascep); and in April, 1919, after Meyerhold's departure from Petrograd, he took on the post of the Kurmascep manager. Gripich recollected: 'Before Meyerhold's departure the promotion of S. E. Radlov to the post of the Classes manager had been discussed and approved'.<sup>2</sup> The organizer of the Red Army Theatrical and Dramatic Arts Workshop, Nikolai Vinogradov-Mamont, also testified that Radlov was the 'focus of attraction for Meyerhold's young students and followers. And after Vsevolod Emilievich had left Petrograd, Radlov was unanimously acknowledged as leader of the left-wing theatre',<sup>3</sup> – within the Petrograd boundaries, of course.

Like many Teo activists, Radlov worked in the mass cultural organizations of the Petrograd military district and the Baltic navy. On 9 October, 1919, the Teo newspaper *Zhizn' Iskusstva* (Life of Art) announced the première of Emil Verhaeren's *Dawns* which was to be shown in the hall of the Stock Exchange by a Baltic navy group directed by Radlov. It was one year before Meyerhold's première in Moscow, and demonstrated the results of practical work on the *Dawns* by the Kurmascep students. It is worth mentioning that in staging the *Dawns* in Moscow, Meyerhold used the model made at Kurmascep by Vladimir Dmitriev and approved of in its initial version by A. Blok. It can be supposed that Radlov, too, made some use of a model made by some young designer of Kurmascep, possibly by Dmitriev himself: later they collaborated in many a production on the academic stage.

On the occasion of the 2nd anniversary of the Red Army, on 23 February, 1920, Radlov and the company of the Red-Army Theatrical and Dramatic Arts Workshop showed a production in verse, *The Sword of Peace*, written by Adrian Piotrovsky. The performance took place in the Cinizelli Circus, and some joint theatrical societies of the Petrograd garrison, as well as the chorus and the band of the military district, participated in the crowd scenes. According to the press, 'the spectacle was a great success with comrades Red-Army men'.<sup>4</sup> There were also some detailed reviews. The Moscow correspondent Evgeni Kuznetsov wrote that it was 'a concise chronology of the entire history of the Red Army' during the

two years of its existence. He was not enthusiastic about its dramatic merits and picked out some borrowings, for example, from *The King's Barber* by Anatoli Lunacharsky; but he did justice to the director's mastership: 'If there was any effect produced, it was only thanks to the director Radlov and his apt production, rich in surprises and sudden turns. Perfect professionalism!'<sup>5</sup> The production was ranked among the significant mass performances of the epoch of 'war communism'.<sup>3</sup>

Radlov took part, as a member of a directorial team, in some other similar undertakings. In a three-part performance *Towards the World Commune*, shown in the portal of the Stock Exchange on 19 July, 1920, under the general direction of Konstantin Mardzhanov, and with Natan Altman as designer, Radlov directed the second part which dealt with the world war. (The first part was done by Nikolai Petrov and the third by Vladimir Solovyov and Adrian Piotrovsky.)

That year, Radlov and Solovyov also directed *The Promethean Fire* to mark the May-Day holiday. The performers were again the actors of the Theatrical and Dramatic Arts Workshop. One of the performances took place in the opera hall of the Narodny Dom (the People's House). The newspaper account sounded well-meaning; it noted that 'the performance, which was attended exclusively by Red-Army men, was accompanied with a stormy applause'.<sup>6</sup> It was a demonstration of organized emotions of organized spectators.

In mass performances, certain elements of traditionalism could sometimes be detected. Thus, it was not without looking back to some old popular court entertainments and amusements that *The Siege of Russia* was performed. It was shown on 20 June, 1920, on the Kamenny Ostrov (the Stony Island, renamed the Island of Rest), which had been transformed, for the occasion, by the architect Ivan Fomin, the artist Sergei Chekhonin and some others. An amphitheatre accommodating one thousand spectators was built near one of the ponds, and a small island in the middle of the pond was turned into the arena of action in the open air. The small island symbolized the RSFSR, which was besieged by the 'gun-boats' of the invaders. Many years later Valentina Khodasevich, a designer and once a Kurmascep student, recalled the episodes of the performance she had designed: 'From beyond the island a skiff appears, decorated as a battleship, with a tower and guns. On board stands a caricature admiral, Lord Curzon (played by Konstantin Gibshman). He is watching the Land of Soviets through a big telescope. The Soviet workers catch sight of him and defend themselves, and after different adventures he is forced to tumble overboard'. Further, a Polish spy – an aerial acrobat Serge (Alexander Alexandrov) – fleeing from pursuit, climbed up a tree, leaping from bough to bough. A Polish general (the clown-acrobat George Delvari) turned a somersault and plunged into the water, where a firework battle was raging; etc. The acme of the performance was the choral apotheosis of the victorious Russian proletariat. 'Since then I and Radlov felt quite enthusiastic about outdoor mass performances', Khodasevich reminisced.<sup>7</sup>

True, a few years later, Radlov was one of the first to point out, soberly and rather skeptically, the exorbitant cost of designing such festive spectacles: 'It was certainly naive and impractical to dress the rainy town in cloth shirts; and, in

general, it then seemed more natural to decorate the wall of a building with a futurist mural than to mend the pavement or the water supply.' But he was right, adding that it had been 'a romantically bold attempt of art to come out into the streets'.<sup>8</sup> It was a characteristic feature of the period of 'war communism' in general, both in life and in art.

Radlov continued this kind of scenic practice for some years. Yet life's new realities themselves called for rejecting old, worn-out forms...

In his first studio theatre, the Theatre of Experimental Productions, Radlov managed to stage only two comedies: Plautus's *Twins* (*Menaechmi*) in his translation and *The Sbitenshchik* (*The Hot-Mead Vendor*) by Yakov Knyazhnin. The twins had masks over their faces, imitating ancient Roman actors. A mask deprived the performer of a reliable help, facial expression; but, on the other hand, it helped him develop the ability for corporal movement, expressiveness of pose and gesture, and self-orientation in space. In a way, it served the purposes of the 'all-the-people's theatre', of which Radlov dreamed.<sup>9</sup> Outdoor performances, the plasticity of the actor playing the leader of huge throngs required especially striking, forceful expressiveness. Facial expression, fine subtleties, minute nuances were simply lost on the audience.

A year later, when the Theatre of Experimental Productions had ceased to exist, Radlov transferred his experiments into another young theatre in Petrograd, which had taken on an unpretentious name of the *Studio*. It was organized at the beginning of 1919 (at 51, Liteiny Prospect) by the director Konstantin Tverskoy, the artist Yuri Bondi and some of the former members of Meyerhold's studio in Borodinskaya Street. Radlov started there as director and playwright, his first production being a play in 3 acts, *The Battle by Salamin*, based on some motifs from Herodotus, Thucydides and Aeschylus. He had written it for children, in collaboration with Adrian Piotrovsky. The next season, when the *Studio* was reorganized into the Maly Drama Theatre, Radlov staged there a very old comedy *Trumph* by Ivan Krylov and quite a new comedy of Konstantin Miklashevsky, *Four Lady-Killers*. Thus, he was still true to the studio experience of his youth: these performances were reminiscent both of the experiments in the '18th Century' group and of the ties with the *Ancient Theatre* where Miklashevsky had worked.

## The Popular Comedy Theatre

Of all the initiatives of creative directorial activity in the Petrograd studios of that time, Radlov's theatre *Popular Comedy* (1920–1922) proved to be most significant. In that theatre of topical political agitation, dramatist and director were fused in one person, a play represented by a script for the next day's performance: it did not claim to be of an independent literary value, and the actor's part served as an outline for the performer's improvisation. These principles were supplemented

by a principle of saturating the action with the elements of a circus show. The actors and the masters of the circus ring appeared hand in hand. In such a way Radlov tried to solve the problem of synthesis. However, the sum of heterogeneous items did not make a true synthesis. Each performer would do what he had been taught before: the comedians picked up and drew the threads of the plot and the fates of personages, the circus artists played their long-known, well-studied tricks which suited the given scenic situations. But a circus actor, being what he was, could not play a part; while the actor of the drama stopped as if stupefied, watching the action when it turned out to be of a stunning nature.

The passion for the so-called 'circusation' of the theatre seized also some outstanding directors in Moscow, such as Sergei Eisenstein with his *Mexican* and *The Wise Man* in the Proletkult Theatre, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Alexei Granovsky with their versions of the *Mystery-Buffer*, and Alexander Tairov with *Jirofle-Jirofla*... Some of the above performances did not solve the problems they had set, of which the main one was the problem of a synthetic actor. True, Eisenstein and Tairov were more successful than the others in their quest: among their actors, almost everyone could do everything. With other directors, every actor mostly did what he could draw from his professional experience. A seemingly synthetic performance was actually one which lacked synthetic actors. There was no interchange of the participants: the entrance of a circus actor, the repartee of an artist, the comedians' dialogue were all superimposed on the plot, developing its variations in time and space. For the scene of the Hell in the *Mystery-Buffer* (1921) Meyerhold had to engage the clown-satirist Vitali Lazarenko, 'a popular jester and jumper', as his bills announced. Even a more obvious example was the performance of the same *Mystery-Buffer* in the Moscow Circus Ring, enacted by battalions of dramatic, circus and ballet artists connected only externally.

Radlov arranged his performances at the *Popular Comedy* more systematically, with the view of uniting the actors of the comedy, variety and circus in a single integral action. He opened a studio attached to the theatre, in the hope of training synthetic actors. The laboratory experiments practiced at the Kurmascep were now carried out both in the studio and in the theatre itself, and the *Popular Comedy* grew to be a marked phenomenon of the day.

Radlov wanted to create an agitational performance on the folk-comedy basis of communication between the actors and the audience, and a close impact on the latter. He was not satisfied with the way it happened in theatres of academic type. Whenever the spectators laughed during the action, the actor stopped in an unnatural rigid posture, waiting for them to quiet down. 'Now any address to the audience, this nerve of the comedy since the times of Aristophanes, has been ousted by our naturalism, and the actor is forbidden to respond joyfully to the voice of the spectators. But communication is the very life of the theatre, which has now been driven out into the circuses'.<sup>10</sup> In his response to a performance he chanced to see in the Saburov Theatre, he spoke on things that troubled and haunted him, and were soon to become the main problems of his own experiment, aimed at free contact between the performer and the audience, the return of the repartee from the circus ring to the theatre boards, the hearty laughter of

like-minded people, confederates onstage and in the auditorium.

Thus Radlov was forcing his way to a comedy in the manner of outdoor folk performances, and partly also to the synthesis of the means of expressive action. In those days the theatre also answered the purposes of political agitation. The Iron Hall of the Narodny Dom in the Petrogradskaya Side, with a flat, two-circle stage resembling Shakespeare's theatre, was full even in spite of severe winter colds.

'An open wooden platform placed along the narrow side of the two-circle Iron Hall in the Narodny Dom, with something like a curtain, without wings or foot-lights, required maximum ingenuity...', the director said afterwards. 'The technically primitive platform afforded small possibilities as far as the scenery was concerned. But then, greater attention was drawn to the actor who, with inexhaustible energy, demonstrated to the excited audience his skill in jumping, somersaults, juggling with fire flames, transformation, quick wit and verbal resourcefulness, musical eccentricity, and other miracles banned from the serious theatre stage'.<sup>11</sup> The stage resembled the variety show platform, without depth, with flattened props. A similar stage in the House of Engineers in Borodinskaya Street, with hardly any wings and 'pockets', had served as a platform for Meyerhold's studio experiments in the pre-October years. The resemblance to Shakespeare's *Globe* was also a point of attraction.

Be it as it may, Radlov liked that platform despite its obvious inconveniences. It seemed to provide the ease and naturalness of contacts between those who were playing and those who were looking on, and it kind of instigated the actor-improviser to concentrate and be resourceful. 'Verbality' and 'literature' were not favoured there. Action prevailed over word, psychological treatment was out of the question. Scripts for performances were written by the director himself, who, hiding from the audience in the farthest corner of the platform, was ready any moment to help the improviser by prompting.

The auditorium was packed with working people and their families, Red Army men, household servants from the neighbouring quarters, homeless teenagers. The audience was unsophisticated, responsive and grateful.

At first the company numbered only several comedians: Boris Annenkov, Faina Glinskaya, Nikolai Elagin. Masters of variety and circus arts prevailed. Konstantin Gibshman had earlier preferred the conversational genres of variety and miniature theatres, at the same time being extremely reticent: he would utter fragmentary phrases and interjections, appreciating a pause, a timid comic stutter, and embarrassed gesture rather than a word. Different parts were played by circus actors: the aerial acrobats Serge (Alexander Alexandrov) and Ivan Taurek, the clowns George Delvari and Bob (Boris Kozyukov), the transformers Alexei Alexon and Valentin Ernani, the gutta-percha man Alexander Carloni, the juggler Takashima, the equerry Pavel Alexandrov. As mentioned above, the synthetic actor was visualized by the director only in prospect. A synthetic performance was formed of different genre episodes, as of bricks.

The task set by the director required a well thought-out compositional linking of such 'bricks': improvisation play of comedians and the gags of their squabble

dialogues; a pantomime which, like that in the circus, would not shy at playful repartees and boxes on the ear, at comic yells, eccentric entrances with recommendation couplets, exaggerated emotional jumps and curvetts, etc. All of this conglomeration of vivid expressiveness required a rational combination, efficient consideration and a proper stylistic balance.

Radlov's recent disciple in the Kurmascep, Konstantin Derzhavin, who was now interested in the *Popular Comedy*, reflected on these problems theoretically. He wrote in the newspaper of the Petrograd Teo: 'By introducing circus actors into the theatre the director sets himself serious tasks... The essence of Radlov's productions is his wish to create an integral performance on the shoulders of circus actors'.<sup>12</sup> To achieve this aim, the expressive capacities of variety and circus arts were immersed, as it were, into the nutrient medium of theatricality, prepared with consideration to the well-known script patterns of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. The tricks of wandering Italian comedians gave full range to scenic improvisation which, in turn, could serve as the starting point for directional research. Then the situations of detective plots and the techniques of cinematographic scripts were made use of. All of this enhanced the effect of the art of comedy.

Radlov's unsophisticated circus comedies were a success with the public. The first one was *A Dead Man's Bride, or A Surgeon's Match-Making*. It had no canonic text, and its distant precursor was 'the night scheme' of the Italian masque comedy. Radlov somewhat modernized both situations and masks, as well as the performer techniques. It made Boris Romashov say that 'the circus-like buffoonery comedy *A Dead Man's Bride* staged by Radlov exceeds the limits of circus action and develops the script by means of numerous, purely theatrical tricks'.<sup>13</sup> This implies at least two logical deductions: first, that both circus and comedy principles co-existed on a par within the framework of the performance, permitting admittance both of the 'circusation' of the theatre and the theatricality of the circus; second, that the art of the performers was neither to aid that of the circus actors nor to serve as connective tissue (though no organism can exist without the latter): it was, so to say, the backbone of comedy action and saturated it.

In the performance, two small cottages were placed in stage corners: one belonging to Doctor Bolvanus (derivative from the Russian noun 'bolvan', block-head) and the other to his rival, a sailor. These toy-like houses 'in the style of Russian cheap popular print but with a touch of futurism',<sup>14</sup> stood opposite each other like two frontier posts. The production, like many others in Radlov's theatre, had been designed by Valentina Khodasevich. Red cloth panels in the background, when parting, revealed part of a two-storey palazzo, where a grotesque banker Morgan dwelt. This circus clown (Pavel Alexandrov), introducing himself to the audience, reported rather than sang his entrance couplets, telling them of his wealth, his slaves the workers, his factories which were as dear to his heart as his young daughter Elizaveta. To cite Vladimir Solovyov, 'the alternation of traditional theatrical personages and today's heroes had given the whole performance a character of an exaggerated parody and had made it easier for the director to work at creating the improvisation text. The director used

successfully some of the items of the circus actors, who resembled the *lazzi* of the old Italian comedy'.<sup>15</sup> This was 'if you like, a *political satire*', Evgeni Kuznetsov noted emphatically.

The cheerful young Elizaveta was wooed by the loathsome miser Bolvanus (Gibshman). The girl objected to marrying him: she had taken a liking to the sailor. The resourceful sailor resorted to cunning. Taking advantage of the fact that Doctor Bolvanus was in need of a corpse for his anatomical experiments, he persuaded his servant to give him out for a corpse. In the dark of night four carriers, who were played by jugglers, with the doctor's servant at the head (enacted by a clown), brought the sailor (clown Delvari) in. In the flickering torch-light the cowardly surgeon tried to start dissecting, but the sailor and the carriers made fool of him and scared him out of his wits, so that in comic panic he took them for ghosts. 'The terrorizing of the doctor at night is excellent', Kuznetsov wrote in the above-mentioned article. 'The spectator *is convinced* that the doctor is *really terrorized* by this devil's Sabbath. Burning torches are flying about, surgical knives are whining as they cut through the air, surgical instruments are whirling over the doctor's head'. If the synthesis which Radlov strove to achieve was at all attainable, it was just in this performance that he was nearest to the solution of the problem. The circus and variety items incorporated themselves in the action and became action as such. Among the participants of the scuffle-play, for example, the bride's grandmother appeared: she vainly tried to defend her granddaughter from the enamoured corpse. The line of the granny's scenic behaviour was crossed by a succession of eccentric falls – 'cascades', which was finally stopped by a leap from the upper storey window. All of that was done by Serge, an acknowledged master of such feats.

The comedy was crowned with a gay apotheosis. As soon as the sailor and the carriers had made Bolvanus sign a renunciation of his claim to marry the 'banker's gal', the wedding of Elizaveta and the sailor took place. 'In a moment a table appears; dishes, bottles, chairs are flying about. Everything is ready! Bolvanus attempts to poison the sailor but is caught red-handed. The concluding festive scene follows'.<sup>16</sup> As if anticipating the humorous orchestration of Vakhtangov's *Princess Turandot*, the participants of the celebration played mouth organs and danced to the tune. The curtain went slowly.

*A Dead Man's Bride* was a great success with the public, and Radlov started writing the second series without delay. On the 20th of April, the comedy *The Second Daughter of a Banker* was shown. As distinct from *A Dead Man's Bride*, this script was based on another play pattern of the popular Italian comedy, the so-called disguise pattern. The central scene was set in a circus menagerie. It was as if Radlov had glanced back at the 'rosy' days of the Russian farce, the days of *The Tamer of Beasts* at the theatre of Vera Linskaya-Nemetti, which he certainly could not have known personally. The circus was turned into a platform for a comedy play, the characters included a bear, a monkey, a giraffe, a tiger. Young Segnor Leonardo, in love with Elena, disguised himself under a bear's skin and 'enacted' an infuriated beast, while the young 'banker's gal', amused with the panic-stricken people around, tamed the bear in a jiffy and even ordered the beast

to kiss her.

The monkey was not meant to be a person in disguise but a natural one, so to say. This popular personage of many farces was played by Serge. In a way, the actor developed the leading part he had played in the preceding circus comedy, *Monkey the Informer*, staged by Radlov at an intervening period between the comedies about two 'banker's gals', Elizaveta and Elena. In the *Monkey the Informer* the comic popular play unfolded, interspersed with topical agitation. The monkey part was a silent one, all the speaking was done by the monkey's master: the monkey Jimmy answered his questions with eloquent gestures and grimaces. And the master readily demonstrated the keen wit of his charge to the honourable public:

'Now, show how the whites advanced towards Petrograd'.  
Jimmy, bow-legged, marched with an air of importance.  
'And how did they retreat?'

Jimmy fled, covering his behind with his hands to protect it from imagined blows. The spectators accompanied his flight with outbursts of laughter.

The motifs of political satire were incorporated into mischievous playing. 'Here are scenes truly and psychologically revolutionary, sparkling with satirical humour!' Kuznetsov exclaimed.<sup>17</sup> The laughter was unanimous, both onstage and in the auditorium, and both laughing parties treated each other without superfluous ceremony, as it is usual among friends.

Just like the falling and jumping grandmother, the monkey Jimmy appeared onstage every moment, rushing and jumping about. The concluding scene – the pursuit of the monkey – was thrilling: Serge himself recollected 'climbing up the metallic girders of the Iron Hall to the ceiling, to the very centre of the auditorium, and, having caught hold there with one hand, scratching himself with the other, and hanging there, etc., which evoked continuous applause'.<sup>18</sup> The actor-acrobat, brave and dexterous, was soaring in the skies, the spectators were constantly turning their heads and joyfully clapping their hands.

In his next production, the comedy *The Sultan and the Devil*, Radlov renovated an old circus pantomime *The Green Devil*. The events developed in the exotic Sultania, unfolding in items almost independent of the main subject. One of the items was the entrance of the sad prince, Takashima the Japanese: according to the show or circus custom, the personage bore the name of the performer, who showed brilliant skill as juggler. The plot was supported by clowns and eccentrics. The shopman Egorka (played by Delvari) entered Sultania via the pit, 'riding' a stick – a toy horse, which he had gnawed round up to its head on the way: it was quite to the taste of the hungry Petrograd citizens. In Bengali light flashes glimpses were caught of the devil, green all over, in different corners of the stage simultaneously. This pantomimic part was played by Serge and Taurek, two aerial acrobats and inseparable partners, costumed and made-up identically. In conclusion of the first act, the devil poured green powder from the balcony on the actors onstage, making them escape to the auditorium. The stage was deserted, and the devil, gloating and grinning, showed the audience a placard which read:

'Interval'. This circus device was quite in place there.

Radlov's circus comedies were intelligible to everybody. Topical jokes and charges of political satire got a ready response from the audience treated as partner. These properties of theatrical play stood the test during the May-Day holiday of 1920. Two acting teams travelled about the worker suburbs of Petrograd, on the open tram platforms decorated with placards, verdure and electric bulbs. Mounted heralds announced their approach with fanfare calls. Some of the items were specially devoted to the May-Day holiday. All of this evoked a most lively response from the excited crowd of spectators. The theatre of popular comedy proved to be intelligible and lasting. It did not lay claim to longevity.

## An Encounter with M. Gorky and the Crisis of the Agitational Satire

On the 16th of July, 1920, *The Popular Comedy* opened the pantomime by Lev Lisenko's *The Soviet Chest*, with satirical masks and brief repartees, on the topics of the international situation; this was followed by a political satire of M. Gorky, *The Hardworking Slovotekov*. Gorky had offered it to Radlov as a script for actors' free improvisation, just as in the pre-October days he had sent some scenic sketches to the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre. Thus Radlov obtained a play on contemporary material which his theatre needed.

Slovotekov, a business manager, something like a house steward, expatiated upon collegiate management and social labour but would not lift a finger himself to do what was his duties. The satire fished out some characteristic features of real life. A yelling crowd of applicants rushed into Slovotekov's office, but he struck them dumb by his speech, juggling, as it were, with round, high-flown words, such as 'organization', 'collegiate' and the like.

Proceeding from the script clues, Radlov enriched the scenic expressiveness of the episodes. Slovotekov (Delvari) uttered his speech in the clown's 'white' voice, accenting it with screams and sudden senseless faltering, and thinking his talk logical and irresistible. During this outburst of eloquence a tenant from the upper floor (Gibshman) ran in. He looked wretched, covered all over with soap-suds: a pipe had burst and his flat was flooded with water. Slovotekov tried to reason with the irresponsible, narrow-minded fellow who had interrupted him so inopportunistically. But just at that moment a large piece of plaster broke loose from the ceiling and fell on Slovotekov's head: the elements showing their indifference to the oratory were doing their antisocial work. With a clownish scream: 'I want consulting doctors and surgeons! I demand a collegiate treatment of my bump!' – Slovotekov left the stage.

Jeering at the talker, who was rightly served, the director showed that the inhabitants of Half-Sleepy Street, Lazy Street, Swampy Street and Crooked Street,

were quite worthy of their Slovotekov. The satire did not play down the impression it produced: the audience was to be given a shock too. The performance was shown only several times and was banned by a high order. Practically, the order was carried out by Gorky's wife, Maria Andreyeva, formerly an actress of the Moscow Art Theatre, but now commissar of theatres and spectacles of the Union of Communities in the North Region, the centre of which was Petrograd. Evgeni Zamyatin wrote about it, skeptically and with alarm, in his article entitled *I Am Afraid*, which caused a great sensation: 'How can we think of Aristophanes when even the most innocent *Hardworking Slovotekov* by Gorky is banned from the repertoire lest it should tempt that silly little chap, the Russian demos!'<sup>19</sup>

Radlov drew a lesson from his bold attempt at responding to contemporary life's realities. True, he did not give up his idea of staging Aristophanes, either at that time or later. However, from that time on, the topical satire lost its status of priority in the *Popular Comedy* Theatre; little by little, verbal improvisation gave way to pure pantomime, which had not been practiced there before. It was like re-reading a page in the history of cheap Paris theatres, when one day they held their sharp tongues and passed over to silent pantomime. It was not accidental that the repertoire of the theatre in Petrograd Side should have included some pantomimes by Deburau.

That summer the *Popular Comedy* once more – and for the last time – staged an agit-satire. It did not have direct reference to the present-day reality: the contemporary life was only the background against which the hideous shadows and grimacing masks of the dying past were represented. The script for actor improvisation in the three acts of the play *The Last Bourgeois, or A Museum of the Old Order* was offered by Konstantin Miklashevsky. A highly educated actor, director and writer, he had finished the Imperial Drama Classes in St. Petersburg and joined the company of the *Ancient Theatre*. Being the author of a fundamental work on the Italian commedia dell'arte, and a contributor to Meyerhold's magazine *The Love for Three Oranges*, he also tried himself as dramatist. After the Revolution his comedy *Four Lady-Killers* was staged by Konstantin Mardzhanov in Kiev and by Radlov in the Petrograd theatre, the *Studio*. Miklashevsky watched the experiments of the *Popular Comedy* with great interest and wrote quite a number of reviews on its productions in the theatrical press. Now he approached this theatre in good earnest.

In the improvisation play the ghosts of the past were haunting the bourgeois, scaring him to death. (He was played, by turns, by Konstantin Gibshman and the author of the play.) The audience understood perfectly well that there were no 'ghosts', and the masks of a former policeman and now burglar, profiteer, drunkard, etc. disguised four footmen (played by Delvari, Elagin, Kozyukov, and Serge), who had conspired against the poor bourgeois in order to frighten, deceive and rob him. The scene 'The Bourgeois's Nightmare' with their inventive participation was the culmination point of this ill-intended blackmail. However, many other episodes in which the bourgeois was involved against his will also resembled a nightmare and filled him with terror, the more so that they occurred when he was awake. The methods of the comedy of masques turned into a

grotesque reflection of contemporary collisions.

Vladimir Solovyov, another connoisseur of *commedia dell'arte*, who had worked much with Meyerhold and with Radlov, expressed his doubts as to the attempt to modernize the traditional techniques of the comic art. He considered that 'topicality as such lowered the purely theatrical value of the main comic situation (the scene where the bourgeois hires a footman) and imparted to the whole of the first act the character of a "joke-comedy"'. Such a defense of pure theatricality was undertaken perhaps for the first time in evaluating the work of the *Popular Comedy*, but it was itself no less debatable, for creation of topical agit-prop theatre was just the main care of the founder and director of the *Popular Comedy*! At the same time, Solovyov's opinion is especially valuable because of its outspokenness.

This review is also important because it points out some vivid details of the performance. Considering the second act, and particularly its central scene 'The Bourgeois's Nightmare' as the best in Miklashevsky's three-act performance, Solovyov admitted it to be good from the very beginning, – 'where the scenic motif of disguise is introduced, and when the footmen, under the guise of different museum rarities of the old order, get into the bourgeois's apartment with the intention of robbing it; certain directorial details are curious – for example, the appearance of a robber with a pick in one hand and a revolver in the other. Especially acute and close to the true theatrical grotesque is the central scene of the play, "The Bourgeois's Nightmare". Here the director has succeeded in conveying a peculiar, mysterious fascination of imperishable theatrical characters. Very amusing and curious are the prop masks made by E. P. Yakunina for this scene'.<sup>20</sup> Among the cast, Solovyov singled out, besides Gibshman and Delvari, also Boris Annenkov in the part of the housebreaker, as a specimen of comic horror in grotesque acting.

On the whole, this performance failed to give a reliable support to the genre of topical agit-comedy: the playwright and the director cared too much for traditionalism. In a certain degree, the performance itself appeared to be a museum of old theatricality. It was soon off the repertoire, although for reasons quite different from those which had led to banning the sharp-teethed satire on Slovotekov and the Slovotekov phenomenon. With *The Last Bourgeois*, the trials of the *Popular Comedy* in using contemporary Soviet subject-matter came to naught.

Then Radlov tried to transfer the arsenal of acquired experience to a conditionally contemplated outlandish ground, to apply the methods of agit-comedy to a fable of adventure, with a happy end.

## Tests for Entertaining Action

In August, 1920, Radlov presented his first attempt of such kind, – the play

*An Adopted Child*. The events unfolding in it were of a definite class character, on the one hand, and permitted free use of comic circus devices, on the other hand. The boy Serge, though being a foster-child of the capitalist Foorsi, hated capitalists, and all his thoughts and sympathies were with heroic revolutionaries whom he tried to imitate. Seeing this, a revolutionary Suares – a quick-change actor Ernani – entrusted Serge with keeping important documents, and the smart teenager, a fellow to the homeless boys in the auditorium, was rescuing his clandestine load from the policemen who pursued him. 'His open collar, loose pants and a short jacket with a belt are perfectly adapted to the actor playing this part, who has to perform a number of acrobatic feats and gymnastic items', wrote Konstantin Derzhavin,<sup>21</sup> who had a thorough knowledge of the job since he was himself being trained by Serge as an understudy.

The scene of pursuit was culmination of the action. Starting among the tables in a restaurant, it was transferred outside into the open space. Serge leapt over barrels and dived into them, climbed up a rope to the roof and jumped down, caught a rope suspended from a flying aeroplane and soared in the skies. Foolish 'cops' – the policemen (aerial acrobats Carloni and Taurek) slipped and fell into traps, plunged into barrels with water. Having escaped from the pursuit, Serge triumphantly handed the documents to Suares' associates, who appreciated his feat and became his comrades-in-arms.

The audience roared with enthusiasm. Contacts between the stage and the auditorium formed immediately. According to Evgeni Kuznetsov, 'every onstage movement is mirrored in the auditorium, which, in turn, reaching the stage, gives rise to a new momentum of action. The actors play, pushing off from the spectators, as it were, as jumpers push off from a spring-board; and again the spectators help the performers by their "intolerable" behaviour'.<sup>22</sup>

This production, like *A Dead Man's Bride*, called for a sequel, and on November 1, 1921, Radlov showed a performance after a play script written by him in collaboration with Serge. *A Friend (New Adventures of the Adopted Boy Serge)*: so read the playbill. The first act was set on board a ship, the second in a sailors' haunt in one of the ports of Turkey, the third in a prison from which the smart boy escaped, and the fourth in the streets of Paris. There were quite a few adventures, and the genre characteristics of a comedy with a murder competed with those of a detective melodrama within the framework of a captivating primitive. Everyone was free to take it as he or she liked, some with all their hearts and seriously, others as a rather rough parody of the heroics and the humour of foreign cinema films of that time. The swift tempo of circus work equaled the dynamics of cinematography. The beauty of cinematographic dynamics, no doubt, fascinated the director, too. It was, therefore, natural that in the spring of 1922, after the *Popular Comedy* had ceased to exist, there were press reports on the attempts of Radlov and a group of his adherents to get *An Adopted Child* filmed. Later, the echoes of *An Adopted Child* were still detectable in some of Radlov's directional work.

But findings of this kind were sometimes accompanied with certain losses. The main of these was the loss in the concrete content of the agit-performance. Superfluous theatricality overshadowed and suppressed the initial ideas; whereas at its

origin the theatre had claimed to be an agitational one.

*An Adopted Child* still celebrated a rather abstract and adventurous idea of 'revolutionary spirit' as a motivation for pursuit, adventures and tricks.

In Radlov's melodramatic comedy *Love and Gold*, theatricality almost completely overshadowed the agitational principles of the performance. Besides, the author-director was preoccupied with the problem of eccentricity on theatre stage. In an interview preceding the première he spoke about 'a great role which eccentricity may play in the theatre as an entirely new kind of the comic element which has up to now been accepted only in the variety show'. He understood this problem as 'a contrasting use of dramatic elements contradicting each other', as 'a peculiar comic rupture of the causal connections of phenomena'.<sup>23</sup>

In its essence, eccentricity was a pseudonym for entertainment intensified by spectacular means. That was the main point with which the director was now concerned.

Already *An Adopted Child* had been a serious attempt at the detective genre. Kuznetsov wrote about this 'comedy of Sergei Radlov which proved a champion in the field of entertainment', and about the spectators at the première, who sat 'all eyes, entranced by the entertaining plot, primitive as it was'.<sup>24</sup> Entertainment and nothing but entertainment! It prevailed over everything else in the performance. In *Love and Gold* it was twice or three times as forceful.

It does not mean that the director's quest lost its creative character. The paradoxical unity of comedy and melodrama in which Radlov hoped to find the basis of eccentric scenic action was being worked out as a daring artistic experiment. Victor Shklovsky considered that 'in the latest production of the *Popular Comedy* an interchange of comic and tragic moments is of interest': thus the tricks of eccentric clowns intrude into the situations of the melodrama, as if acting wilfully but in fact following a well thought-out directional design. The melodrama itself is 'of a cheap-novel type, with a swift succession of scenes, with catastrophic lovers', and it consists 'of a number of adventure episodes'.<sup>25</sup> Shklovsky investigated the techniques, the mechanisms, of entertainment creation. He was less interested in the production from the standpoint of its contents. At the same time his general judgment was applicable to the concrete fabular content of scenic forms. The subject-matter of the action receded into the background before the invincible design.

After the première of *Love and Gold* this was admitted as a self-evident fact. Lev Nikulin, who spoke of the *Popular Comedy* with sympathy and had placed it at the top of the list of Petrograd 'left-wing' theatres, found in it a 'whole-hearted, interesting and pointed approach to theatrical art. There are curious theatrical designs, and a combination of circus designs with theatrical ones sometimes results in an entertaining spectacle which contains not a grain of sugary aestheticism'. However, the latest production of the theatre made him feel embarrassed. The play *Love and Gold* did not seem to him compulsory for the repertoire of a revolutionary agit-theatre: 'the play *Love and Gold*, which employs purely cinematographic effects captivating the audience, the intensification of action, effective stunts performed by circus actors. All of this is entertaining enough but

you will never be able to see the theatre's ideas, its thoughts and the justification of its existence'.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, adventure spectacles such as *An Adopted Child, A Friend, Love and Gold*, were becoming a specific mark of the *Popular Comedy*. The press noted that the spectator of the *Popular Comedy* Theatre seemed to prefer 'sharp and entertaining modern plays with an intricate plot, swift cinematographic tempo of unfolding action, etc., which is quite characteristic of a number of performances shown by this theatre. Thus, the play of this type, *Love and Gold*, although being on for the second season, has attracted much more spectators than the new production of Molière's *Pourceaugnac*, whose second performance was attended only by one eighth of the expected audience'.<sup>27</sup> The theatre was both criticized by some and approved of by others for the entertaining character of its productions. The label stuck fast and could not be removed. In fact, the theatre showed a bias in favour of the 'red Tarzan' type. The Russian translations of Burroughs' stories began to appear as early as 1922. If Burroughs had not written his *Tarzan*, he would have been invented by Radlov. The red *Tarzan*, the *Little Red Devils* were signs of the times. Such were also the adventure spectacles of the *Popular Comedy*.

In 1921, Radlov could not help seeing that the position of the theatre founded by him was becoming precarious. He did all he could to save it. He hoped that the situation might improve if Miklashevsky and Solovyov, two directors whose ideas were congenial to his, joined the *Popular Comedy*. However, it was clear that improvised dialogue and the variety and circus methods of interpreting action attracted Radlov in a much greater degree than they did his fellow-masters. Circus art as a component of scenic action had a particular fascination for him, and he tried to preserve it at any cost. For the sake of it he was ready to compromise, to make concessions even at the expense of the contents. But engraving circus ways upon the evergreen tree of the classical comedy proved to be a still greater risk. They worked parallel to each other and the result was a number of performances in the spirit of the bygone 'pre-bourgeois epochs'. Attempts at combining the agitational theatre with the traditionalism of the beginning of the century, in their turn, testified to the precariousness of the director's positions.

## The Influence of the Circus on the Heritage

Radlov's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Shakespeare was also a comedy combined with the circus. Circus actors were given the parts of servants, which made it possible to regulate their stage tasks. The action went on without interruption, on two scenic platforms, the upper and the lower one; it was transferred to the proscenium and also into the auditorium in front of the first row of the spectators. There, in sight of the audience, the tragicomic character, the jealous man Ford (Vladimir Chernyavsky) changed his clothes, while upstage the

servants (the acrobats) looked for him hurriedly, leapt from one platform to the other in pursuit of Falstaff, and scurried about the proscenium, performing their tricks in a brisk tempo. Georgi Guriev, a young director and formerly a student at the Kurmascep, wrote: 'At last we saw a truly Shakespearean performance, brilliant, vivid and impetuous, free from the heavy artillery of the contemporary theatre'.<sup>28</sup> To make both the comic situation and the action dynamic in any performance had always been alpha and omega with Radlov's Theatre, whatever might be its ways of seeking and striving for a true popular comedy.

In fact, the performance was really Shakespearean. Radlov had never been so presumptuous as to think about 'overcoming' Shakespeare. With a certain apprehension understandable in a director in those days of ideological pressure, he admitted that his production was 'likely to be taken by some as an insufficiently "left" one'. He added that to mangle 'Shakespeare who had done us no harm never entered our plans. We treated Shakespeare according to the nature of the material'.<sup>29</sup>

Such a reverent attitude to Shakespeare, so unexpected at the time, made doubtful the director's 'leftism' paraded in many of his concurrent productions. As if alluding to this, Shklovsky wrote: 'Shakespeare in the Iron Hall was staged infinitely more correctly and with greater talent than the funereal performances of Shakespeare in some theatres under a feathered canopy. (It was a hint at the Bolshoi Drama Theatre.) But is it worth staging Shakespeare in such a place?'

In that performance the director showed himself an erudite, full of respect for the classics in general and for Shakespeare in particular. Radlov's Shakespearean productions were yet to come: true, they included only the tragedies, for except *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, no other comedies were ever staged by him afterwards.

In the short-lived biography of the *Popular Comedy* this performance remained but an episode, though an outstanding one. Yet it was a starting point for Radlov. As the store of his Shakespearean performances grew, however, Radlov regarded his first attempt with ever growing skepticism. Concluding his work at the production of *King Lear* in the State Jewish Theatre, he wrote: 'It is now perfectly clear to me how far I was then from any adequate scenic rendering of Shakespeare. I was fascinated by a purely accidental, though really amazing similarity between the architecture of the theatre where I planned that production (it was the State Theatre of Popular Comedy directed by me, located in the Iron Hall of the Leningrad Narodny Dom) and the old architecture of the English theatre of Shakespeare's time. Thinking back to what I was doing, I am ready to admit that some of the mise-en-scènes in certain parts of the stage were very close to the directorial "geography" of an Elizabethan performance, – but how little it had in common with the very essence of the problems connected with Shakespeare's drama'.<sup>30</sup>

After the première of *Othello* in the Maly Theatre, Radlov's self-appraisal was even more severe. 'It's very possible that, from the standpoint of restoration, I guessed much that was correct and probable, yet the performance itself, except for some happily arranged mise-en-scènes, now seems to me rather dry and

anaemic. And I am ready to sympathize with some boys who, surrounding me in the auditorium, asked me not without anguish: "Comrade author, when will *The Sultan and the Devil* be on?" – yearning for the half-circus, half-fairy script I had written'.<sup>31</sup>

But the times of such scripts were already drawing to their end. Turning from them now to a detective comedy with a slight touch of social colouring, now to the restored classical drama, Radlov was gradually moving away from his early tests on creating an agitational theatre.

Thus, although *The Merry Wives of Windsor* had not changed the aspect of the *Popular Comedy*, this performance nevertheless proclaimed an important new tendency. Moreover, after the appearance of Miklashevsky and Solovyov, who were then devoted to the ideas of traditionalism, the comedy of 'pre-bourgeois epochs' was pressing the modern agitational theatre.

At first, the masks of commedia dell'arte were deliberately altered, acquiring certain class characteristics. In *A Dead Man's Bride* the masks' genealogy could only be guessed at: the miser Pantalone turned out a banker; Aurelia became 'the banker's gal' Elizaveta; the leading comic lover Silvio, a smart and resourceful sailor.

However, even unsophisticated theatre-goers could recognize their prototypes. As early as December 1919, before the *Popular Comedy* was opened, Solovyov's pantomime *An Interrupted Rendezvous* was shown on the Iron Hall stage. It followed the tradition of commedia dell'arte, and its personages were Pantalone, Silvio and Aurelia, who looked and behaved according to their nature. And now, too, in Solovyov's pantomime *The Pranks of Smeraldina*, staged after an Italian script of 1730s, *Marquiz the Majestic Gascon*, the same and other similar masks were traditional and acted as such, while all the comic stuff was mainly concentrated in the servants' scenes. Harlequin (Delvari) and Brighella (Kozyukov) provoked by Smeraldina (Lubov' Basargina) were frisking in an amusing small scene introduced in the script. Other servants disguised themselves as devils and, popping out of a trap, teased the foolish old Pantalone. In the context of the performance such episodes did not always seem organic: more often they were interesting in themselves.

Friends of the *Popular Comedy* still supported their theatre, though it was sometimes of little effect. With the change in the repertoire the audience was also changing. Besides, the company was joined by some new actors and actresses.

On 25 December, 1920, Alexander Blok saw his wife (known by her scenic pseudonym, Lubov' Basargina) in the part of Smeraldina, and he mentioned it in his notebook: 'Luba's performance. Luba played well'.<sup>32</sup> In a letter written a fortnight later (January, 8) to Nadezhda Nolle-Kogan, wife to historian of literature Piotr Kogan and Blok's acquaintance in Moscow, he wrote that Lubov' Blok was 'quite carried away with her work at the *Popular Comedy* Theatre, where she now plays much and successfully'.<sup>33</sup> For all that, it would hardly be correct to consider Basargina, an actress of an average scenic talent, as the type of those synthetic performers which the *Popular Comedy* needed. In this connection, a friendly-minded and tactful critic wrote as follows: 'All that could be done by

mastery she did do, her techniques were excellent, yet the part of Smeraldina is not within her artistic abilities, and so she has played only Smeraldina – and has done it perfectly – but she has failed to represent the roguish Smeraldina'.<sup>34</sup> There was not a hint at synthetic possibilities of the actress in the critic's appraisal of her performance.

*The Pranks of Smeraldina* was the debut of Elizaveta Yakunina, a designer trained at the Kurmascep. Later she mounted some more performances, *La Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon* among them. This comedy of Eugène Labiche was staged by Radlov and his disciple, Guriev, who had reduced its four acts to one and turned the play into a vaudeville. Molière was treated with greater respect: Solovyov, who directed his comedy *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, preserved its three-act structure. As for *La Jalousie du Barbouillé*, the play had been meant as a one-actor, judging by Molière's stage directions. In Molière's repertoire new actresses played next to Gibshman and Miklashevsky. They were Elizaveta Golovinskaya, who had come from the Peredvizhnoy (Touring) Theatre of Pavel Gaideburov, and Radlov's sister Natalia Kazanskaya. Among the newcomers was also the eccentric actor Evgeni Kumeiko and some others. At the same time, the functions of the circus comedy and of its performers were diminishing. The *Popular Comedy* was losing its status of a modern agitational theatre.

Molière's *La Jalousie du Barbouillé*, shown in the autumn of 1921, was conventional throughout. What it meant practically was made clear from comparing it to a version of the same play written at about the end of the decade by Vladimir Mass and staged by Nikolai Foregger in the Revue Theatre in the Moscow House of the Press. This version was entitled *Fuile Pains*. It consisted of two acts, 'with acting during intermissions, and quite a number of topical interludes in a masque fashion'.<sup>35</sup> The old theatrical masks were modernized, the text was interspersed with deviations on the topics of the day, and some numbers were inserted. For example, Molière's doctor turned out to be a dogmatic prig, a certain 'ideological' woman-singer sang a comic song about the pernicious plays of Mikhail Bulgakov, etc. In a kaleidoscope of masks appeared Rina Zelenaya, Boris Tenin and other actors. According to a reviewer, the theatre 'approached the present-day reality through the works of Molière. In the farces written by the great French comedian they found the personages which they thought it possible to bring back to life as social characters of our times. The learned pedants of "Molière's age" turned into "critics" and pseudomarxists'.<sup>36</sup> The Molière farce was filled with the flesh and spirit of modern realia and became a kind of canvas for a revue-performance.

Once, at the dawn of the *Popular Comedy*, Radlov and his improvising performers interpreted the scripts and plays of their repertoire in a similar way. Now this was gone. The satirical theme of *The Hardworking Slovotekov* was cut off. Spectators could find nothing of contemporary spirit in the Molière productions of the *Popular Comedy* Theatre. The restoration tendencies of directorial work hindered the immediate contacts between performers and spectators. The audience was puzzled, felt bored, lost interest in the theatre.

The investigator of the Russian satirical theatre, Elizaveta Uvarova, pointed out a certain similarity in the orientation of different theatres. Referring to the charac-

ter of Molière's *Doctor* as he was represented in the Revue Theatre, she says: 'The modernized personage of Molière's play was a certain variant of Gorky's *The Hardworking Slovotekov*'.<sup>37</sup> Since Gorky's 'anti-Soviet' script had not been published and the authors of the review could know of it only by hearsay, the resemblance noted by E. Uvarova shows that sharp satire was characteristic of the Moscow theatre as well.

However, for the *Popular Comedy* at the time it produced *La Jalousie du Barbouillé*, topical satire had already lost its sharp character and was retreating into the past. Adrian Piotrovsky spoke about it with sincere regret. To use his words, 'the Molière performance appeared to be cumbersome and academically dull in spite of the ingenious splendour of costumes. Labiche's *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon* produced a pitiful and painful impression, so foreign was the exclusively verbal Gallic humour of this – maybe, really gay – vaudeville to the broad manner of the theatre. It was pitiful and painful to see the limitless deftness of the acrobat Serge squeezed into the mannerism of a Parisian flaneur, while the pleasant intimacy of Labiche's play seemed kind of frozen on the open boards...'

Speaking about the vicissitudes suffered by the theatre which was departing from its purpose, the critic took to heart its present cares. 'What is it? Is it the theatre's ideology where the defect lies? Or is its formula of popular art only a new expression of old aestheticism with its three sores: stylization, pursuit of prettyism, and eclecticism? Doubting was especially bitter because our most hopeful and seemingly well-grounded expectations were connected with the *Popular Comedy* Theatre during a year-and-a-half period of its life'.

However, Piotrovsky was somewhat relieved when he saw a new première of the theatre, Radlov's production of Calderon's play *El Alcalde de Zalamea*. As he said, the performance was 'as clear as to be almost dry, and as simple as to be almost severe. No stylization whatever!' Despite its severity and even thanks to it, the performance seemed 'a really festive occasion'.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, both Radlov and the performers were a great success. Golovinskaya was very good in the part of the dishonoured Isabella. She remained with Radlov for many years, both in the different studio works and in the workshop at the Institute for Stage Arts, where *El Alcalde de Zalamea* was staged anew in 1923, but this time by the students.

However, Piotrovsky was wrong in his prognosis: it proved too optimistic. The audience of the *Popular Comedy* did not share the critic's opinion of the performance, it could not win them back to the theatre to which they were growing indifferent. The production of Aristophanes' comedy *The Acharnians*, planned by Radlov and promised by the press, was not to be brought about...

The performances which did take place were Gogol's *Gamblers* mounted by Miklashevsky, who also played the part of Ikharev; Karatygin's vaudevilles *The Upset Tuner* and *Three Wives on Hire*; and the pantomimes by Deburau *The Bear and the Sentinel* and *Arlechino-Skeleton*, which were staged by Miklashevsky: in the latter he played the leading role. None of these productions, however, could relieve the general situation of embarrassment. They demonstrated a diversity of varied and sometimes refined tests of traditionalism, but they bore no relation to the agitational comedy.