

FILE ON

GORKY



COMPILED BY
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B L O O M S B U R Y

WRITER-FILES

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Compiled by Cynthia Marsh

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Abbreviations

Books

PSS M. Gor'kii, *Pol'noe sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow, 1968-76. [*Complete Collected Works*, of which Volume VII (Moscow, 1970) and Volume XIII (Moscow, 1972) are the main volumes cited. Location and date of publication given on first citation only.]

SS M. Gor'kii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow, 1949-66. [*Collected Works*.]

Sob. soch. *Sobranie sochinenii* [*Collected Works*, by other writers].

Theatres

MAT Moscow Art Theatre.

BDT Bol'shoi dramaticheskii teatr [Large Dramatic Theatre], Leningrad.

MGSPS Moskovskii gorodskoi sovet professional'nykh soiuзов [Theatre of the Moscow Soviet of Trade Unions, 1930-38. Before 1938 known as MGSPS, after 1938 as Theatre of the Moscow Soviet].

RSC Royal Shakespeare Company.

The theatre is, by its nature, an ephemeral art: yet it is a daunting task to track down the newspaper reviews, or contemporary statements from the writer or his director, which are often all that remain to help us recreate some sense of what a particular production was like. This series is therefore intended to make readily available a selection of the comments that the critics made about the plays of leading modern dramatists at the time of their production — and to trace, too, the course of each writer's own views about his work and his world.

In addition to combining a uniquely convenient source of such elusive *documentation*, the 'Writer-Files' series also assembles the *information* necessary for readers to pursue further their interest in a particular writer or work. Variations in quantity between one writer's output and another's, differences in temperament which make some readier than others to talk about their work, and the variety of critical response, all mean that the presentation and balance of material shifts between one volume and another: but we have tried to arrive at a format for the series which will nevertheless enable users of one volume readily to find their way around any other.

Section 1, 'A Brief Chronology', provides a quick speculative overview of each playwright's life and career. *Section 2* deals with the plays themselves, arranged chronologically in the order of their composition: information on first performances, major revivals, and publication is followed by a brief synopsis (for quick reference set in slightly larger, italic type), then by a representative selection of the critical response, and of the dramatist's own comments on the play and its theme.

Section 3 offers concise guidance to each writer's work in non-dramatic forms, while *Section 4*, 'The Writer on His Work', brings together comments from the playwright himself on more general matters of construction, opinion, and artistic development. Finally, *Section 5* provides a bibliographical guide to other primary and secondary sources of further reading, among which full details will be found of works cited elsewhere under short titles, and of collected editions of the plays — but not of individual titles, particulars of which will be found with the other factual data in *Section 2*.

The 'Writer-Files' hope by striking this kind of balance between information and a wide range of opinion to offer 'companions' to the study of major playwrights in the modern repertoire — not in that dangerous pre-digested fashion which

can too readily quench the desire to read the plays themselves, nor so prescriptively as to allow any single line of approach to predominate, but rather to encourage readers to form their own judgements of the plays in a wide-ranging context.

Maxim Gorky's place in the Russian as distinct from the former Soviet theatre is in process of painful reassessment. To have been neglected as old-fashioned in the creative and relatively open artistic environment of the 1920s, and then held up as a model of socialist realism amidst the oppression of the 1930s, is scarcely a recommendation in the present political climate. And yet Gorky wrote largely, almost obsessively, of those most capitalist of institutions, the family and the small business – a preoccupation underlined by the inclusiveness of this *Writer-File*, as earlier by the succession of RSC productions of the lesser-known plays, which revealed *The Lower Depths* to have been, if still his masterpiece, uncharacteristic in its chosen milieu.

Thus, although the bourgeois focus of Gorky's plays was declared by one respected Soviet critic (as here recorded on page 55) to have been 'a reflection of class conflicts', those conflicts today seem as rooted in the perceptions of Freud as of Marx. As one of his leading translators into English, Jeremy Brooks, points out on page 32, this helps to account for the favourable response towards the RSC productions of their British audiences, who are more comfortably attuned than their European neighbours to appreciating political conflict within the familial microcosm than as a matter of 'whether you live or die tomorrow'.

Increasingly, the strong man in Gorky's various family groups turns out to be a woman – sometimes overweening in an almost Strindbergian fashion, but more often with a force of will that is outwardly-directed in its fierce protection of the security of the home, and of its economic underpinning. Then again, in *The Old Man* especially, there are qualities (as here discussed on page 78) that are recognisably Ibsenesque – notably Gorky's sense of the determining effects of past actions upon present behaviour, and his increasing inclination to probe the individual rather than the collective psyche.

Such associations are helpful in so far as they direct our thinking outwards from the more commonplace comparisons with Chekhov – whose families seem almost English in their allusive reticence besides the Slavic implisiveness of Gorky's. Yet there is much, too, in his later characters – those small businessmen eternally unfulfilled or, like Egor Bulychev, clinging to the flimsiest hopes of redemption – that relates them to the compulsive dreamers of *The Lower Depths*. No more can we finally assert of the foxy merchant Bulychev than of the vagrant Luka whether he is life-affirming or life-denying in his dreams.

Simon Trussler

1868 16 March: Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov (Gorky's real name) born in Nizhnii Novgorod (known in this century variously as Nizhegorod and Gorky), the major town at the point where the Oka flows into the Volga. Father a boatyard carpenter.

1871 Father transferred as boatyard manager to Astrakhan, but shortly afterwards dies of cholera. Aleksei returns with mother to her parents, who own a small dye works. Graphic account of early years in first volume of his autobiography, *Childhood*.

1879 Mother dies of tuberculosis. Aleksei works in a shoe-shop as general dogsbody.

1880 Apprenticed to draftsman: treated badly, and runs away as cabin boy on Volga steamboat. Tries other professions, including icon painting, watchman at a building site, clerk. Spends spare time reading. Mixes with students, tramps, and prostitutes.

1884 Leaves for Kazan', possibly to study. Lives from hand to mouth, often taking odd jobs in docks. Mixes with students. Realizes he is unsuited to discipline of study.

1887 Working in a bakery. Feb.: death of his grandmother affects him deeply. Dec.: attempts suicide.

1888 Works among peasants at Krasnodivovo with a radical colleague. Disillusioned, wanders in the Volga region. Works for a time in Tsaritsyn (later to be known as Stalingrad and Volgograd) as a menial in railway administration. Spends free time reading. Interest in Tolstoyism. Begins to write.

1889 Makes way to Moscow to visit Tolstoy, but he is absent on pilgrimage. Returns to Nizhnii Novgorod and lives with radicals: under surveillance. Works in brewery, then for a lawyer. Contacts the writer V. G. Korolenko to show him his work: disillusioned by his comments.

1891 Sets off on journey working his way through Russia and Ukraine, mostly on foot.

1892 Encouraged to write again: 'Makar Chudra', a short

A Brief Chronology

story, published in Caucasus under the pseudonym of Maxim Gorky ('Bitter'). Returns to Nizhnii Novgorod. Works for lawyer again. Several short stories published

1895 Moves to Samara to work as newspaper columnist.

1896 Returns to Nizhnii Novgorod as editor. Marries E. P. Volzhina. Tuberculosis diagnosed.

1897 With help from a literary fund in Petersburg, Peshkovs leave for convalescence in Crimea. July: son Maxim born.

1898 May: arrested in Nizhnii Novgorod for previously associating with radicals. Placed under strict surveillance. First collection of short stories published in Petersburg: a sellout. Sends it to Chekhov as a token of his admiration.

1899 Publication of his first novel, *Foma Gordeev*. March: Gorky meets Chekhov in Yalta. Popularity enormous: Repin paints his portrait, and Gorky regarded as model for radical literature and politics.

1900 Speaks out against conscription of radical students. Meets Tolstoy.

1901 Joins demonstration in favour of students in Petersburg. Placed under house arrest. Radical novel *The Three of Them* published. May: daughter Ekaterina born. Nov.: allowed to go to Crimea for health. Demonstrations of support accompany him. *Philistines* in rehearsal at Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). Stays with Chekhov in Crimea for week. Visits Tolstoy.

1902 Election to Academy of Sciences cancelled following Tsar's objection. Chekhov and Korolenko resign. March: *Philistines* opens amid intense controversy while MAT on tour to Petersburg. Ordered to Arzamas. Completes *The Lower Depths*: opens in Dec., to loud acclaim.

1903 Joins Znanie publishing house. Widely popular for his work among radicals, liberals, and the reading public at large, but figure of suspicion elsewhere in establishment. Separates from wife.

1904 July: deeply affected by death of Chekhov. Nov.: premiere of *Summerfolk* at Kommissarzhevskaja's Theatre, Petersburg: denounced by the artistic elite as propaganda.

1905 Jan.: involved in events of Bloody Sunday: arrested and impris-

oned for his protest. Writes *Children of the Sun* in prison. International call for his release. Sent to Riga under police surveillance. Involved in Bolshevik press. Oct.: tempestuous premiere of *Children of the Sun* (MAT). Nov.: meets Lenin, newly returned from exile.

1906 Goes to America via France with M. Andreeva, partly to escape reaction in Russia and to win support for the Bolsheviks. Enjoys international acclaim, but scandal in America when discovered Andreeva and Gorky not married. Completes novel, *The Mother*, and play, *Enemies*. Aug.: daughter dies in Russia. Nov.: premiere of *Barbarians* in Riga.

1907 Feb: premiere of *Enemies*, Berlin. Takes refuge in Italy, residing finally in Capri. Stays until 1913. Stream of political and literary visitors in these years, including Lenin.

1908 *Confession* published: reflects interest in fusion of Christianity and Marxism (referred to as 'god-building'). June: premiere of *The Last Ones*, Tashkent.

1910 Details of the death of Tolstoy appal him. Begins publication of long novel *The Life of Matvei Kozhemiakin*. Oct.: premiere of *The Eccentrics* in Petersburg and of *The Reception* in Kiev.

1911 Feb.: premiere of *Vassa Zheleznova* (first version), Moscow.

1912 Begins work on *The Zykovs*

1913 First volume of autobiographical trilogy, *Childhood*, published. Begins work on *Counterfeit Coin*. Dec.: returns to Russia under amnesty.

1915 Sets up journal *Letopis'* (*The Chronicle*): does not always follow strict Bolshevik line, to Lenin's wrath. Completes *The Old Man*.

1916 Second volume of autobiography, *In the World*, published in *Letopis'*.

1917 Finds newspaper *Novaiazhizn* (*New Life*).

1918 July: premiere of *The Zykovs*, Petrograd. *New Life* closed down on Lenin's orders. Gorky accommodates himself to Bolshevik cause.

1919 Jan.: premiere of *The Old Man*, Moscow. Intercedes with Bolsheviks on behalf of intellectuals. Organizes committee to protect Russia's cultural heritage.

A Brief Chronology

- 1920** Separates from Andreeva in favour of M. Budberg. June: *Workaholic Slovotekov*, premiered in Petrograd, banned after four performances.
- 1921** Health undermined, leaves for sanatorium in Black Forest, and remains in Germany.
- 1923** Party to setting up journal *Beseda (Conversation)* in Berlin in an attempt to reconcile Soviets and emigrés. Publication of third volume of autobiography, *My Universities*.
- 1924** Returns to Italy. Debarred from Capri, stays in Sorrento.
- 1925** Publication of novel *The Artamanov Affair* in Berlin. Undertakes final novel *The Life of Klim Samgin* (unfinished at his death).
- 1926** Completes *Counterfeit Coin*.
- 1928** May: returns to Moscow for six months. Immense official and popular reception. Winters in Sorrento. Italian premiere of *Counterfeit Coin*, Rome and Naples.
- 1929** May, again returns to Moscow, including trip on Volga in itinerary. Oct.: returns to Sorrento in deteriorating health.
- 1930** Writes *Somov and the Others*.
- 1931** May: returns to Moscow. Highly decorated and honoured. Oct.: returns to Sorrento. Completes *Egor Bulychev and the Others*.
- 1932** May-Oct.: visit to Russia. Sept.: premiere of *Egor Bulychev and the Others*, Moscow, Leningrad. Completes *Dostigaev and the Others*.
- 1933** May: final departure from Italy for Russia. Leads life of prominent public figure, but also watched. Moscow house centre of intellectual life. Becomes spokesman for Soviet view on art and literature. Nov.: premiere of *Dostigaev and the Others*, Leningrad and Moscow.
- 1934** Feb: MAT premiere of *Egor Bulychev and the Others*. May: son Max dies. Aug.: chairman of first Congress of Soviet Writers.
- 1935** Undertakes triumphant tour on Volga. Health deteriorates. Winter in Crimea. Completes second version of *Vassa Zheleznova*.
- 1936** Returns to Moscow in May, and dies on 18 June.