

Maximilian Voloshin

Four Articles on the Theatre

On Theatre

"What's your impression of *Brand*?"

"Very poor. I consider the play itself weak. But you, naturally, like it?"

"More than just like it. I was stunned. And in several places tears overcame me. And now, because of your rejection of the play, I am nourishing a fierce hatred of you."

"That's to no purpose. I am right and can prove to you, logically and inescapably, that *Brand* was poorly produced.

"Our debate is not a fair one. A critical rejection is the greatest insult to delight. Analysis is naturally expressed in words, delight in action."

"Do you wish to remind me that Nikolai the Miracle-Worker fired by holy ecstasy, struck the skeptical Arius at the council of Nicaea."¹

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¹ What Voloshin had in mind is an episode from the life of Nikolai Mirlikijsky, who in debate at the council of Nicaea in 325 C. E. attacked the Arian heresy, which denied that Jesus was consubstantial with God the Father, and "inspired, like the prophet Elijah, with a desire for God, shamed the heretic not only in word but also in deed, having struck him on the face" (*Minei Chet'i na russkom jazyke. Zhitija svjatyx, izlozhennye po rukovodstvu Chet'ix-Minej sv. Dimitrija Rostovskogo*, Book 4 [Moscow, 1903], 188).

"That's really the only answer. In debates denial is always stronger than affirmation. This is a fundamental, eristic truth.²

When in a logical discussion delight meets up with logic, then catastrophe is the inevitable outcome. I completely understand Saint Nikolai and exonerate him."

"But you won't imitate him, will you? To deny that Ibsen's *Brand* is distorted is impossible. At least a third of the play was cut. Do you think that it is too long and tedious for a full and complete scenic adaptation? Why then put it on? There are many good plays by Ibsen . . . In the end, one could have made a shorter version that was less outrageous. The best scene—Brand's death by stoning—was thrown out. The especially significant symbolic moment, when he throws the keys of the church into the brook, was left out. Then I also insist that the setting is bad.

I can accept realism, but in that case I demand that realism be carried out to the end. They ought to force me to believe that the rocks are really rocks and not papier-mâché, and that those are really waves roaring on stage in the second act and not just two moving bands of coloured cardboard. If they had made it so that the waves were completely invisible, with their choppiness communicated only by the chaotic movement of the mast of a ship, then I would have had the illusion of choppiness. Finally, one can convey the movement of water cinematically. But no ... if the production is to be realistic, then it must consistently realistic to the end. All or nothing"

"All or nothing? Aha, you repeat the words of Brand. And I have caught you. The show produced a greater impression on you than you wish to show. Formally, you are right, but I don't like hearing in your words an echo of the usual Moscow attitude towards the Art Theatre. I am astounded by the deliberate fault-finding with trivia, with minor flaws, and the complete disregard of the Theatre's real merits and true achievements."

"We're tired of the Art Theatre. To see annually one and the same thing, the same illusionist methods, is annoying. Look at the Art Theatre's audience. Why do they come? When I am at the

² Eristic refers to the art of disputation.

opera, I see that the audience is enthralled. But here they come to judge and to look for errors. In Petersburg or Berlin the Art Theatre makes a greater impression."

"I don't take such an approach to the Art Theatre. I did not read Ibsen's *Brand* previously; the cuts and distortions of the original do not disturb me. Without any preconceptions I can give myself over to the dream that is unfolding on stage.

Brand stunned me and disturbed me in the same way when the inevitable appeals of Roland's horn aroused an echo from mountain caves. But this call came not from Brand's voice but from Ibsen himself. I heard the homily and the denunciation uttered by the many-voiced, loud cry of the organ. The people and mountains displayed themselves like monstrous metaphors of this homily. Brand himself was only one of the rhetorical figures in the flow of this inhuman pathos. I don't know if all the words written by Ibsen were repeated, but I did hear Ibsen's voice. Can you recall many theatrical shows whose elements would merge so thoroughly into a single organic whole that behind the voices of the actors could be heard the voice of the poet himself? I insist that in his *Brand* Ibsen spoke as much through the glaciers and avalanches of Norway as through Brand's monologues. In the sets of *Brand* there is no less lyricism than in the sermons. And in the Art Theatre's production one and the other elements of the play merged into one for me."

"You are satisfied with little."

"This means only that I was able to remain a spectator and evaded the danger of becoming a judge. Do you not sense that an analytical response contradicts the very basis of a perceptual response to art? Every work of art demands that you give yourself over to it, even if only for a moment, but completely, unthinkingly, and unreservedly. How can it bloom in your soul in any other way? You, the refined and demanding judges, deprive yourselves of the honey of the flowers, but it is accessible to each naïve soul. When I see people touched by tasteless verses, delighted by the sight of unsophisticated painting, stunned to the point of tears by bad melodrama, I do not despise but envy them. I envy the strength of their creative response. What is bad and

unfinished they transform and temper within themselves, finishing it and making it beautiful. The one who goes into ecstasy before an undoubtedly talentless work does not display thereby his tastelessness. His ecstasy is a sign that he is himself a creator and artist.

The moment of perception in the presence of a work of art is as holy as the moment of its creation. Perception is a sacrificial rite.

One can't be stunned without wholly giving up one's soul to the maelstrom of dramatic action. Theatre demands from the spectator the complete abandonment of his ego. The holy significance of theatre is that the action of what we contemplate takes us for several moments out of our personal shell and opens for us a different world.

Analysis and criticism do not allow the individual to give himself up. They lock the soul in impenetrable armour. But the tragic vision can arise only in the one who arrives with an open, receptive soul. He is the one to judge. First of all, one must recognize the truth that theatre is completed not on the stage but in the soul of each separate spectator. In addition to the responsibility of theatre there is still the responsibility of the spectator. For a play's failure the spectator may be as guilty as the author, the director, and the actors. How do you want to experience dramatic emotion when you insist that theatre does not generally affect your aesthetic impressionability?"

"Yes. In general, I don't react much to the impressions generated by the stage. But I explain this by the imperfection and the antiquatedness of the scenic methods. Without speaking of simplified and symbolist theatre, which, of course, could have made my soul quiver, I find that realistic theatre has far from exhausted all of its means."

"Of course... If only there would appear a director who combines in his own person the physicist and the artist ... Leonardo da Vinci."

"No. It's simply that all the means of the contemporary stage have not yet been exhausted. Why, for example, are we doomed to accept the existence of footlights and the wings?"

"How can you do away with them? An orchestra from ancient Greek theatre? Outdoors staging?"

"Why do that? We were talking now not of the creation of a completely new theatre according to ancient models, but about the continuation, the evolution of what exists. Without going beyond the current architectural models, we can do away with the footlights and the wings,³ after having built a stage with different levels so that it descends gradually to the stalls. And then all four sides of the stage would be available for the comings and goings of the actors, and not just the three traditional ones. For mass scenes depicting the crowd this purely architectural and hence technological advance could have huge impact. In this way the footlights will be abolished together with all the other conventions associated with it."

"The proscenium has entered so deeply into the basic being of our stage that I would not want to do away with it at all."

"The proscenium was an accidental creation. In poor or improvised theaters a row of candles were used. Presently it is difficult for us to imagine the theatre from Shakespeare's time, when the best seats for the aristocrats and the theater habitues were on the stage, and the actors stumbled over their legs."

"No, for me the footlights is a curtain of light separating the stage from the spectator; it has an inner significance. A physiological one, perhaps. You know that I look at the theatre as a dream vision.⁴... Have you happened to analyze and observe the process of the origin of dreams? I don't know whether this is a general law or if it happens this way for all people, but I have observed in myself four stages in the origin and evolution of dreams coming to life behind the eyes. The first stage is when you shut your eyes and see various symmetrical patterns of colour and light similar to wallpaper patterns. This, of course, is caused by the cir-

³ The idea of doing away with the footlights, given by the second voice in the dialogue and countered by the author, has much in common with the appeals of Vjacheslav Ivanov in his article, "Predchuvstvija i predvestija," published in *Zolotoe runo*, 5-6 (1906).

⁴ Voloshin refers here to his article "Theatre--A Dream Vision," which appeared in *Rus'* (9 December 1906) and is translated in this collection.

culuation of the blood and the reflections of light penetrating from the outside.

The second stage consists of a variety of the most simple of object forms; these are the eye's memories. One after another, individual objects arise: a tree, a branch, a sacrificial altar, a room. At times they are fragmentary memories of the eye; at other times they seem to be conventional signs, symbols or hieroglyphs of some sort of incomplete ancient alphabet. They are still, like drawings. They will appear momentarily and leave. The third stage is one of moving images. You have doubtless observed them in the moment between wakefulness and sleep, when your consciousness has not yet fallen asleep but when dreams are already floating on the surface of the eye. They change, floating constantly and independently of one's will like the flowering of soap bubbles. They are vivid and at the same time pellucid, just like the reflection of the sky and clouds on the surface of clear water when from below the bottom can be seen. At times you see a dream and at the same time can still observe the furnishings and walls of the room in which you are lying. This is the third stage. Afterwards, complete darkness falls, as if you suddenly descended into a well. This is already a dream. But with practice you can pass through this dark corridor, retaining consciousness. And then the fourth stage ensues. In the depths appears an unusually clear vision, clearer than your usual sight. Clear as a photograph. You can halt it, you can observe it, you can even return to it once it has passed. What is peculiar to it is that it somehow does not occupy the full field of vision but one small, framed section in the darkness, which at the same time is brightly illuminated. It is exactly this vision that I am reminded of by the impression of theatre and its curtain of light created by the footlights. This is perhaps a purely subjective impression but I relate it to the very idea of the footlights."

"And what is beyond this fourth stage?"

"I think that this corridor leads into those realms where clairvoyance begins. But let's return to the basic models of the stage.

When you spoke of the theatre of Shakespeare's time, when the public sat on both sides of the stage, it occurred to me that a complete rejection of these theatre models, which do not allow at all for any base for illusions, is possible. But such a stage we will have to make round, like the ring of the circus. The spectators will sit around it on all four sides. Sets, therefore, will be done away with completely.

What remains is not a picture, not a bas-relief with the actors' faces turned inevitably to the spectators, as if they were portraits, but the free sculptural action of the entire human body. The mimicry of the face gives way to the mimicry of movements. And the setting—a room, a landscape—will emerge only in the imagination of the spectator. In addition we can put into practice the antique means of declaring the author's stage directions before the start of the act. Contemporary dramatists have made stage directions into a special poetic genre. The art of description has attained a striking high degree of compression. Spectators must not be deprived of this aspect of contemporary drama. And I agree totally with Fëdor Sologub,⁵ who suggested for a production of Blok's *Balaganchik* that the author's stage directions be proclaimed, like an incantation, by the author himself, and then the scenic action should begin. On a circular stage all this becomes essential and perfectly logical."

"What do you feel about the attempts to simplify the theatre by Komissarshevskaja?"

"In principle I sympathize with them, but the results do not satisfy me. I am afraid that Meyerhold indulges too much in fantasy; he is too much of a literary person, and not an actor. If we ourselves were to realize in actual fact the daring reforms of

⁵ Evidently Voloshin has in mind Sologub's "Theatre of a Single Will," in which the writer proposes that a theatrical show should be constructed as follows: "the author, or the reader taking his place, sits near the stage, somewhere off to the side. Before him is a table, on the table the play now being performed... and as the reader near the stage reads, the curtain opens; on stage appears and is illuminated the setting indicated by the author; then actors come onto the stage and do what is suggested by the author's directions which are being read. ..." (Sologub, F. "Teatr odnoj voli," in *Kniga o novom teatre* [St. Petersburg, 1908], 186-87).

the stage that we have just been discussing, then, of course, we would fail. We have insufficient knowledge of the traditions and the psychological conditions of the stage. Does Meyerhold experience awe before the traditions of the theatre? One must love what one destroys. Only then can one build something new on that ground. In order to destroy one must have a sacrificial victim; if not, destruction makes no sense."

"But Meyerhold, does he really break and destroy without pity?"

"No. Practically speaking, he tends to present the stage as if it were a flat screen. To reduce all the decorations to a painterly panel, and to have the actors blend with it, to create something like a bas-relief. If he himself were a painter, then, perhaps, he would have succeeded, and we would have received a very interesting and beautiful show. But this would be only one of many possibilities for the stage, and not a reform of the theatre. But Komissarzhevskaja's theatre relies on the decorative talents of artists from Moscow circles, Sapunov, Sudejkin, Denisov. One can value them all as colorists, but not one of them has the talent of a draughtsman. They cannot draw. But painterly architectonics, the sense of a structure--this is what is essential to bring Meyerhold's ideas to life. The same lack of structure is felt in the bas-relief composed by the groups of actors. Here the touch of the painter-sculptor is almost missing. In the simplification of the set I see no true logic. Far from all the details on the stage are inevitably conditioned by the stage action. There are only hints at a simplicity, but I see no true simplification."

"The productions at Komissarzhevskaja's theatre seem to me the play of amateurs."

"One senses in them little inner joy. Which can be felt, for example, in the production of *Brand*, where there is a concentrated force, connecting everything—the theatrical spectacle, the decor, and the words—into a unified scenic organism. I don't agree basically with the methods of the Art Theatre, but they produce in me an incomparably greater effect than the methods of Meyerhold, with which I do agree in principle."

"But, nonetheless, Meyerhold's shows are the equivalent of one of the Art Theatre's rehearsals."

"I am impatiently waiting for the Art Theatre's production of Hamsun's *The Drama of Life*⁶ which ought to apply the new methods of simplicity developed in the Theater Studio where Meyerhold worked. And from the Art Theatre as a whole I expect a more consistent and accomplished realization of these principles."

Notes

The text published here appeared in the newspaper *Rus'* on 2 February 1907.

The Moscow Art Theatre's premiere of Ibsen's play *Brand*, to which Voloshin responds in this article, took place on 20 December 1906. The reviews of the production were basically negative (See *Moskovsky xudozhestvenny teatr: Istorichesky ocherk o ego zhizni i dejatel'nosti 1905-1913*, vol. 2 [Moscow, 1914], 39). For example, the critics judged severely the scenic version of the play which left out the death of Brand in an avalanche: "an inexplicable cut" was what the famous critic A. P. Kugel' called the absence of what he considered the play's main scene (*Teatr i iskusstvo*, 18 [1907], 304). And another critic, N. I. Petrovskaja, insisted that "people who have not read the play will probably not understand what's wrong but will definitely feel the presence of some strange gap, both external and internal." (*Pereval*, 3 [1907], 51)

The decor of the show was foregrounded and aroused much censure: "the mountain scenery, the most wonderful, astounding mountains with their magnificent peaks, pushed into the background the soul of the heroes, the idea of the play" (S. Jablonsky — *Teatr i iskusstvo*, 1 [1907], 304). Even on the pages of the symbolist periodicals, the set and the production of *Brand* received negative notices (*Zolotoe runo*, 1 [1907], 77-78).

⁶ This production was realized by Stanislavsky in 1907 (the premiere was Feb. 8th) and signalled the theatre's break with realism and its approach to a Symbolist poetics. For more details, see Stroeva, M. N. "Moskovsky Xudozhestvenny Teatr," in *Russkaja xudozhestvennaja kul'tura kontsa XIX - nachala XX veka (1908-1917)*. Book 3 (Moscow, 1977), 26-7.

Unlike the majority of critics, Voloshin, using the convenient form of a dialogue, answered many of the critical comments directed at the theatre and gave a positive assessment of the show. In his reading of the Moscow Art Theatre's production he finds an affirmation as well as a foundation for several of his own theatrical principles. As for his polemical attacks on Meyerhold's scenic innovations, they can be mostly explained by the attempt of Voloshin to establish his own original theory and to oppose the conceptions of the ideologues of "new theatre," among whom the name of Meyerhold was almost the most authoritative.

Thoughts on Theatre

I

Theatre is a fusion in a single moment of three separate elements, actor, poet, and spectator.

Actor, poet, spectator—these are the tangible masks of the three basic elements which compose every work of art.

A moment of experience in life, a moment of creative realization, a moment of understanding—these are the three elements without which the existence of a work of art would be impossible. They inevitably co-exist in music as well as in painting and in poetry. They can therefore be realized in one and the same person, although this is not inevitable.

Take the origin of a piece of poetry. First comes the moment of experience, which is available to every individual but makes a poet only of a poet. Goethe insisted that an incident from life should be at the base of each artistic work.⁷

Next, and this happens at times many years later, the creative realization: the vague life-experience is embodied in words. The words can speak of something completely different, but the

⁷ Compare the words of Goethe cited by Eckermann: "All my verses are verses apropos of something; they are evoked by reality and have their foundation and basis in it." (I. P. Eckerman, *Razgovory s Gete v poslednie gody ego zhizni* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1934), p. 168.

stabilized *will* of what was experienced will give the life that inspires the words.

The will as a potential is concealed in the words. It appears and flares up only at the last moment determining the existence of the work, the moment of understanding. The moment of understanding, because of its objective significance in art, is not only not lower but perhaps higher than the moment of creation.

The work of art begins to exist as a living and acting independent unity not from the moment of creation, but from the moment of comprehension and acceptance.

The first to understand the work is perhaps the poet himself. The concluding labour and the artistic finishing are grounded on this comprehension.

But just as the first moment of experience, the third moment of comprehension can be, but does not have to be, combined in one person. The poet can create a work inspired by the will not of his own but other people's experiences, which are intuitively understood by him, but at the same time he can totally fail to understand what he has created. We have too many examples of such lack of comprehension, and the words of Belinsky to the young Dostoevsky—"But do you yourself understand *what* you have written?"—will remain the classic model. The creative act of comprehension belongs to the reader, who in this case was Belinsky, and on the reader's talent, receptivity, or lack of talent depend the existence and the fate of a work of art.

It's clear that we are dealing here with a properly constructed triad: experience is the situation; creativity, because by its inner sense it contradicts experience, is the opposition; comprehension is a generalization. What exists as separate, ideal moments taking place at different times in each of the simple forms of art, we see as three concrete forces merging at one and the same moment in the complex art of the theatre.

The dramatist offers a scheme of experience in life, an outline of the will's aspirations. The actor, who by his nature is the opposite of the dramatist, searches deep within himself for the gestures, motions, and intonations for these manifestations of will—in short, he seeks its living embodiment.

The opposing aspirations of the dramatist and the actor must be merged in the understanding of the spectator for theatre to take place. The spectator is the same kind of active figure in theatre as the others. On his talent or its lack depend the depth and the significance of the theses and antitheses, the breadth of the pendulum's swings, which he realizes and synthesizes through his understanding.

In the area of thought the moment of creation and that of understanding can be separated not only by years but even centuries, as we see in the examples provided by Leonardo da Vinci, Ronsard, or Vico. But in the theatre all these elements must merge in a moment of scenic action, or else they are never realized.

This creates for the theatre conditions of existence, which distinguish it from other arts.

Theatre cannot create for future generations; it creates only for the present one.

Theatre depends wholly on the level of its audience's understanding and serves, when successful, as a precise indicator of the level of understanding for its time.

Theatre is realized not on the stage but in the soul of the spectator.

In this way, the spectator is the main creator and artist in the theatre. Without the affirmation provided by his delight, not one of the poet's intentions, and not one of the actor's embodiments of character, no matter with how much genius they are devised, can achieve their realization.

For artists of the theatre this creates completely different conditions of work than for people in other arts. Here one cannot set up the goal of outstripping one's time. Their one mission, both harder and profounder, is to understand and study the basic strings of the soul of their generation, so as to play on them as on a violin.

The necessity of reckoning with the moral and esthetic standard of their time imposes on the dramatists a certain primitive simplicity, but at the same time creates what will seem to us, a

century later, the greatness of their own genius and that of their entire era.

Each country and each decade have exactly the *theatre* that they deserve. This must be understood literally, since *dramatic literature* is always ahead of its time.

For the last years one has constantly heard complaints of theatre directors about the crisis that the theatre is living through.

Some ask, "Can one not replace the actor with something more suitable?"

Some announce, "If dramatists don't give us what is needed for the stage, then we'll do without them."

Such a rejection of one or another of the three elements, which comprise theatre, gives witness that a fracture really exists.

The poet, actor, and spectator do not find themselves in sufficient agreement to meet together in a single moment of comprehension.

II

Because of his position in the theatre, the director bears the dramatist's intention, guides the actor's creative work, and represents the understanding of the ideal spectator. He is the one for whom theatre is a simple art, just as a lyric poem is simple to the poet and a picture to a painter. He unites in himself the triad of theatre. Therefore in a period when theatre blooms, a period of complete harmony among its component parts, the director is not visible, not palpable, not known. He fulfills his business unnoticed. Some slight pressure from his ruling hand, and his role is done. He needs neither initiatives nor inventiveness.

But if disharmony between spectator, actor, and author takes place, then, through the force of circumstances, the director comes to the fore. He is responsible for the balance of forces in the life of the theatre and therefore must fill in what is lacking at the given moment.

More than all other signs, the nervousness, inventiveness, and talent of contemporary directors testify to the disharmony in the theatre.

Some directors see the root of evil in the actor's lack of perfection; others in the ignorance of dramatists about the conventions and demands of the stage. Both are right. But that actors have forgotten how to act and dramatists have forgotten how to write indicate that these are two branches of a single reason, which one must look for in the soul of the spectator.

III

Let's try to glance at the organism of the theatre, taking as our fulcrum neither the dramatist nor the actor, but the spectator.

The history of the theatre's origins in Dionysian rites,⁸ as they are represented currently, issues from the gradual renunciation by the adherents in the holy orgies of active participation in them, by their singling out from their midst first a chorus and then one, two, and, finally, many actors.

Theatre originates in rites of purification. The unconscious expressions of animalistic will and passion, characteristic of primitive man, throb with musical rhythm and find an outlet in dance. Here the actor and the spectator merge into one. Later, when the chorus and the actor separate from the throng, then for the viewer the purifying rite ceases to be an action and becomes a purifying vision, a purifying dream. The spectator remains the same unconscious and naïve primitive man he was before, who comes to the theatre for the purging of animalistic anguish and of an excess of animalistic forces, but a shift in reality occurs: what he actually did before is now transferred into his soul. And the stage and actor and chorus live a real existence only when they live transformed in the soul of the spectator.

Theatre is the complex and perfect tool of sleep.

⁸ It is commonly accepted that Greek drama and tragedy emerged from agricultural festivities honouring Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of the fertile forces of the earth, of wine, and of wine-making.

The history of the theatre is profoundly and organically tied to the development of human consciousness. At first it seems that from the beginning of history we find man possessing one and the same logical—daytime—consciousness. But we know that there was once a moment when “the ape went mad” in order to become a man.⁹ The cosmic images of ancient epics and psychological self-observation tell us that our daytime consciousness arose gradually out of an ancient, animalistic, sleep-time consciousness. The mighty, obscure, and bright images of myths testify that once reality was reflected differently in the soul of man, penetrating to his consciousness as if through the foggy and iridescent depths of sleep.

If we ourselves begin to analyze our own consciousness, then we will notice that we master it only in the moments we observe, contemplate, or analyze. When we begin to act, the boundaries narrow, and already everything that is beyond the paths of our intended ends comes to us through the depths of sleep. The daytime consciousness is completely extinguished in us, when we act under the influence of emotion or passion. When we act, we inevitably retire into the circle of an ancient, sleeptime consciousness, and the realia of the external world take on the forms of our dreams.

The basis of all theatre is dramatic action. Action and dream are one and the same.

IV

The inner meaning of the theatre of our time differs in no way from the meaning of primitive Dionysian orgies. Just as they cleansed a person of an excess of animalistic activity and passion, translating these things into rhythm and freedom, so too does contemporary theatre free the spectator from his oppressive impulses to act. The means have changed and become more refined; the reason for putting oneself into a state of musical frenzy became accomplished by means of a dream created by art.

⁹ See note 3 to the article, "Theatre--A Dream Vision."

The spectator sees in the theatre dreams of his animalistic will and in this way is cleansed of them, just as the orgiasts were liberated by dance.

Hence, the basic task of a theatre is to show clearly, to create the dreams of its contemporaries and cleanse their moral being of an excess of elemental action by means of dreams.

From this point of view, ideas about the educational significance of theatre are newly illuminated. Theatre really serves to affirm sociability and civic-mindedness, but not by sermons about some ideals or others, and not at all by moral and heroic examples (this is all "literature" and has nothing in common with theatre), but by displaying those criminal instincts that contradict the demands of "the Law" at any given historical moment. Any theatrical spectacle is an ancient rite of purification.

Therefore, the breaking of the law always serves as the theme of theatrical plays. Tragedy, with its purifying dreams of fatal passions and noble impulses that are transformed into crimes with the breaking of the law, is born in eras of elemental and severe will. In stormy, passionate eras drama blooms. In eras of civic calm and happiness comedies of manners and satirical plays predominate, featuring purifying dreams about petty social sins and love affairs. In every historical moment of every people theatre represents the purifying font for the possible violations of legality, the borders of which are precisely defined by the people's legal criteria.

Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and *La Dame de chez Maxim*¹⁰ are, from this point of view, two consecrated elements of one and the same rite, and the purifying force of any popular farce and vaudeville is in no way less than the purifying force of Shakespearean tragedy.

The educational significance of theatre is not that it guides someone for some reason, but that it is the safety valve of the moral order. From the contents of the repertoire and the form of the plays one can always judge with accuracy which excesses threaten the order of the community.

¹⁰ *La Dame de chez Maxim* (1899) is a play by Georges Feydeau.

But in this case one should by no means confuse dramatic literature with the theatre realized in the dream of the spectator. Reading the texts of Shakespeare and Aeschylus, we are dealing with pure literature and can not yet judge how much "theatre"¹¹ there was in this literature.

Only the rapture of the viewer and the applause of the auditorium inform about the establishment and the perfection of theatre.

V

The reasons for the disharmony that Russian theatre is experiencing lie first of all in the soul of the spectator.

Hastily following cultural and historical paths, we have dragged on for several centuries. There is no possibility at all of establishing a level of law and order in a society where the morality of the *Übermensch* is confused with the "fear of God." In Russia there never was a single, nation-wide theatre. The Russian theatre was the social theatre first of one more or less stable social class, then of another: at one time of the merchant class, at another of the gentry class, and at still another time the theatre of the civil servants. Now the theatre of Ostrovsky, now of Griboedov and Turgenev, now of Gogol. The Russian intelligentsia, thanks to its universal and collective nature, was able to synthesize these types of theatre and create for a single moment of time its own theatre, the theatre of Chexov.

Naïveté and trust are the talents the spectator must possess for the creation of great theatre.

¹¹ Here are several examples of dramatic works, now considered classics, that did not become theatre at the time of their appearance (Voloshin took the examples from Remy de Gourmont's *Promenades littéraires* (Paris, 1904).) In France of the 17th century the following plays failed completely on stage: Molière's *L'Avare*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, *Le Misanthrope*; Racine's *Britannicus*, *Bajazet*, *Phèdre*. And the greatest success was had by Corneille's *Timocrate* and Boursault's *Le Mercure galant*. And if we have to form an opinion about the theatre of the seventeenth century, then it has to be formed on the basis of the mediocre plays of mediocre writers, because the plays mentioned above became theatre only in the eighteenth century. [Voloshin provided this note.]

But naïveté to a far greater degree is a feature of culture than of barbarism. It is characteristic of the truly cultured person to encounter all new forms of foreign cultures with profound, naïve rapture; he has an inherent taste for exoticism. Barbarians, however, are characterized by skepticism and lack of trust, and by satiety soon after they are carried away.

In Russian society two things exist simultaneously: a profound, almost insulting skepticism in relation to aesthetic forms, with which it is satiated so easily, and a naïve credulity in the area of moral, legal, and religious questions.

The basic error of all the theatrical experiments of the last years is that they attempted to satisfy the audience's aesthetic demands. This is a mission that is completely unthinkable, since the Russian audience still does not yet have aesthetic demands; instead, there are aesthetic whims and the skepticism of barbaric satiety, which will never allow a single dream to appear on this soil. In this area the Russian soul still does not have those excesses, from which it would be necessary to liberate itself with the help of rites of purification.

On the other hand, the realm of moral demands, in which the Russian audience is excessively naïve, trusting, and undemanding, was completely forgotten in the course of these experiments.

It is true that the moral demands of the Russian audience were expressed over the last years in very broad, general ideas of a liberating nature in the areas of love and of politics, precisely in those areas forbidden to Russian theatre. But it is impossible to deny that it was precisely here and precisely in the last few years that rites of purification were absolutely essential, and that theatre as the safety valve of legality could have played an immense leveling role.

The success of Leonid Andreev's plays¹² indicates the nature of those dreams that are eagerly perceived by the soul of the Russian spectator. The crude presentation of moral questions, the declamatory pathos, the cheap, popular symbolism of a universal character, the fragmentary quality of the action—all these features resemble nightmares more than dreams.

As for the aesthetic theatre, satisfying the demands of the aestheticized intelligentsia of Moscow and Petersburg, it consists wholly of plays by foreign dramatists: Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Przybyszewski, Hamsun... We do not have our own dreams; we see the dreams of foreign lands. We see them, at times, very clearly, but they do not satisfy us and cleanse us of nothing. In the end, not being able to fall asleep, we turn to ironizing.

VI

There exists at present only one theatrical spectacle that unconditionally possesses the trust of the audience. It is cinematography.

One must look for elements of the art of the future not in the subtleties of old art—the old must die in order to bring forth fruit—and future art can arise only out of the new barbarism. Cinematography is that barbarism in the realm of the theatre.

We have seen how in the theatre the actor has gradually driven the spectator off the stage in order to become his dream. In cinematography this process is completed; the spectator is completely separated from the actor, and before the spectator is only the lighted shadow of the actor, voiceless but animated by the non-human speed of his movements. But all the same, this is a vision of action and, thus, theatre.

¹² Andreev's play *The Life of Man* was staged in 1907 both by V. E. Meyerhold for Komissarzhevskaja's Theatre and by Stanislavsky for the Moscow Art Theatre. Of the latter production one of the critics wrote: "Something new was discovered: that one can reproduce life by giving it an outline, a skeleton, but allowing to the inspiration, the creative work, of each spectator the possibility and the right and the duty of filling in the concrete details, as he, that is, each spectator, wishes.

The popularity of cinematography is based, first of all, on the fact that it involves machinery, and the soul of a contemporary European is attuned to the machine in most naïve and trusting ways.

Cinematography gives to the theatrical vision a crude democratic quality based on its cheapness and its accessibility to all, the longed for democratic quality of a photographic cliché.

Cinematography, like theatre, is in complete harmony with a society, in which the newspaper has replaced the book and the photograph has replaced the portrait. It has all the potential to become the theatre of the future. It takes hold of the dreams of the spectator by means of its cruel realism. In the aesthetic demands of the nation's masses it will take the place of the theatre in precisely the same way that gladiatorial battles replaced Greek tragedy in the ancient world. To the hypnotic music of monotonous marches it shows the raw facts and gestures of street life. In a small room with bare walls, reminiscent of naves of sectarian exultation, the same ancient, ecstatic rite of purification is performed.

Cleansed from what? Not from an excess of will and passion, of course, but from an excess of self-righteous banality, of the automatic repetition of gestures and faces, of photographically gray colours, of monotonously nervous wandering about the big, modern city. Film projectors, revolving like Chinese prayer wheels on all the corners of the streets, and cinematographers, thanks to whom not only theatres but also churches in Catholic countries empty, testify to the extent of the demand for cleansing from the everyday, from the vastness of life's boredom that has overfilled the cities.

This feature of the rites of purification will always remain the province of cinematography. But when power over the dreams of the cities of Europe passes from the hands of Pathé and Gaumont,¹³ whose imagination cannot proceed beyond performances of prestidigitation and moralistic tales for children,

¹³ Voloshin refers here to Emile and Charles Pathé, French engineers, and Léon Gaumont, a French industrialist, who were engaged in the technology and business of cinematography.

into the hands of entrepreneurs more inventive, artistic, and immoral, then new possibilities in cinematography will be revealed. It will be able to resurrect the art of the ancient mimes and liberate the old theatre from the burden of the trivial purifying art of farces, revues and cabarets that the theatre was forced to assume in the cities. At that time the dramatic theatre will be left its former realm of dreams of will and passion.

From this point of view the significance of cinematography can be beneficial for art.

Notes

This article appeared first in *Apollon*, 5 (1910), 32-40.

On Nudity

The *Freier Bund* is the name of a German society whose goal is the physical and moral improvement of humanity through nudity. The society is located in Berlin. It has its own park at Grünwald, where members of both sexes gather for games in the open air. The Society was founded by Dr. Küster, a physician who was able to assert the Society's right to exist before the most bashful of all police forces, the Prussian police.

Dr. Küster says, "There are two reasons keeping people from nudity: the fear of catching cold and bashfulness. The first reason does not stand up medically to criticism, because our skin is an astonishing regulatory mechanism, thanks to which we, once we are in motion, do not have to attend to any atmospheric changes whatsoever. As for bashfulness, if your sensibilities are annoyed by semi-nudity, take my nudity cure and you will see how your nerves will be soothed and what a profound sense of physical and moral liberation will remain with you after visiting our park."

The practical implementation of nudism in contemporary society under the aegis of hygiene leads to reflection. At one time much was said in Russia about nudity. But the question was so

hopelessly compromised by Anatoly Kamensky's "Leda"¹⁴ that it became reprehensible even to utter the word.

Why?

That the first rags covering the human body appeared so as to force us to think of that which is concealed or that the appearance of clothes was connected to the realization of sensuality—that is a secret to no one.

But from this come the notions that the history of dress is connected with the development of sensuality, and that fashion is a barometric curve marking the slightest alterations in pressure. To each new fold in our dress, a new twist in desire somewhere in the depths of our soul is in accord. All of European urban culture is a huge, peacock's tail of sensuality.

This means that the rejection of clothes is equivalent to the rejection of the whole history of culture. Those, therefore, who can no longer hear the word "nudity" are essentially right. Only they are unable to substantiate properly their indignation; they call themselves the defenders of morality and chastity, when they are really acting as the defenders of culture, as the preservers of the historical rights of sensuality. They truly feel an inner contradiction when aesthetes, that is, the ideologues of sensuality, speak about nudity. Sensuality and nudity are incompatible.

References to ancient Greece introduce constant confusion when it comes to nudity. Greece did not know all the refinements of our sensuality, the refinements of sin and of Catholic mysticism. The ancient world did not experience romanticism, sentimentalism . . . And Greece then did not mean only the Periclean Age; it also included Mycenae and Knossus. It knew long centuries of the culture of clothes. Nudity came later, together with the promotion of gymnastics and sports. It came from Sparta, and sensual Ionia was at first shocked. It arose not because of aesthetic demands but because of gymnastic necessity. But afterwards even aesthetics was transformed by it.

For contemporary aesthetes beautiful nudity can be only imagined or secret. In the city—whether in a theatre or on a

¹⁴ "Leda" is a short story by A. Kamensky.

street or in an apartment—a person without clothes will be a caricature of nakedness. The French *Nu au Théâtre* only proves this. There uncovering oneself is only a special form of dressing.

Nudity in the open air—in a field, on a shore of the sea, close to running water, illuminated by the sun and fanned by the wind—is another matter. It is not impossible that, thanks to sport and hygiene, nudity will attain the right of citizenship in Europe. Where a muscle is rhythmically tensed, where there is healthy physical fatigue, there is no place for sensuality. There is therefore no need for the instinct of culture to defend itself. And it will happen regardless of the aesthetic advocacy of nudity.

(Darwin asked a savage from Terra del Fuego how he was not cold in the snow when naked, while he, Darwin, froze in his fur coat. The savage answered with a question:

“But is your face cold?”

“No.”

“So, my face is all over me.”¹⁵

He would have answered the very same, if he would have been asked why he was not ashamed of his nakedness. We are ashamed of our body only because we do not consider it as a face. The face is in no way bound to any definite area of the body. It can wander. The face of Greek athletes is the torso. The Vatican Heracles¹⁶ is missing a head, arms, and legs, but his *face* loses

¹⁵ Voloshin's memory is mistaken. The dialogue he includes is found in a collection of anecdotes dealing with human life and history by the Latin writer, Claudius Aelianus, who lived at the end of the second and beginning of the third centuries. Aelianus writes, “Once during a snowfall the Scythian Tsar asked some man standing in the cold without any clothes, if he were not freezing. The Scythian answered the question with a question, asking if the Tsar's forehead were freezing. Hearing from him, “Not at all,” the Scythian said, “And I do not freeze because my body is solid forehead.” The Russian translation of Aelianus's collection was titled *Pestrye rasskazy*. This source was discovered by A. V. Lavrov

¹⁶ The Vatican Heracles is an ancient sculpted torso in the Vatican Museum. The Goncourt brothers wrote of it in their diary: “The *Torso* is the only work of art in the world that we consider a complete and absolute masterwork... It is a singular object issuing from the hands of humanity, of which nothing more perfect can be imagined. “After them Voloshin called the *Torso* “the most striking work in its tragic pathos that came to us from Greece.” (See his article, “Skelet

nothing thereby. Clothing has artificially expelled the face to the front part of the head and the metacarpals of the hands. And we instinctively defend this valued concentration of the face.

The French say that it is but one step from tights to rice powder. But rice powder is as much of a costume as a tattoo. It is only one of the contemporary refinements of dress.

In the *Revue*s nudity under the rice powder shocks no one in Paris. But I happened to be in the Chatelet when Isadora Duncan danced for the first time the “Bacchanalia” from *Tannhäuser*.¹⁷ In the last dance there came a moment when both panels of the tunic, attached only at the shoulder, flew up into the air behind her back, and she danced several steps completely uncovered.

It was appropriate, consistent, and flowed out of the whole sense of her dance. But the audience, not having expected this, gasped as one. *She had on no rice powder!* The solemnity of the spectacle was so intense that no one allowed himself a single sign of protest. But the silence was so palpable that Isadora Duncan had to retract her “gesture” and to explain it as due to the unevenness of the stage floor at the Théâtre du Chatelet.

What is shameful about nudity? Not the shapes of the body — clothes accentuate them¹⁸; tights no longer shock anyone. The anatomy underneath the skin — muscle, bone, the skeleton — can arouse horror but not shame. No one will be ashamed to show his X-ray. Consequently, indecency is connected with a person's skin. What exactly is skin?

“Skin is a fabric, resembling silk to the touch. For the eyes it is the most beautiful surface in the world, which, at the same time, is a metallic wall for all hostile attacks. With its amazing viability skin is equally impenetrable by dampness and dryness,

zhivopisi” [1904])

¹⁷ Voloshin refers to the opera by Richard Wagner.

¹⁸ This very broad generalization contradicts Voloshin's constant protest against contemporary European clothing, which “hides human forms” (see his article “Voprosy sovremennoj èstetiki” [1904]). In the same article he offers the following formulation: “Clothing is beautiful to the extent that the movements of the body are exposed in it.”

cold and heat, electric discharges and hostile bacteria, the strongest poisons and fatal gases. Human skin is one of the wonders of the world. It is more beautiful than velvet, softer and more pliant than silk, more impermeable than rubber, and, subject to the effect of the atmosphere, more stable than steel. It is almost as incapable of conducting electricity as glass. It is one of the most solid of elements, one most able to bear all kinds of danger—from all three spheres of nature—but we barely dare to expose it to the sun and do not allow it to breathe fresh air." This quotation comes from a medical book.

Compared to the Russians, the French are almost free of a sense of shame about their own bodies. But they are always struck by the Russians' freedom to bare themselves spiritually. In all spheres of spiritual life they are insurmountably bashful and reserved. (Thus, for example, insanity in a French family is carefully concealed.) The Russians' openness about themselves attracts the French and disturbs them, as does the innocent shamelessness of children and savages, as does a freedom that is inaccessible to them. The spiritual shamelessness of the Russians can only be explained by the absence of external forms of psychic life. The Russian spirit feels itself only from within, and does not yet know its own epidermis. And in this area all bashfulness is concentrated in the covering of the skin.

We experience an acute sense of confusion and awkwardness when we accidentally see undressed a woman well known by us and respected by everyone. This is natural.

Once in the theatre I happened to meet a woman whom I know well but had never seen dressed. (She was a model.) At first I felt exactly the same feeling of awkwardness and embarrassment.

Going bathing, I undress at home, put on a bathing robe, cross the thirty metres separating my home from the sea, and throw myself into the water. The local inhabitants are profoundly shocked by this behaviour.

Local decency insists that each individual undress in full view of others, on the open beach ten steps from the road.

In my memory remains a model who did not dress during her breaks but sat in the corner of the studio and laid out her needlework. In this pose there was as much beauty and modesty as when she appeared clothed in a long morning dress. The eye refused to recognize her nakedness.

Notes

This piece was first printed in *Dnevnik pisatelej*, 1 (March 1914), 34-40, under the title "Bliki. O nagote." The text of this issue is translated here. Voloshin touched on the question of nudity in his Paris reports, "Vesenny prazdnik tela i pljaski" and "Sredi parizhskix xudozhnikov..." published in 1904 and 1905, and also in other articles.

La Dame aux camélias on the Stage of Nezlobin's Theatre

The Moscow critics reacted hostilely to the very idea of producing *La Dame aux Camélias* at Nezlobin's Theatre: what sense is there in reviving every sentimental and outdated old thing?¹⁹ This is the crux of all the criticism. But the audience, as happens more and more often today, disagreed with the critics, and *La Dame aux camélias*, running under the absurd subtitle, "You will be known by the way you live your life," is playing to full houses at the very end of the season. The audience shows its complete lack of confidence in theatrical criticism: although all the critics mercilessly censured *The Naked Woman*, *Typhoon*, and *The Scoundrel*,²⁰ it is precisely these plays that have had the most sensational and prolonged success. But the critics don't take into account the display of the public's lack of confidence. Let us assume that this is the situation not only with theatrical criticism but with criticism in the arts and in literature—everywhere one and the same situation. This is a death sentence for Russian criti-

¹⁹ The play by Alexandre Dumas *filis* was first performed in Paris in 1852.

²⁰ *La Femme nue* is a play by the French playwright Henry Bataille, *Tajfun* (*Typhoon*) is by the Hungarian playwright Menyhért Lengyel, And *Zhulik* (*The Scoundrel*) was written by I. N. Potapenko.

cism, for if the critic cannot convince even the naïve, trustful public, then what is the sense of his existence? A skeptical scorn for all the works analyzed by him, and a desire to get off with a several more or less successful witticisms has set the tone in criticism. But most of all a critic is afraid of revealing himself to be enthusiastic; to do this he would have to seek support in the established, favourable opinion of the general public...

La Dame aux camélias is one of the plays that will continue to live on the stage for a long time still. The sentimental and moral emotion characteristic of a certain age and a certain cast of soul will find satisfaction in this play for a long time still, and actors will for a long time still look at the role of Marguerite Gautier as a test of the artistic maturation of their talent. Dumas succeeded in creating this role so that within its framework it would be possible to include the most varied feminine temperaments and images; in the comparatively narrow limits of tragico-sentimental experience the freedom to add the story of whatever womanly heart you like was given by him.

Perhaps in the very story of the origins of *La Dame aux camélias* lies the secret of its fascination. Recall the portrait, engraved with several strokes of Saint-Victor's²¹ pen, of Marie Duplessis, the courtesan whose beauty and death inspired Dumas:

"Having seen it once, you found it impossible to forget her face, oval and white like a perfect pearl, her pale freshness, her mouth childlike and pious, and her eyelashes thin and light like the features of a ghost. The large dark eyes, without innocence, alone spoiled the purity of this virginal face, and even more, perhaps, the quivering mobility of her nostrils, open as if inhaling a scent. Subtly set off by these puzzling contrasts, this image, angelic and sensual, attracted by its very mystery."²²

Captivated by this face, Dumas combined in it the two basic character types of the French female lover, Mimi Pinson and Manon Lescaut;²³ Mimi atoning for the sins of Manon. Here is the secret of the sentimental charm of Marguerite Gautier.

²¹ Paul Bins, comte de Saint-Victor (1827-81), was a French critic and essayist.

²² Voloshin quotes from de Saint-Victor's book, *Le Théâtre Contemporain (Emile Augier, Alexandre Dumas fils)*, 1889, p. 270.

Roshchina-Insarova, of course, created not this Marguerite. Her “lady with camelias” was a very Russian woman. In her there was not a drop either of Mimi’s hearty levity or of the charm of Manon’s frivolity. Her soul was the overstrained and patient soul of the Russian woman, worn out from suffering, but with that special soothingly deep timbre of voice, which in Russian women so often conceals the storms of the heart. Marguerite Gautier without pathos and gestures is a very modest, very simple, and very understanding woman. And such a purely Russian Marguerite was convincing and beautiful.

In a production of *La Dame aux camélias* it’s always agonizing for the remaining actors, who are doomed to the thankless task of establishing an artificially French background for the heroine of the play. But, I think, this might have been avoided; it would have been worthwhile to regard the play from the perspective of its historical era. The end of the 1850s is already the distant past for us. The fashions, costumes, and manners of high society in the Second Empire, which is fashionable just now, are so different from ours that it would have been possible to approach *La Dame aux camélias* just as we are now approaching *Woe from Wit*. Placed in an historically definite milieu and time, the actors would get the opportunity to introduce much more psychological realism into their roles. But, unfortunately, Nezlobin did not take advantage of this possibility, and *La Dame aux camélias* is played in tuxedos and tails.

Notes

This short piece appeared first in the supplement, *Russkaja xudozhestvennaja letopis’*, to the periodical *Apollo* 9 (1911): 144-45. The premiere of *La Dame aux camélias* at Nezlobin’s Theatre was 23 March 1911.

²³ Mimi Pinson is the hero of a short story with the same name by Alfred de Musset, and Manon Lescaut is the hero of the novel, *Histoire de Manon Lescaut et du Chevalier des Grieux*, by the Abbé Prévost.